

# Nurturing Our Children on the Path to Christian Adulthood

Paul Thompson and Beth Peak Thompson

*For centuries, cultures and religions have acknowledged the significance of the transition from childhood to adulthood, marking the time of change with ceremony and ritual. From tasks of bravery required by African tribes, to bar or bat mitzvahs, quinceañeras or confirmation classes, youth receive the message that they are no longer children and now live in a world of different expectations. Formalized recognitions are essential and can have great power, but these time-honored traditions lose their power if they do not adapt to change. Culture is not static and human maturation is not regular in its progress. As a result we live in a generation where parents are set adrift with little guidance in helping youth make the transition from childhood to adulthood.*

Scripture instructs us to teach our children. The heart of the faith for the people of Israel is found in Deuteronomy 6:4–6: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.” Immediately following those words we are told, “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.”

The writer of Colossians declares: “We proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching our children with all wisdom, so that we may present all of our children perfect in Christ. To this end we labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in us, their parents.”

Christ further instructs us in Matthew 28: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Presbyterians hold certain values coming from Scripture and our Reformed traditions that call us to nurture and guide young people. As challenges grow, so does the urgency to pass on these values to our children. The concept of covenant is central to the Reformed tradition. At God’s initiative we are called into a relationship with God. In gratitude for God’s call of grace, we seek to respond faithfully. God’s desire to be in relationship with us, and our response to God’s desire, form the foundation for human life.

What do we tell our young people in describing this life lived in grace and gratitude? The following must be basic in any guidance for young people making the transition to adulthood:

Because God calls us into relationship, we know that we are called into relationship with each other, with Christ at the center. Individuals are meant to be together. We understand that even if we wanted to, we do not live alone. What we do affects others both individually and as a community.

We understand that God's law is a way to help us live within the community. Rather than being punitive, the law is an extension of God's grace. It helps us order life and live together in a way that seeks to be pleasing to God.

Despite our best efforts we can never fulfill with completeness the life God has in mind for us all. We are human. We will fail and fall short of God's intentions. Sin is pervasive. At the same time, God's grace is redemptive. Despite our humanity and our failures, the grace of God made known in Jesus Christ sets us free and makes us new.

This forgiving love then leads us in gratitude to respond. We are called to serve. Having been so loved, we are to love our children and help them to fulfill God's hope for them. Having been so loved by God, our children are to respond in like manner to others. Acting on our faith in God's love of us, we joyfully share God's love with others.

We also believe that God is sovereign. God chooses to freely create and love all that we are. God does so without our aid. Thus our sovereign God is not limited by our best understandings or definition or explanation of God. God's will is therefore not confined to tradition. God can speak to us today offering a new word and revealing a new way. We are a people who have been reformed and are ever reforming, learning and trying to apply what we know of God to the world in which we live.

At baptism, parents promise that, relying on God's grace, they will live the Christian faith and teach that faith to their child. They further promise through prayer and example to support and encourage their child in becoming a faithful Christian. In addition, the congregation promises to guide and nurture the child by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him or her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of the church.

The fulfillment of this promise has become increasingly challenging in an environment that grows in its secularization. How do we interpret these sacred beliefs for our children in their time? We live in a world today that is almost unrecognizable when compared to the time of Christ. Scientific advances have enabled us to live longer and learn more. Cultural changes have created new challenges to living faithfully and maintaining Christian values. With the lengthening of life spans, adolescence has also lengthened. Better nutrition has lowered the age when girls have their first period. Young people are physically ready to have a child long before they are emotionally or financially ready. Marriage often occurs in the mid-twenties as opposed to the mid-teens in earlier times. Advancements in technology offer continual new challenges. We do really live in a different world.

Still, increasing complexity absolves neither parents nor the church from the responsibility taken at baptism to raise children in the love of God. If anything, the complexity of today's world requires a redoubling of our efforts to help young people live in faith and grace. What follows is an effort to be faithful to both our call and our promise. Holding true to Scripture and the Reformed tradition, we seek to assist parents and church leaders in the formidable task of helping children make the transition into adulthood around one of the more difficult aspects, that of sexuality.

*Beth Peak Thompson* has a Master of Arts degree in Christian education from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education. She has served in five Presbyterian churches and as a missionary in Mexico in her twenty-seven-year career as a Christian educator. She is the director of Christian education at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Denton, Texas. In addition to teaching sexuality education, she loves leading mission trips and youth conferences, teaching confirmation classes, and assisting the children in worship every Sunday. Beth enjoys travel, movies, reading, sewing, and Mexican food.

*Paul M. Thompson* completed his Bachelor of Science degree with honors in psychology at the University of Central Arkansas. He completed his Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and has done postdoctoral work at The University of Texas at Austin and at the University of Texas–Pan American. Besides being a Presbyterian minister, Paul has a background in clinical psychology and is a trained educator and licensed professional counselor. Paul is coauthor of *The Giving Book*, published by Westminster John Knox Press, and *Serious Talk About Mental Illness: Adolescent Suicide*. His other writing includes *Decision Making: The Christian Adventure*, a Presbyterian high school curriculum piece, and numerous articles for *Group Magazine*, *These Days*, and other publications. Paul enjoys reading, writing, movies, music, walking, baseball, and travel. He is married to Beth and has a daughter and a son.