Parenting Apologetics: Teaching Children (5-12 Years) to Appreciate Faith in Secular Society

Seidel Abel Boanerges
Spurgeon's College (London)

1. Introduction

Childhood is a special and unique stage in a person's life. The knowledge, experience and impressions laid at this stage chart a path for a person's adolescence and adulthood. This paper explores how parents could teach children aged 5-12 to appreciate their Christian faith in a secular society. This paper will first explore the meaning and purpose of Christian apologetics. Secondly, it will explore the development of children between the ages of 5-12, particularly the various changes that they go through, such as physical, biological, cognitive, communicative, emotional, social, and moral. Thirdly, it will explore the scriptural language of parenthood between God and humanity, the critical role of parents in children's spiritual formation and various parenting styles. Fourthly, it will discuss three strategies by which parents can help their children appreciate their Christian faith in a secular society – they are: 1) regular opportunities for faith discussions and questions, 2) the implications of the theological concept of *Imago Dei*, and 3) the advantages of having Jesus as a friend and will finish with a conclusion.

2. Christian Apologetics

The word 'apologetics' is derived from the Greek word 'ἀπολογία' (apologia), meaning 'defence'.[1] Apologetics may be simply defined as the defence of the Christian faith. Originally, 'ἀπολογία' (apologia) was a legal term used in a court of law.[2] In ancient Athens, the defendant was permitted to make a formal verbal defence against the accusation after an accusation; this was an opportunity to give a 'word back' or to 'speak away' (apo—away, logia—speech) the accusation.[3] Classical Greek works such as Plato's (429–347 BC) *Apology* demonstrate this defence, where Plato defends Socrates (469–399 BC) against his accusers. This same word 'apologia' appears seventeen times in the New Testament in various parts of speech, such as noun form (ἀπολογία [apologia] – 1 Cor. 9:3) or verb form (ἀπολογοῦμαι [apologoumai] – Acts 24:10) to indicate a personal defence against an accusation or the general defence of the gospel.[4]

The call for Christian apologetics finds its roots in various scriptures. It's a biblical injunction, exemplified by Peter's directive to persecuted Christians to be prepared to articulate the reasons for their faith (1 Peter 3:15). Likewise, believers are urged to defend their beliefs actively (Jude 3), dispel doubts among new converts (2 Corinthians 10:5), address false doctrines (Titus 1:9-11), and acknowledge the role of reason in elucidating God's truth (Isaiah 1:18). Throughout biblical accounts, numerous figures engage in apologetic discourse. For instance, Peter defends the phenomenon of tongues at Pentecost (Acts 2), Paul engages in persuasive dialogue with various groups (Acts 17), Stephen defends himself against blasphemy charges in Jerusalem (Acts 6), and Jesus, through his teachings and miracles,

---

[1] 'ἀπολογία' in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edn, ed. by Frederick William Danker (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.117.

[2] 'ἀπολογία', p.117.

[3] J Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter,* Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), p.188.

[4] 'ἀπολογία' in Timothy Friberg and Others (eds.), *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), p.69 and Boa and Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons*, p.1.

asserts his identity as the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Messiah, and proclaims his equality with the Father (Matthew 22:23-33; Mark 2:10-11; Luke 24:39; John 5:17-39). Understanding the broader context of 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV), often regarded as the cornerstone text for apologetics, is crucial for our discussion.

> Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an **answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

The Greek term 'ἀπολογίαν' (apologian) has been rendered differently in various Bible versions, such as 'answer' in the NIV and KJV, and 'defence' in the ESV and NRSV. This variance depends on the translation approach (formal, dynamic, idiomatic, or optimal equivalence) adopted by each version's translators.[5] The terms 'defence' or 'answer' within their contexts convey meanings like vindication, rebuttal, or explanation.[6] The letter of 1 Peter was not addressed to scholars or philosophers but to early church believers. Peter wrote to Christians scattered by persecutions across Pontus, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.[7] Although facing oppression and hostility, Peter encouraged them not to fear but to stand firm and defend their newfound faith in Christ.

---

[5] For a helpful resource on Bible translations, please see, Kenneth L. Barker, 'Bible Translation Philosophies', in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World*, ed. by Glen G. Scorgie and Others (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), pp.51-64.

[6] Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter,* NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), p.7.

[7] Davids, p.7.

In the New Testament, the term 'apologia' isn't used in the modern sense of a formal academic discipline known as Christian apologetics. Boa and Bowman Jr. point out that 'defence' was narrowly employed in the first and second centuries to describe a group of writers referred to as 'apologists,' who defended the Christian faith in their works against accusations.[8] Notable examples are Justin Martyr's *First Apology, Dialogue with Trypho,* and *Second Apology*, and Tertullian's *Apologeticum*.[9] These early Christian apologists adapted their apologetic methods from previous Greco-Roman approaches (like Plato's Apology), formally defending Christianity against various charges or misunderstandings.[10]

'It was apparently not until 1794 that apologetics was used to designate a specific theological discipline.'[11] The Enlightenment forced apologetics to reinvent itself.[12] Hume's rejection of revelation and natural theology, Kant's dismissal of traditional proofs for the existence of God, and Darwin's promotion of a naturalistic explanation for life's order and diversity posed significant intellectual challenges.[13] In response, modernist apologetics, led by figures like Joseph Butler, William Paley, and Charles Hodge, embraced reason, evidence, and revelation in their defence of Christianity.[14] McGrath observes that historically, Christian apologists adeptly addressed the rationalist challenges, adapting their methods to resonate with the

---

[8] Ken Boa and Robert Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faiths*, 2nd edn (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p.2.

[9] Boa and Bowman Jr., p.2.

[10] Boa and Bowman Jr., p.2.

[11] Boa and Bowman Jr., p.3.

[12] 'Enlightenment' is a contested term with many different expressions (Descartes, Hume, Kant, Bayle, Spinoza and Toland, etc.) and interpretations (culmination of earlier trends in the Renaissance and Reformation, etc.).

