

## **The History of Children and Parenting in the Community of Christ Tradition**

by Jeri Lauren Lambert

As a part of the Restoration movement, we in the Community of Christ historically, have worked very hard to distinguish ourselves from other faith traditions, particularly those of the Protestant movement. However, I believe that if we were to ignore the contributions of other Christian faith traditions with regard to our beliefs surrounding children and parenting we would miss a great deal. John H. Westerhoff III, in the appendix of his text, “Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith” walks briefly through the ages of Christian history and lifts up the voices of the fathers of the faith on the topic of parenting and children. Westerhoff states, “In the early Church, the Christian nurture of children was the parents’ fundamental duty, a duty which could not be delegated...the conviction remained that the training children received at home from their parents was the most important of all.”<sup>1</sup>

From Erasmus in the fifteenth century, Sir Thomas Elyot in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther and John Calvin, the message was the same -- parents had a primary responsibility to raise their children in the Christian faith. Martin Luther offers the following, “[Parents] should know that they can perform no better and no more useful work for God, Christianity, the world, themselves and their children than by bringing up their children well...”<sup>2</sup> Sharing much the same sentiments in the twentieth century, George Albert Coe held, “If God is to become a living power in the consciousness and conduct of children...parents must habitually speak of God as an actual present reality in

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Westerhoff III, *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*, (Winston Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1980), 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

their own lives.”<sup>3</sup> And finally, from Lewis J. Sherill, a contemporary of Coe, “[T]he family was the first and most important school of the child. Parents, by what they themselves are and do...furnish the material which makes up the child’s idea of God.”<sup>4</sup>

I believe it is helpful to hear from other voices of the Christian faith in order that we might better understand the beliefs and practices of the Community of Christ tradition. It may be interesting to note that we hold very similar beliefs regarding parenting and the role of the church in the Christian nurture of children even while we differ on whether to initiate infants by baptism or by blessing. From “The Church’s Concern for Children: A Historical Summary” by Richard P. Howard as found in the work titled, “Children: Of Such is the Kingdom” we find the following,

From the inception of the Restoration movement the conviction grew that little children (beneath the age of accountability) are ‘alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world,’ not needing baptism for salvation because of their innocent state, incapable of sin and therefore incapable of genuine repentance (Moroni 8:11-26). It followed from this that both parents and church were seen as accountable to God for ushering little children into the state of accountability. Only in such a state could they start the process of becoming free adults with the power to choose discipleship to Jesus as well as to formulate their values and course in life...An important aspect of training the child toward accountability was the requirement that parents were to bring their children to the elders for a blessing before the church in the name of Jesus Christ (D. and C. 17:19).<sup>5</sup>

The proper training of children was considered such an important priority for parents that, “[o]ccasionally specific parents were singled out as needing to give more fervent attention to the nurturing and teaching of their children. F.G. Williams and Sidney Rigdon were chastised for negligence in these matters (Section 90:6d, e,7).”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Howard, ed., *Children: Of Such is the Kingdom*, (Herald House Press, Independence, MO, 1979), 133.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 134.

From the Doctrine and Covenants, Section 90:6d-f, 7

- d. ... I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth,
- e. but verily I say unto you, my servant Frederick G. Williams, You have continued under this condemnation; you have not taught your children light and truth, according to the commandments, and that wicked one hath power, as yet, over you, and this is the cause of your affliction.
- f. And now a commandment I give unto you, if you will be delivered; you shall set in order your own house, for there are many things that are not right in your house.
- 7 - Verily I say unto my servant Sidney Rigdon, that in some things he hath not kept the commandments, concerning his children; therefore, firstly set in order thy house.<sup>7</sup>

For the chastisement to be recorded in our present-day scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants, it was not only a serious matter but one in which the parties involved became examples to other parents. According to Richard Howard, Joseph Smith III started the first RLDS Sunday school for children at Nauvoo in 1861.

