



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Kids with Minds of Their Own Shaping a Faith That Lasts

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### *Introduction*

1. As a 22 year-old finishing college, I watched with some disapproval at the way my dad dealt with some matters regarding my youngest sister who was 16. Part of my criticism involved feelings that he seemed to be letting her by with some things he would not have tolerated a few years before, when I was 16. As a 22-year-old with a newly minted BA degree, I had my parenting philosophy worked out and was set for life. When I was 25, our oldest son was born. As he began to grow, I found that some features of my parenting philosophy needed to be modified. I adjusted and applied my new improved philosophy to the task of raising my oldest child. When I was 30, our youngest son was born. Pretty soon, as his older brother had done, he began to present some challenges, the kinds of things typical to growing boys. But, I was ready. My new improved, adjusted parenting philosophy was firmly in place. So, I implemented the techniques I had honed to perfection when my oldest was going through his preschool years ... and promptly found that some of them just didn't work with the younger son! Coincidentally (?), it was at about that time that I realized that my dad had become much smarter. The reality, of course, is that I learned he had known what he was doing with my youngest sister after all, even though he did not always treat her as he had me, or, for that matter, as he had our sister who was the middle child.
2. I doubt it would have made an impact when I was 22 (or 25, or 30), but I wish I had read then what I read not long after my youngest graduated high school. Experience taught me it is exactly right: "Every child is like all other children, like some other children, and like no other child."<sup>1</sup>
3. In our more rational moments, most of us will admit the truth of that statement.
  - a. In our emotional—and advice-prone—moments, we don't always seem to believe it.
  - b. So, we do as I did with my dad 40 years ago: we decide we know what's best for this or that child based on the limited sample and experience we've had with another child or two.
  - c. That's when we are most prone to statements that begin with, "What that child needs is ...."

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<sup>1</sup> From David Elkind, "The death of child nature: Education in the postmodern world," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 79, no 3 (November 1997), 241-245. Elkind paraphrased two earlier writers, Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry Murray.

4. For those with church backgrounds, problems may arise from misunderstanding the nature of Proverbs 22:6 as a *proverb*, that is, a statement that is *generally* true, but to which there are sometimes exceptions.
  - a. We try to apply the proverb absolutely to all children, failing to remember that the mind of their own (free will) that all kids have leads some to go a different way, regardless of their training.
  - b. Or we may be surprised to discover that, despite following the proverb, what worked for one child does not work for others.<sup>2</sup>
5. Allowing for free moral agency presents a challenge for faith-shaping goals. How do we help our children who have minds of their own go the way they should go? Consider these ideas.

### Body

#### I. What Do We Mean by “Have Faith”?

- A. We need a clear view of what faith ought to be to evaluate whether we are developing it.
- B. John Westerhoff suggested the analogy of a tree with its rings reflecting stages of growth.<sup>3</sup>
  1. A tree with one ring is just as much a tree as one with ten or a hundred. So, the beginning stages of faith are as real as later stages; the question is whether there should be more rings given the opportunities people have had (see Heb 5:11-6:10).
  2. The right environment is necessary for proper growth. See Mark 4:1ff.
  3. Because of the slow, gradual manner of growth, we do not always see the expansion, though we will see the results. Nor can we skip rings, moving from a one ring tree to a three ring tree without having a two-ring tree.<sup>4</sup>
  4. Growing trees do not replace rings as they grow, they add rings to what is already there. So, when we think of developing faith, we need to stress that there is a place for beginning styles of faith though they are not the same as more fully developed faith styles. We should not throw out the good in search of the best.
- C. In light of this analogy, consider some developing stages of faith.<sup>5</sup>
  1. Experienced faith—typical of the preschool and early childhood years. At this stage, children learn about the faith solely from their experience with parents and others (teachers).
    - a) This stage is necessary, but should not be the sum total of faith development.
    - b) It’s also possible to “stall out” at this stage. This can take one of two forms.
      - (1) Inherited faith—children believe and do solely because that’s what their parents believe and do; they make no personal commitment to the faith.

<sup>2</sup> While some do fail because their parents do not train, or they train poorly, I have in mind here with those cases when children freely reject good training.

<sup>3</sup> John Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1984), 89ff.

<sup>4</sup> This has implications for parents who are tempted to despair and think that their efforts are failing; patience is indeed a virtue (see 2 Pet 1:5-7).

<sup>5</sup> We should keep in mind that God expects his people to grow (see Heb 5:11ff.; Eph 4:11-16; 2 Pet. 3:18; etc.). But no specific stages are mentioned in Scripture. We can, however, discern some things from noticing faith development in the stories of the people whose lives are recorded in Scripture. We can also draw from truth that has been discovered from other areas of study, which is what we are doing here.