[13] Boa and Bowman Jr., pp.23-24.

[14] Boa and Bowman Jr., pp.22-24.

prevailing intellectual climate.[15] However, McGrath also warns against replicating these approaches uncritically, recognising that each era presents unique issues and concerns.[16] With the rise of postmodernity in the West and Western-influenced cultures, the landscape for apologetics shifted once more. Apologetics found itself confronting postmodern values such as relativism, religious pluralism, skepticism toward objective truth, anti-foundationalism, and a heightened emphasis on relationships, communities, and personal experience.[17] This cultural shift, influenced by post-Christendom and postmodernism, necessitates the adaptation of apologetics to remain culturally relevant.[18]

Scholars have recently expanded the scope of apologetics beyond mere defence, presenting various perspectives on its functions. This section delves into three viewpoints from prominent apologists: Norman Geisler, Alister McGrath and John Frame. Geisler identifies two crucial functions: Defense, which involves addressing objections, and Offense, which focuses on explaining why Christianity alone is true.[19] On the other hand, McGrath emphasises three functions: Defending, which entails tackling barriers to faith; Commending, which involves highlighting the appeal of Jesus Christ and the gospel; and Translating, which entails elucidating Christian concepts in cultural terms.[20] McGrath's perspective, influenced by both modernist and postmodernist outlooks, seeks to make Christianity more plausible and attractive. However, he excludes the offensive aspect,

---

[15] Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge-building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), p.28.

[16] McGrath, *Bridge-building,* p.28.

[17] See, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (eds.), *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

[18] Stuart Murray defines post-Christendom as 'the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.' Stuart Murray, *Post Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), p.19.

[19] Norman Geisler, 'What is Apologetics and Why Do We Need It?', in *The Harvest Handbook of Apologetics*, ed. by Joseph Holden (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2018), 21-26, (p.22).

[20] McGrath, *Bridge-building,* pp.17-21.

aiming instead to foster understanding and appreciation of the Christian faith.[21] McGrath intends to make the Christian faith more plausible and attractive: 'The object of apologetics is not to antagonise or humiliate those outside the church, but to help open their eyes to the reality, reliability, and relevance of the Christian faith', (hence the exclusion of the 'offence' function).[22] Frame provides a balanced perspective, incorporating elements from both Geisler and McGrath. He outlines three functions: Proof, which establishes a rational basis for Christianity; Defense, which addresses objections to belief; and Offense, which actively challenges unbelieving thought.[23] While Frame adopts McGrath's three functions, he combines Commending and Translating into a single function called Proof. Additionally, he retains Geisler's Offense function, which aims to proactively expose unbelieving thought, drawing an analogy to its usage in sports and warfare.[24] Although Frame acknowledges concerns about the term 'offence' potentially suggesting aggression from apologists, he argues that it reflects a strategic approach akin to attacking an opponent in sports or warfare rather than being personally offensive.

My doctoral research developed a new concept in the field of apologetics called 'Holistic Apologetics'. I developed it as a part of my research on Holistic Apologetic Preaching (HAP).[25] I researched the question, 'To what extent does apologetic preaching equip evangelical believers to defend and share their Christian faith

---

[21] More about these perspectives will be discussed in the next section.

[22] McGrath, *Bridge-building,* p.18.

[23] John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), p.2.

[24] John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 2nd edn, ed. by Joseph E. Torres (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), p.189.

[25] Seidel Abel Boanerges, *Homiletical Apologetics and the Local Church: Equipping believers through holistic apologetic preaching*, 2022 [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Chester. <https://chesterrep.openrepository.com/handle/10034/627869>.

today?'.[26] I argued that a holistic approach to apologetics and a textual approach to apologetic preaching are helpful to evangelical believers in understanding their Christian faith deeply and in defending and sharing it in a relevant and contemporary manner. I specifically argued for the inclusion of **spiritual apologetics** (healing, miracles and prophecy) alongside **artistic apologetics** (literature, painting, drama and film) and **action-oriented apologetics** (fighting injustice, solidarity, compassion) into our contemporary practice of apologetics. Holistic apologetics does not dismiss traditional **intellectual apologetics** (moral arguments, proofs, contradictions), but argues that it is only one of the ways to practice apologetics today. A holistic understanding of apologetics equips believers in diverse ways for their discipleship and mission in contemporary society. If contemporary apologetics is to be effective, it must include and actively encourage the demonstration of spiritual, artistic, and action-oriented apologetics alongside traditional intellectual apologetics. This concept of holistic apologetics is relatively new to the field of Christian apologetics; therefore, due to the scope of this paper, it will only focus on the intellectual side of apologetics.

3. Understanding the Middle Childhood Stage (5-12 Years)

Development is generally defined as 'the action or process of bringing something to a fuller or more advanced condition'.[27] Childhood development means that the child is growing or advancing in their awareness of themselves and their surroundings. Sean MacBlain helpfully outlines the reasons why it is imperative for teachers to

---

[26] Abel Boanerges, *Homiletical Apologetics* <https://chesterrep.openrepository.com/handle/10034/627869>.

[27] 'Development', The Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/development>.

know about a child's development. The reasons he lists are equally important for parents to know about their child's development as well. He asserts,

> Trainee teachers need to know about children's development for many reasons. Every child they encounter as teachers will bring to each learning situation innate dispositions, individualised biographies and accumulated histories of learning. These will all have been shaped in their homes and preschool settings and will be characterised by patterns of behaviour that are often difficult to understand and not always predictable. They will present with different personality traits, emotional and social strengths and vulnerabilities, and likes and dislikes; importantly, they will also have expectations, which, though they are unable to articulate, will mean that they need their teachers to be empathetic towards them and support them in reaching the potential they have been born with, and that is rightfully theirs.[28]

Understanding childhood development helps parents perceive the child's world from a child's perspective, which is complex as it takes time, energy and effort. It is important to note that a child's development varies from child to child and depends on various factors, such as social, political, economic and religious. MacBlain rightly notes,

> Children's development is grounded in the historical cultures and societies they are born into, the

---

[28] Sean MacBlain, *Child Development for Teachers* (London: Learning Matters [SAGE], 2019), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1431983/12>.

communities in which they grow up, and increasingly the ever-changing and globalised world around them; every one of these elements impacts in different ways on children's development and, of course, their learning.[29]

Every child is a product of their physical and cultural environment; understanding them requires understanding their multiple contexts of influence and impact. During the latter half of the 20th century, Erik Erikson, a name that is still referenced by scholars today, suggested that a person goes through eight stages in life (see below).[30] He notes that during middle childhood, children explore and develop through a range of experiences and try to fit the social and cultural mould of their immediate environment.[31]

---

[29] MacBlain, *Child Development*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1431983/18>.