But the church at large was hesitant to adopt the Sunday school, the two main reasons being the conviction that parents should teach gospel living to their children, and the feeling that the Sunday school, being a Protestant institution, had no place in the authoritative and distinctive Restoration.<sup>8</sup>

“*The Saints’ Herald*”, Vol. 37, No.25 Lamoni, Iowa, June 21, 1890 contains the report of the General Conference on the topic of the Sunday-school. *The Saints’ Herald* states that on Saturday, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1890 the conference resolved to appoint a committee, “whose duty shall be to devise ways and means toward the further establishment of the Sunday-school work....”<sup>9</sup> The report listed in the 1890 *Herald* continues by offering an address made by Elder M.H. Bond on the topic of Sunday-school to the General Conference. In his comments Bond states the following,

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<sup>7</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants*, (Herald Publishing House, Independence, Missouri)

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Howard, ed., *Children: Of Such Is the Kingdom*, (Herald Publishing House, Independence, Missouri, 1979), 136.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

That to ‘train up a child in the way he should go’ is in the sight of God not only demanded as a service of love, but of imperative duty, which to neglect is to bring upon us the final condemnation as having been both unwise and unfaithful servants? ...Is the soul of the child worth as much as that of the man? But because first impressions are the most lasting, should not we as a people feel the importance of studying the utmost diligence, in impressing the young mind with gospel truth. Our Savior charged Peter – thrice impressed – to feed his lambs.<sup>10</sup>

“*Autumn Leaves*”, a paper for youth published by Marietta Walker beginning in 1888 and running until 1932, contained, “varied offerings of literary wisdom from world-famous poets and philosophers as well as the RLDS writers...For many years the Sunday school, the Religio, and the Women’s Auxiliary found opportunity for sharing important ideas and program notes...”<sup>11</sup>

In *Autumn Leaves* Vol. 7, No.2 Lamoni, Iowa February 1894 is recorded the following, “In an address before the General Association at Independence, Missouri, Bro. Heman C. Smith said, ‘The Sunday school of to-day should be composed of the parents first, then the children. Those who hold the priesthood are also under obligation to aid. Christ’s injunction to Peter ‘Feed my lambs,’ was not for Peter alone.’”<sup>12</sup>

The Restoration movement shares several of the beliefs of the early Church and the Protestant movement regarding parenting and children. Down through time the echoes resound, parents are primarily responsible for the awesome task of raising their children in the Christian faith. In the RLDS tradition, select parents who were found shirking their parental duties were reprimanded so publicly that it became a matter of sacred record. John H. Westerhoff III, an Episcopal priest, and the father of three children, describes the task before parents in the following passage,

The Christian faith implies a way of life. To share our faith is to share our life, to be an example to give our children a glimpse of what the Christian life is. We need to share our lives of service, and we must invite our children to join us. That is what it means to live together with our children and share our faith.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 164,167.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>13</sup> John Westerhoff III, *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*, (Winston Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1980),52.

To his voice I would add the voice of Barbara Howard, ordained minister in the Community of Christ and mother of four children, from the text, “Children: Of Such Is the Kingdom”,

As Jesus called for the children, he said, ‘Suffer the little children to come me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God.’ Jesus did not use the future tense in his remark. ‘Of such **is** the kingdom of God’ is a strong statement suggesting that we recognize the presence of God in every child.<sup>14</sup>

From the Doctrine and Covenants, Section 161:4a, (April 4, 2000)

Do not neglect the smallest among you, for even the least of these are treasures in God’s sight. Receive the giftedness and energy of children and youth, listening to understand their questions and their wisdom. Respond to their need to be loved and nurtured as they grow.

Echoing through time we hear again today, “Feed My Lambs”.

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<sup>14</sup> Barbara Howard, ed., *Children: Of Such Is the Kingdom*, (Herald Publishing House, Independence, Missouri, 1979), 12.