In this section, I am still using categories suggested by Westerhoff, with the addition of titles under the first style that were suggested by Jerry & Becky Gross in a workshop in which they introduced their study on adolescent faith development. That workshop was conducted at the Stone Mountain, GA church of Christ on Feb 22-23, 1985.

- (2) Indoctrinated faith—in this form, a child can repeat reasons and answers he or she has been given, often quite adeptly. But there is little internalization or ability to reflect on the matters for oneself.
  - (a) Illustration: a friend told how thrilled she was when she saw her toddler had grasped the idea that God made all things. Her husband cautioned that the boy was simply parroting a phrase he had heard, plugging the word “God” in the blank any time he heard the question, “Who made...?” One day the woman realized her husband was right when she found her son’s room in disarray and asked him, “Who made this mess?” He replied, “God.”
  - (b) Notice that, although this parroted faith is often attributed to “Pharisaical” or “conservative” people, those who consider themselves more “progressive” or “liberal” can sometimes pass on their views in the same way.
2. Affiliative Faith—the child wants to be part of the group, the family of believers, and so says/does the things that will make him accepted.
  - a) This is an important step in the process and confirms what parents have long understood when they put their kids in situations where they are around other Christians (youth groups, church camps, settings that connect with other youth groups for Christian fellowship, Christian colleges that are “marriage factories,” etc.).
  - b) The question is not whether this is useful, but whether this is all faith should be.
  - c) What if the group goes wrong at some point? Do we have the kind of faith that does right because it’s right?
3. Searching faith—typical of adolescence, the developmental stage when children are naturally seeking their own identity and independence (as it should be; God never meant for us to keep our children, but to prepare them for leaving).
  - a) We need to adjust our terminology and realize that adolescence is not, as often caricatured, primarily a period of *rebellion*, but a period of *testing* and *identity-seeking*.<sup>6</sup>
  - b) We also need to understand that, if this is normal adolescent behavior in all other areas of life, it is also normal when it comes to questions of faith.
  - c) The “everyone” in 1 Peter 3:15 should include our youth who ask “why?”
4. Owned faith—at some point, usually in early adulthood (for adolescence lasts into the mid-20s), people who have progressed through these stages should make faith their own. They make decisions based on it because they believe it, not because of their parents, their church, or their peers.

## II. Creating a Climate for Developing Owned Faith: Job’s Story.

- A. God wants parents to help their children develop faith in the same way he seeks to develop it in all of us.
- B. Consider Job’s story.
  1. Job 42:1-6—Job said that he had grown in his faith, that he questioned some things, was challenged by some things, and emerged with a different and stronger faith than before.

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<sup>6</sup> I base this on reading from various sources, but also on experience with adolescents as a parent and a teacher. In the latter role which lasted 12 years, I spent around 600 hours a year in daily contact with about 100 adolescents a year. (This figure accounts only for the time spent in the confines of a classroom, not other encounters at school and elsewhere.)

2. Job 9, 10—Job’s faith development involved some tough questions, asked in ways that some believers (erroneously) have found uncomfortable, if not anathema. See 9:14-18, 32-35; 10:1-3, 18, 19.
  3. Job 12, 13—Job had once shared the same view of the direct connection between sin and suffering that his friends held; but he was confronted with the reality of his own experience and came to question his traditional beliefs. See 12:1-4, 9, 13-15; 13:1-5.
  4. Job 38-41—In the questions with which God confronted Job, his testing and questions were given some guidance and, where necessary, correction. See 38:1-5; 40:6-9.
- C. A major part of helping our children develop the owned faith of Job 42:1-6 will involve the creation of an environment (at home and church) that allows them to examine, question, and grow *their* faith.
1. We should show that we welcome tough questions from those who ask them.
  2. We should even allow the questioning of cherished beliefs and admit that our own specific beliefs can benefit from examination and questions.
  3. We should also be prepared to ask the kinds of questions that generate additional thought and development of our children’s faith.<sup>7</sup>

### *Conclusion*

1. The process outlined here may seem more involved than it is. What it really amounts to is the willingness of parents and church leaders to study and grow in their own faith to the point that they are not threatened by the kinds of questions that often accompany faith development, but can give the kinds of answers that guide those who are seeking into stronger faith.
2. What are you doing to prepare to help those who follow you to develop their own strong faith?

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<sup>7</sup> I am reminded here of an older high school student I knew who was questioning whether one could even believe in God. Later, after he had gone to college, he explained the difference between the way two of his teachers had responded to his questions. He said one listened politely, and then went on, almost as if the question had been asked. The other acknowledged the legitimacy of his questions, and then asked him whether he had thought about this or that idea, guiding him toward a different conclusion. The young man was emphatic that the second teacher had helped him more as he struggled with his faith.