[30] Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York, NY: Norton, 1963), p.202.

[31] See Table 1— Erikson, *Childhood*, p.202.

Stage/Age Range	Main Challenge	Positive Resolution of the Challenge
Birth to 18 months	Trust versus mistrust	The child develops a feeling of trust in his or her caregivers.
18 months to 3 years	Autonomy versus shame/doubt	The child learns what he or she can and cannot control and develops a sense of free will.
3 to 6 years	Initiative versus guilt	The child learns to be independent by exploring, manipulating, and taking action.
6 to 12 years	Industry versus inferiority	The child learns to do things well or correctly according to standards set by others, particularly in school.
12 to 18 years	Identity versus role confusion	The adolescent develops a well-defined and positive sense of self in relationship to others.
19 to 40 years	Intimacy versus isolation	The person develops the ability to give and receive love and to make long-term commitments.
40 to 65 years	Generativity versus stagnation	The person develops an interest in guiding the development of the next generation, often by becoming a parent.
65 to death	Ego integrity versus despair	The person develops acceptance of his or her life as it was lived.

Table 1 – Erikson's Eight Stages of Life

Jean Mercer notes that although humans are classified as children according to the law until they are 18 years old, in child developmental studies, the development stage, she notes, is normally from conception to 12 years old.[32] Ages 5-12 years are also known as middle childhood. Although early childhood (0-4 years) is considered critical to a child's development, middle childhood (5-12 years) is equally critical as a range of physical, psychological, and social

---

[32] Jean A. Mercer, *Child Development: Concepts and Theories* (London: Sage, 2018), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1431985/10>.

changes occur in this stage. The British national curriculum for school children is organised into blocks of years called 'key stages'. In the UK and some other countries, ages 5-12 represent three key stages. They are Key Stage 1 (5-7 years), Key Stage 2 (7-11 years), Key Stage 3 (12-14).[33] Martin Packer observes that,

> Middle childhood is a stage of development in which the child is thrust outward in three ways. She moves out of the family into the peer group, she enters the world of work and of games that require more complex physical and psychological skills, and she makes a tentative entrance into the world of adult logic, symbolism, and conceptualization.[34]

For parents, it is helpful to know about these key stages, particularly some of the changes that take place during middle childhood. Some of these changes might sound irrelevant to the topic of this paper, but they have an indirect impact and influence their moral and social behaviour. Hence, it is important to go through, albeit briefly, some of the changes that take place during middle childhood. Keenan and others helpfully write in detail the range of changes that take place in children.[35] Some of them which are relevant to this paper are as follows:

Physical and Biological Development: At this stage, children grow physically as they experience growth spurts, during which their height and weight increase steadily. Primary teeth are replaced by permanent teeth. They develop motor skills such as writing, drawing, running, jumping, dressing, using mobile phones, computers, and video games,

---

[33] UK Schools and Education, *The National Curriculum*, <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum>.

[34] Martin J. Packer, *Child Development: Understanding A Cultural Perspective* (London: Sage, 2021), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3013328/19>.

[35] Thomas Keenan, Subhadra Evans, Kevin Crowley, *An Introduction to Child Development* (London: Sage, 2016), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3271685/17>.

and getting used to the world of social media and reels. During preadolescence and early adolescence (9-12 years), differences in body composition begin to appear.[36] It is also the stage where they develop attitudes towards sex and sexuality, as some may have started puberty (11-12 years) and explore their sexual curiosity.

Cognitive and Communication Development: They develop cognitively as they are able to think logically and improve their reasoning skills to solve problems and other issues they face. By the time children are five years old, they have already developed some good communication skills and can communicate either through spoken or sign language. They develop considerably in this area of communication during this stage. 'Middle childhood has often been seen as a time for mastering intellectual skills, using the cognitive tools of language and other material symbol systems.'[37] It is important to note Vygotsky's zone of proximal development concept here. Vygotsky defined that zone as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers'.[38] Children during this stage have matured and developed some problem-solving skills, but they still need some assistance from others to mature even more. It is helpful to note the future capacity for growth in children.

Emotional and Social Development: Erikson argues that during this stage of 5-12 years, a child starts moving from their home context into the wider social context. This is where they develop emotionally. It is during this stage that children grow in their individuality and self-

---

[36] Robert M. Malina, Claude Bouchard, Oded Bar-Or, *Growth, Maturation, and Physical Activity* (Leeds: Human Kinetics, 2004), See chapter 5, Body Composition, pp.101-117.

[37] Packer, *Child Development*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3013328/19>.

[38] L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p.86.

independence. They gain their self-confidence and begin to manage their own self-expectations. Packer asserts that 'middle childhood is also a time when the child's understanding of society, morals, ethics, and law changes, as she becomes more skilled with societal institutions. She comes to understand other people in more complex ways, and this enables changes in relationships with peers and with parents'.[39] That is why Erikson argues that children during this stage could either grow in their skills and develop a 'sense of industry' where they learn to work with people around them, or they develop a 'sense of inferiority' where underdeveloped skills will make them introverted and have negative social consequences. It is important to note that 'the child constructs interpretations of environmental events, and continually acts and interacts with his or her environment in order to construct and reconstruct experience.'[40] Children at this stage do not respond passively but actively engage with their environment and create their own reality.

Moral Development: A vital area of development during middle childhood is the moral development of children. Packer argues that morality is at the core of the child's understanding of other people, including themselves, as it relates to how they respond to themselves and others.[41] As noted earlier, morality depends on one's culture and contexts, such as social, political, religious and economic. Regardless of their contexts, children at this stage develop a sense of morality between right and wrong and increasingly become aware of concepts such as justice and fairness. 'That's not fair' is a common phrase we hear between siblings from this young stage. They are able to understand, at least to some extent, the concept of justice and how everyone, particularly themselves, must be treated equally and fairly.

---

[39] Packer, *Child Development*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3013328/19>.

[40] Rosalyn H. Shute and Phillip T. Slee, *Child Development: Theories and Critical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2015), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1323896/11?element_originalid=ch4>.

[41] Packer, *Child Development*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3013328/20>.

It is helpful to note Damon's three stages of distributive justice in children.

> Damon (1977) described three broad stages in the development of distributive justice. In Stage 1, preschool children (aged 4 to 5) tend to base judgements of distributive justice on desire and irrelevant facts (e.g. 'give more money to the older child'). By Stage 2 (aged 6 to 8), children base their conceptions first on equality ('all children should be given the same amount of money') and, slightly later, on the basis of equity ('the child who worked hardest on the art should be awarded the most money'). At Stage 3 (aged 8 and above), need and circumstance tend to be considered in determining distributive equations ('the poorest child should be given the most').[42]

Here, we note that children develop a sense of equality between the ages of 5 and 12. Nonetheless, an important aspect we must note at this point is that children cannot 'draw a distinction between social conventions and moral norms', but 'They [have] accepted the authority of their parents, and judged right and wrong on the basis of their respect for this authority.'[43] One of the key theological ideas in this paper is the concept of *Imago Dei*.[44] Children at this stage might know the 'how' of being equal, but we will discuss the 'why' we should be equal later in this paper. 'Guilt, shame and embarrassment have been termed the 'self-conscious' moral emotions.[45] They feel guilty when they break moral standards and learn to anticipate its consequences, such as disapproval, warnings, time out or withdrawal

---

[42] Keenan, *An Introduction*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3271685/27>.

[43] Packer, *Child Development*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3013328/19>.

[44] From Latin *Imago Dei*, meaning the Image of God, will be explored later in this paper.

[45] Keenan, *An Introduction*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3271685/27>.

of privileges. Skinner noted that when such moral standards are taught and practised by parents, gradually, children increase in their good behaviour and decrease in their bad behaviour.[46]

Moreover, they develop empathy and sympathy as they better understand the feelings of their peers or the people around them. Nevertheless, it is helpful to distinguish between prosocial and altruistic behaviour. In prosocial behaviour, help is given with an expectation of gratitude (thank you) or reward, but in altruistic behaviour, help is given without any expectation.[47] 'Altruistic behaviour is motivated by internalized values and self-rewards that do not carry any anticipated social rewards.'[48] Childhood Studies notes that prosocial behaviour is a great advantage for societies, families, and even children. However, altruistic behaviour is not encouraged, and it is not even seen as an advantage. This is where Christian parents can nurture the value of altruistic behaviour in children. We will revisit this topic in the *Imago Dei* section below.

4. The Role of Parents in Children's Spiritual Formation

A frequent imagery that we find in all scripture regarding the relationship between God and humans is the image of a relationship between a parent and a child. God is frequently pictured as a father (Deu. 32:6; Pro. 3:11-12; Isa. 64:8; Hos. 1:1; Matt. 6:26; Heb. 12:5-6). Similarly, God is also pictured as a mother (Isa. 49:15, 66:13; Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34; Gal. 4:19). As a loving parent, God wants the best for his children. God has his children's best interests in mind, even if the children don't realise that. In this process, God also disciplines his children, a theme that is also frequently found in the

---

46 Keenan, *An Introduction*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3271685/27>. Original reference is J. E. Susky, 'Compassion and Moral Development', *Journal of Thought*, 14(3),1979, 227-234.

47 Keenan, *An Introduction*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3271685/27>.

48 Keenan, *An Introduction*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3271685/27>.

Bible. God has a special place for children. The most often quoted passage regarding children in the New Testament is as follows,

> Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there (Matt. 19:13-15).

Parents have a unique privilege in helping their children know God and the vital role one's faith plays in our daily lives. Gary McKnight asserts that 'God assigns to parents a special role and responsibility in the spiritual nurture of their children (e.g., Deu. 6:4–9; Eph 6:1–4)'.[49] Children are introduced to God through their parents. They develop an understanding of God's nature and ultimately believe in God. The seeds that are sowed during early and middle childhood mature and become strong in the latter years of the child's development. Kim wisely notes that,

> Parents also profoundly influence their children's spiritual development. This influence is due, in part, to the fact that children cannot see the invisible God, but they can see their parents who they may understand to live in God's presence. Children learn the reality of God through their parents' practice of the presence of God.[50]

---

[49] Gary McKnight, 'Equipping Parents for the Spiritual Formation of their Children' in *Exploring and Engaging Spirituality for Today's Children: A Holistic Approach*, ed by. La Verne Tolbert (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/18>.

[50] Kim, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1722349/254>.

Unfortunately, 'statistics show that many Christian parents have disengaged from their God-intended role as the primary spiritual nurturers of their children'.[51] McKnight cities the survey done by the Family Needs Survey with nearly 40,000 Christian parents and discovered that,

- Over half of parents said that their families never or rarely engaged in family devotions.
- About 40% of parents said that they discussed spiritual matters with their children never, rarely, or only occasionally.
- Nearly one-quarter of parents never or rarely prayed with their children, and another one quarter prayed with their children only occasionally.[52]

Christian parents should prioritise regular engagement with their children on matters of faith. These crucial formative years offer a prime opportunity to instil values and beliefs that will guide them through adolescence and into adulthood, especially in a secular society where faith may be challenged or destroyed. Fully utilising these formative years of middle childhood can establish a strong foundation of spirituality that will support them as they navigate the complexities of secular society.

Parenting practises considerably differ based on one's culture and context. There is no single parenting pattern that is practised all over the world. In the above section, we noted how a child's social, cultural, economic, and political contexts influence their development. The same is applicable to parents on their parenting as well. Back in the 1960s, Baumrind was one of the pioneers who

---

[51] McKnight, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/18>.

[52] McKnight, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/18>.

proposed three parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive.[53] Later, Maccoby and Martin revised that model and proposed four parenting styles – authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and indifferent.[54]

Control/ Demand	High	Low
High	AUTHORITATIVE *loving, supportive* *demanding, controlling*	AUTHORITARIAN *unsupportive* *demanding, controlling*
Low	PERMISSIVE/INDULGENT *loving, supportive* *indulgent, non-demanding*	INDIFFERENT/NEGLECTFUL *uninvolved* *little discipline*

Table 2: Four Parenting Styles

The authoritative parenting style is controlling and expects the child to obey in every aspect fully. However, authoritative parents are kind and loving, and they make every effort to understand their children from their perspectives as well. Bornstein and Zlotnik argue that 'Authoritative parenting is like a democracy in which the feelings and ideas of both the parents and the children are recognised and supported'.[55] The advantage of such a style is that children develop to be more disciplined, have a higher achievement rate and become independent. The authoritarian parenting style is controlling, but it rarely tries to understand the child from their perspective. It is like a one-way street where the child must obey and respect parental authority. Children with this style are less confident and have fewer social skills than those with an authoritative parenting style. A permissive parenting style is not controlling or demanding. They

---

[53] MH Bornstein and D Zlotnik, 'Parenting Styles and Their Effects', in *Social and Emotional Development in Infancy and Early Childhood*, ed by. Marshall M Haith and Benson Janette (Oxford: Elsevier, 2009), p.282.

[54] Bornstein and Zlotnik, p.282.

[55] Bornstein and Zlotnik, p.282.

provide all the love and support needed for the child. They allow the child to act in freedom and have fewer expectations about their maturity. In this style, the scope of discipline or punishment is very minimal. As a result, children under this parenting style tend to be less mature but independent. Sungwon Kim notes that 'the parents' level of education can explain some cultural differences. Parents with a low level of education value obedience and conformity'.[56] Finally, an indifferent parenting style shows very little interest in the development of children. They rarely show any interest in what happens at school or in the life of the child. In this style, the parent's interests come first, and they are indifferent to the child's interests. Children under the style demonstrate poor intellectual skills, self-doubt and lack of self-esteem. Bornstein and Zlotnik observe that the authoritative parenting style is quite common within Western cultures, such as in European and American societies. However, the authoritarian parenting style is more common within African American, East Asian, South Asian and Latin American societies.[57]

If you are a parent reading this paper, a helpful reflective question to ask at this point is, 'To which of these four categories does your parenting style fit?'. What are its advantages and disadvantages? Whichever parenting style is used to nurture spirituality in our children, we must note that it has positive or negative implications. God cares about children's spiritual development. According to KE Lawson, 'Children's spirituality is the child's development of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, within the context of a community of believers that fosters that relationship, as well as the child's understanding of—and response to—that relationship.'[58] Therefore, it is imperative that parents play a

---

[56] Sungwon Kim, 'Parenting Styles and Children's Spiritual Development Families', *in Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed by. Holly Allen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1722349/254>.

[57] Bornstein and Zlotnik, p.286.

[58] Kevin E Lawson (eds.), *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), xi.

vital role in the spiritual formation of their children. The section explores various strategies on how we can do it in practice.

5. Strategies for Nurturing Faith in a Secular Setting

How are parents supposed to nurture this spiritual development as discussed in the section above? Chris Hooton argues that we can achieve it through spiritual direction, a practice that has been practised for centuries.[59] He defines spiritual direction as 'a relationship in which three people enter into a conversation: the person seeking direction (directee), the director, and the Holy Spirit. There is one purpose to this meeting, helping the directee recognize the voice of the Spirit'.[60] Spiritual direction is an important concept for this paper, as the three strategies listed below flow from it. This spiritual direction is a foundation on which all other strategies can rest. Sometimes, faith is made so cerebral that one could forget that it is primarily a relationship between God and humanity. The voice of God, the Holy Spirit, is vital in all matters pertaining to faith. Hotton asserts that Spiritual direction is particularly 'helpful in times of stress or crisis for the child'.[61] He recalls an experience with his daughter when she was being bullied at school. At home, he and his daughter took that problem to Jesus in prayer and later she found comfort as she felt that Jesus was right there with her. Now whenever she feels threatened, she knows that Jesus is there with her and for her. We will unpack this in one of the strategies later.

James Fowler proposed six stages of faith in our spiritual development - Pre-Stage: Undifferentiated Faith (infants); Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (pre-school); Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith

---

[59] Christopher C. Hooton, 'Parents as Spiritual Directors Fostering the Spirituality of Early Elementary-Aged Children', in *Exploring and Engaging Spirituality for Today's Children: A Holistic Approach*, ed by. La Verne Tolbert (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/19>.

[60] Hooton, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/19>.

[61] Hooton, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/19>.

(school age); Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence); Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (early adulthood); Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith (middle adulthood); Stage 6: Universalizing Faith (later adulthood).[62] The paper is concerned with stage 2, Mythic-Literal Faith. We have already noted in our second section that children at this stage develop a sense of justice. Logic starts to play a greater role at this stage. As they increase their understanding of fairness, they develop a sense of cause and effect. They develop a separation between the fantasy world and the real world. It is interesting to note that formal school education begins at age five and above. In addition to parents, they start trusting other family members, friends and teachers on matters of faith and society. At this stage, children understand their faith primarily through stories and they interpret them in very literal ways. Fowler notes,

> The great gift to consciousness that emerges in this stage is the ability to narratize one's experience. As regards our primary interest in faith we can say that the development of the Mythic-Literal stage brings with it the ability to bind our experiences into meaning through the medium of stories.[63]

Therefore, parents are encouraged to teach their children through the form of narratives. Nonetheless, although there are several strategies we can discuss, due to the scope of this paper, I have reduced them to three strategies that will help us to – 1) regular opportunities for faith discussions and questions, 2) the implications of the theological concept of Imago Dei, and 3) the advantages of having Jesus as a friend.

---

[62] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995).

[63] Fowler, p.136.

5.1 Strategy One – Regular Opportunities for Faith Discussions and Questions

Most literature published on children's work and family work encourages regular healthy conversations between parents and children. It is also helpful to provide regular opportunities for children to ask questions pertaining to their faith. In this section, this paper will draw from evidence-based research of a number of scholars and researchers in the field of children's faith and spirituality. Allen and her fellow researchers observe that,

> The recommendations repeated most frequently in the literature by children's spirituality and parenting researchers will not be surprising to most parents. Four ways commonly suggested to parents as they seek to nurture their children's religious and spiritual development are 1) to participate with children in religious activities and rituals as a family (e.g., prayer and Scripture reading), 2) to foster mutual conversation and discussion, 3) to model a congruent spiritual life before their children, and 4) to parent lovingly yet firmly.[64]

Similarly, King and Boyatzis assert that if parents and children have regular conversations at home, those conversations provide a helpful context to nurture their faith.[65] Ivy Beckwith argues that,

---

[64] Holly Catterton Allen with Christa Adams, Kara Jenkins, and Jill Williams Meek, 'How Parents Nurture the Spiritual Development of their Children Insights from Recent Qualitative Research', in *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*, ed by. Kevin Lawson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012). Perlego Books <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/878737/16>.

[65] King, P.E. and Boyatzis, C.J., 'Exploring Adolescent Spiritual and Religious Development, Current and Future Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives'*, Applied Development Sciences*, 2004, Vol. 8, pp.2-6.

> If the child's parents and caregivers show that listening to and following God's story is a priority for them, then the child will model those attitudes. If the important adults in the child's life practice the spiritual disciplines, worship God, and make time to care for their own souls, then the child will find ways to mirror these behaviors in her own life.[66]

Jennifer Mata-McMahon and Patricia Escarfuller offer some very helpful suggestions for teachers on nurturing spirituality in secular settings.[67] Some of their suggestions for a classroom are also applicable to parents who can implement them in their own homes. One of their suggestions is to offer opportunities for children to express their understanding of their faith and the spiritual world. Mata-Mahon surveyed her pre-service teacher students on a children's spirituality project and noted the following insight from one of her students.

> After reading this book (Mata, 2015) I started to reconsider the way I view education and my role as a teacher. Throughout my learning experiences in the classroom, I have started to connect with the idea that a teacher's role is to make sure students are learning in everything they are doing. As teachers, I believe we have the ability to see everything as a learning opportunity, but as potential spiritual friends, we also have the opportunity to turn a learning experience into a spiritually uplifting opportunity. Our focus is on the whole child and

---

[66] Ivy Beckwith , *Postmodern Children's Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), p.53.

[67] Jennifer Mata-McMahon and Patricia Escarfuller, *Children's Spirituality in Early Childhood Education: Theory to Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), Section III – Tying It All Together.

> while it can be easy to focus our attention solely on curriculum and education, we must remember that our students are more than growing brains; they are learners with souls that see the world around them in different ways and through unique lenses. Because of this, I believe it is necessary for teachers to incorporate opportunities for the students to express whom they are in the spiritual world allowing others to see the whole them and not just the learners they sit next to in class. Whether it is through show and tell or an 'all about you' autobiography, I believe students should have the opportunity to spiritually express themselves in ECE [Early Childhood Education].[68]

Likewise, parents might see it as their responsibility to ensure that their children are learning academically or intellectually in everything they do, but they should also regularly create opportunities for children to express how they view the spiritual world. Children are often told how to demonstrate their emotions, such as 'stop crying' or 'it will be okay, don't be sad' etc., but they argue that teachers (in our case, parents) who support their children by providing a listening ear to hear about their spiritual experiences and feelings will be in a better position to nurture their spirituality.[69] Another suggestion is to generate awe and curiosity of the spiritual world with appropriate exercises such as meditation and mindfulness.[70] Another pre-teacher notes,

> We model expressions of wonder and awe when we are learning. We teach children to be curious and reinforce their engagement by offering extensions to

---

[68] Mata-McMahon and Escarfuller, p.131.

[69] Mata-McMahon and Escarfuller, p.133.

[70] Mata-McMahon and Escarfuller, p.133.

deeper learning about the things they are passionate about. We teach children to allow themselves to be inspired. We do this by creating space and capacity through meditation, breathing exercises, and a mindful openness to the present moment. In general, we know that our sense of wonder tends to dissipate as we age if left unattended. I think this occurs largely because we are distracted by the busyness we've constructed in our daily lives, but I think it's also due to a lack of understanding about the importance of spirituality. As teachers, we have a responsibility to nurture this innate sense of awe and curiosity, which I suppose can be labelled spirituality.[71]

Parents need to make it a priority to create awe and curiosity regarding the Christian faith. As a theological educator, I stay clear of the old pedagogical model of banking concept of education, where 'the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits'.[72] As parents, we need to guide and direct our children appropriately, but we should not see them as individuals into whom we are depositing information. We should develop creative and inquisitive children who thirst for knowledge and better experiences.

Moreover, parents might assume that their children attending Sunday School (something equivalent during a midweek) at church might address their questions concerning their faith, but some eye-opening research by Pamela Caudill Ovwigho and Arnold Cole proves otherwise. Ovwigho and Cole did very helpful qualitative research by conducting semi-structured interviews with twenty-one children

---

[71] Mata-McMahon and Escarfuller, p.133.

[72] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Continuum, 1997), p.53.

between the ages of 8-13 years across various Christian denominations.[73] Many children commented that the Sunday did not have any relevance to the rest of the week in their lives. They commented on playing games with some links to scripture and biblical stories, but they were unable to find the relevance of their faith in their daily lives or how to appreciate their faith in a secular society. Surprisingly, the requests from these children were thought provocative and eye-opening. In their own words, they requested the following.[74] It is helpful to read and carefully reflect on these quotes for our own context.

- Delia (12)—Give us homework so we don't forget about God during the week. (Interviewer: What would that look like?) Just a certain verse that we could look up and think about.

- Leah (12)—Don't tell the same stories over and over. (Interviewer: Is it the same stories or just they are told in the same way?) Sort of both. We've heard Noah every year. We need more depth. They still treat us like we're little. We want to be challenged. That's what my religion teacher did this year. (Interviewer: He made you think?) Yes! But it was still fun!

- More time for questions. Emily (8) thought they should have more variety in the songs

---

[73] Pamela Caudill Ovwigho and Arnold Cole, 'Making Faith Their Own Lessons for Children's Ministry from Kids' Reflections on Their Spiritual Lives', in *Exploring and Engaging Spirituality for Today's Children: A Holistic Approach*, ed by. La Verne Tolbert (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/23>.

[74] Ovwigho and Cole, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/23>.

they sing, longer stories & more time to ask questions. John (10) felt there should be more time for the teacher to share about his or her life and for the kids to ask questions. Similarly, Michael (10) was interested in open discussions about what they really believe.

- Grace (9)—Do Bible study together. Do devotions together. Give me tools to help me understand the Bible better like stories about people who have done things wrong and now choose to follow Jesus. Or, maybe Bible flashcards. And answer my questions.

- Katie (10)—Tell personal stories. (Interviewer: How would that work?) We should talk about what's hard to us so we can help each other.

- Leah (12)—I would love to pray together. To talk about our struggles. To read the Bible together and talk about it. And still go to church together . . . It's important we keep doing that.

- Michael (10)—Discuss what their faith means to them.

- Marty (10)—Do it first. (Interviewer: What do you mean?) Show us how you stay close to God.

The majority of the suggestions resulting from this research are directly applicable to the leaders of these children's groups at church, but similar conversations and opportunities can also be given by the parents at home, or parents can follow up on these conversations at home. Gary C. Newton narrates one of his experiences where he was absolutely amazed at the level of deep philosophical and theological questions raised by eight 11-year-old boys. He was leading a children's camp, and one evening, he was leading bedtime devotions for these eight boys.[75] These boys asked the following questions.[76]

- If God really created everything good, then where did Satan come from?
- Did we come from monkeys? . . . . .That's what my teacher says.
- If God is good why did he let my dad leave our family?
- Does Hell last forever or do people just burn for a while and then go?
- How can a good God send people to Hell?
- Will my dad go to Hell? I don't like that at all!
- How can anyone ever be good enough to get to heaven? Everyone I know, including myself, sins all the time. It is impossible not to sin. Life would be no fun!

It is important for parents to note that engaging in apologetics with their children is no longer an option if they want to ensure that their children take their faith seriously in a secular society. Paul Washer, a

---

[75] Gary C. Newton, 'Strategies for Engaging Children at the Deepest Level in Spiritual Formation', in *Exploring and Engaging Spirituality for Today's Children: A Holistic Approach*, ed by. La Verne Tolbert (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/29>.

[76] Questions are taken from Newton, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/879250/29>.

noted evangelist, is often quoted with regard to the priority of proper theological education for children. Once in a sermon, he argued – 'Your children will go to public school. . . and they will be trained for somewhere around 15,000 hours in ungodly secular thought. And then they'll go to Sunday school, and they'll colour a picture of Noah's ark. And you think that's going to stand against the lies that they are being told?'.[77] Regular conversations with children regarding their faith and the opportunity to ask questions will help them to appreciate the relevance of the Christian faith in a secular society. There are several apologetics resources that have been published for kids. Here are some helpful books that I have used recently.

Books by Lee Strobel

- *The Case for Christ for Kids*
- *The Case for Faith for Kids*
- *The Case for A Creator for Kids*

Books by J. Warner Wallace and Susie Wallace

- *Cold Case Christianity for Kids*
- *Forensic Faith for Kids: Learn to Share the Truth from a Real Detective*
- *God's Crime Scene for Kids: Investigate Creation with A Real Detective*

Other Books

- *Learning Logic* by William Lange Craig

---

[77] Paul Washer, *Sermon - The Christian Life* [Part 1 of 6] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4bIaXpor9g>.

- *The Defense Never Rests: A Workbook for Budding Apologists (Ages 10-16)* by William Lange Craig and Joseph Tang
- *Jesus is Alive: Evidence for the Resurrection for Kids* by Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell
- *The Awesome Book of Bible Answers for Kids* by Josh McDowell and Kevin Johnson
- *If I Could Ask God Anything: Awesome Bible Answers for Curious Kids* by Kathryn Slattery

Melissa Cain Travis produced some excellent illustrated apologetics books for children. Books such as:

- *How Do We Know God is Really There?*
- *How Do We Know God Created Life?*
- *How Do We Know Jesus is Alive?*
- *How Do We Know Right from Wrong?*

To conclude our first strategy, parents must be intentional in providing opportunities for children to discuss their faith and spirituality and ask difficult or unanswered questions will help them to understand faith better. The next two strategies concern showing the relevance and advantages of the Christian faith in a secular society for children.

5.2 Strategy Two – The Implications of the Theological Concept of *Imago Dei*

Michael Bird argues that 'A central component in the doctrine of humanity is the affirmation and explication of humans created in the imago Dei, the "image of God."'[78] In Genesis 1:26-27 we read that

---

[78] Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1388307/69>.

God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'. Grudem notes that 'The fact that man is in the image of God means that man is like God and represents God.'[79] However, he also notes that 'Both the Hebrew word for "image" (צֶלֶם , H7512) and the Hebrew word for "likeness" (דְּמוּת , H1952) refer to something that is similar but not identical to the thing it represents'.[80] The scope of this paper does not allow the theological discussion of the debate as to what constitutes the image of God in humans,[81] but being made in God's image gives us intrinsic worth.[82] Now, how is this theological concept related to the theme of our paper? It communicates the idea that every human being created in God's image possesses dignity and worth regardless of age, gender, race, disability, socioeconomic status, and even religion. This has huge implications for how we treat each other as human beings. If each individual has inherent worth in the eyes of God, then we are to treat each other with respect, care and compassion.

My four-year-old daughter is taught to 'be kind to people', 'no hitting people', 'sharing is caring', and other such lessons at her nursery and home. She is quite advanced intellectually for her age, so she asked me one day why it is bad to hit people. Initially, I gave her a pragmatic answer: hitting people hurts them and makes them sad, so that is why we do not hit people. Later, I also told her that God loves each one of us because he made us in his own image. I am not sure how much of that she comprehended, but she knows that God loves people and that's why we do not hit them. That is the reason why she

---

[79] Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), Perlego Books, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1388356/34>.

[80] Gruden, *Systematic Theology*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1388356/34>.

[81] For the various theological views on the *Imago Dei* - Substantive View, Relational View, Functional View, and Royal View, please see, Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1388307/69>.

[82] Lucy Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2022), p.139.

also knows that we need to be kind to each other. As my daughter grows and moves to the middle childhood stage, I would love to explain the concept of *Imago Dei* and its implications in greater depth. However, a child who is in the final years of their middle childhood stage would better understand the concept than one who is just about to enter that stage. They can also be taught that social justice is important because it promotes equality and the well-being of everyone. Moreover, environmental justice is important because the world and environment belong to all of us, and we need to do everything to strive to safeguard it and be good stewards of what God has committed to our care (Gen. 2:15). Furthermore, being made in the image of God gives us a sense of purpose and meaning. It was St Augustine who said, 'To praise you is the desire of humanity, a small piece of your creation. You stir humanity to take pleasure in praising you because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'.[83] McGrath rightly notes that 'a human longing for God is thus built into the fabric of creation, precisely because creation is a purposeful and directed process'.[84]

It must be noted that the concept of *Imago Dei* is unique to the Judeo-Christian faith.[85] There is no other faith in which human beings are considered to be made in God's image and possess that inherent worthiness. This concept provides the theological foundation for moral and ethical principles, such as it is not right to murder, steal, covet or commit adultery, but rather we are to love people regardless of their age, gender, race, disability, socioeconomic status, and even religion. The uniqueness of this fundamental concept will help them appreciate their Christian faith in not only a secular society, but also in the world of other faiths.

---

[83] Augustine translated and quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), p.208.

[84] McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, p.208.

[85] Ruiping Fan, 'Can We Have a General Conception of Personhood in Bioethics?', in *The Moral Status of Persons: Perspectives on Bioethics*, ed by. Gerhold K. Becker (Amsterdam: Brill, 2021), p.16

5.3 Strategy Three – The Advantages of Having Jesus as a Friend

A common hymn we often sing is 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus' by Joseph Scriven who wrote this song as a poem in 1857.[86] Scriven wrote this song while he was in the depths of sorrow. His fiancée accidentally drowned a day before their wedding, and he learnt that his mother was seriously ill in Dublin, Ireland, while he was in Ontario, Canada.[87] The meaning of the song is that in times of our deepest troubles and struggles, we have a friend in Jesus who is closer than any other human friend and is able to come and help us. All we need to do is take our problems and pain to the Lord in prayer, and that is where we can find solace.[88]

We can teach our children that in times of trouble or worry, we can trust Jesus because he is our friend. John 15:15 taught his disciples that he is not their master but a friend: 'I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.' This verse captures the wonderful truth that Jesus extends his friendship and intimacy to everyone who follows him. A master-servant relationship is directly by hierarchy and distance, but friendship is based on mutual love, kindness and affection between each other. Children during the middle childhood stage do not need to know all the complications surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity, how each person of the godhead plays a key role in our lives, but the simple concept of Jesus is my friend is what they need when they are in trouble so that they could pray to him. We can communicate this concept to our children through stories of the Bible such as Jesus blessing the children (Mark 10:13-16) or the

---

[86] Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Kregel Publications, 1982), p.276.

[87] Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, p.276.

[88] Please see the words of the song, What a Friend We Have in Jesus. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, p.275.

parables of the lost sheep and prodigal son (Luke 15:3-7 and 15:11-32). As we noted earlier, parents are to develop mutual conversations and model a congruent spiritual life before their children by praying and demonstrating their faith in action. Children would then see the relevance of their Christian faith in their daily lives, particularly the uniqueness of their Christian faith in a secular society.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how parents could teach children aged 5-12 to appreciate their Christian faith in a secular society. It first explored the meaning and purpose of Christian apologetics and chose to focus on the intellectual side of apologetics. Secondly, it explored the development of children between the ages of 5-12 and discussed the various changes that they go through such as physical, biological, cognitive, communicative, emotional, social, and moral. Thirdly, it explored the scriptural language of parenthood between God and humanity, the various parenting styles and the critical role that parents can play in their children's spiritual formation. Fourthly, discussed three strategies by which parents can help their children appreciate their Christian faith in a secular society. They were 1) regular opportunities for faith discussions and questions, 2) the implications of the theological concept of Imago Dei, and 3) the advantages of having Jesus as a friend.

Nurturing a Christian identity in children provides them with a moral compass grounded in God's love for humanity, giving them meaning and purpose for the ethical and moral choices they make daily. It will instil in them a strong sense of love for one another and demonstrate qualities such as compassion, honesty, integrity, and kindness. As a result, children will appreciate their Christian faith in a secular society and the key role faith plays in our everyday lives.

Rev Dr Seidel Abel Boanerges

Dean of Ministerial Formation
& Tutor in Practical Theology

Spurgeon's College, London
seidel@spurgeons.ac.uk