

**Children’s Spirituality: Biblical Foundations, the
Importance of Laying a Solid Spiritual Foundation
and the Nurturing Role of the Family and the Faith Community**

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“I believed that to be a Christian meant to God to Church, pray, read your Bible and be good. My picture about God was that God was a dictator, I was hopeless, felt worthless and lead a meaningful life,” said She as she recollected about her childhood (Rhakho 2017, 103).

As I came across these lines, I could not help but be intrigued by the fact that spirituality is not only about the external religious practices that can be taught to children even though they grow up in a home, in a Christian home. Spirituality, as we see it today, is a term that has several connotations and can convey different meanings according to the different contexts.

Scottie May, a pioneer for children’s spirituality in Christian perspective and Associate Professor of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College, states that the term spirituality is “misused in a contemporary society” and expresses the difficulty to lay out a simple definition of spirituality (May 2006, 48). True to May’s statement, spirituality today is understood in many terms. It can also be defined in a solely secular way. It could be an expression or a lifestyle or, obviously, arising from religious allegiance. The influx of the usage of the term spirituality has made it difficult to create an autonomous, universal, or “a concrete functional perspective,” says Holly Catterton Allen, Associate Professor of Christian Ministries whose area of scholarly interest is in children’s spirituality (Allen 2008, 6). At this point, we see there are diverging thoughts that can be explored, but this paper will focus on one perspective, children’s spirituality from the Christian perspective.

Rebecca Nye, a renowned scholar in children’s spirituality who did extensive qualitative research on children’s spirituality in her dissertation, *Psychological Perspectives on Children’s Spirituality*, describes the spirituality of the child “as an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness relative to other passages of that child and this was often in the context of

how the child related to things, especially people, including themselves and God” (Nye 1998, 237). In her findings, “Relational consciousness appeared as a common underlying thread in much of the data” (Nye 1998, 244). She further elaborated the concept of relational consciousness as (1) child-God consciousness, where the child was able to imagine and experience the relationship to God, (2) child-people consciousness, the relationship of the child with the others, (3) child-“world” consciousness, the responses of the child around the beauty and sensation in nature, and (4) child-self consciousness, the context of the child’s relationship with their own identity and their own mental life (Nye 1998, 249–250).

Another important scholar on children’s spirituality within a Christian context is Catherine Stonehouse. In her book, *Joining Children on the Spirituality Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (1998), Stonehouse also elaborates about children’s openness to God, the ability to think about God, and the ability to comprehend the reality of transcendence.

Children’s spirituality in Christian perspective is also defined in the form of experiencing and knowing God (Anthony 2006, 33); encountering God through a sense of awe and wonder and a process of reflection (May 2006, 46); knowing Jesus and growing in that relationship (Carlson and Crupper 2006, 104); or an innate or inborn part of the humanness of each child at the time of their birth (Copsey 2005, 24–26). At this point, giving a single definition to children’s spirituality from a Christian perspective may not do justice to all the opinions of the scholars stated above. The vastness of understanding also reminds me of what Brendan Hyde says in his book, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness* (2008): spirituality is a “contested concept” (1) which “belongs to every person’s being” (29), and no individual is created in the same way. As Hyde stated, spirituality “may not be able to be succinctly defined” (23), pointing to the idea that comprehension about spirituality would definitely have variants.

I would agree with Hyde’s concept about the inability to give a precise definition of spirituality experienced differently as all individuals are created differently. Some experience spirituality in relationships; others in knowing or encountering. But one thing is sure: “Trying to develop an understanding of spirituality without including God in the equation is futile” (Anthony 2006, 10). Children’s spirituality in the Christian perspective is not only about

the knowledge that the child possesses about God but also includes a personal encounter and moments of wonder that will connect the life of the child with God.

Biblical Foundations for Children's Spirituality

The Bible clearly states, "So Jesus grew both in height and in wisdom, and he was loved by God and by all who knew Him" (Luke 2:52 NLT). Biblical holistic child development that is anchored in God's Word sees every component of growth as equally important, including spiritual development. These experiences influences, shaped, and contributed to Jesus' teaching and preaching ministry as an adult (Lee 2018). Spiritual encounters among children in the Bible are also evident. Young Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord (1 Sam 2:21); David acknowledged God from birth and declared that he trusted God even as an infant (Ps 22:9); the prophet Jeremiah realized that he was appointed by God prior to his birth (Jer 1:4). John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15) and leaped when Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, greeted Elizabeth, John's mother (Luke 1:41). The Apostle Paul was set apart from birth and called by God's grace (Gal 1:15).

The Bible's distinct records of children's spiritual encounters clearly show that "the human capacity to be in a relationship with God is not solely limited to adults (Graves 2006, 165). Children experiencing God is not superficial; rather, Scripture sets the standard for what the child should be experiencing (Carlson and Crupper 2006, 106). Children, too, are spiritual beings (Csinos and Beckwith 2013, 57) who are created in the image of God. Spirituality is a part of our human nature because we are all created by God in His image (May 2006, 49).

Significance of Children's Spirituality

According to Kathryn Copsey, when God said, "Now we will make humans, and they will be like us" (Gen 1:26 CEV), he laid the foundation for all people as spiritual beings because he was not referring only to a physical resemblance in terms of flesh and blood. It follows that God has made us spiritual beings like himself (Copsey 2005, 24). Copsey, in this aspect, also states that spirituality in children is within the child from the moment of

conception (2005, 24). Trisha Graves, the children's pastor at Carmel Presbyterian Church, acknowledges that children are extremely open to the spiritual dimension in their lives (Graves 2006, 188). She also further states that children are capable of transforming spiritually because the Holy Spirit is alive and living in them if they are followers of Christ (Graves 2006, 193). June Lee states, "God instilled in children a spiritual potential and inner capacity for faith to experience a relationship with Him" (Lee 2018). Machteld Reynaert considers the child as a full human being and an active maker of spiritual meaning wherein each child has the capacity to search for meaning in their lives (Reynaert 2014, 179).

Although Copey, Graves, Lee, and Reynaert agree on the same view of the potentiality of all children to experience God, Graves uses the word "If." By using this word, Graves implies that, although all children have spiritual potentiality, yet this potentiality can be awakened only if they are followers of Christ. I agree with Grave's statement when she uses the word "transformed." Following Christ is not only knowing about him but is all about being transformed like him. Graves also implies that if children follow Christ, they will be transformed. But such transformation calls for laying a very solid spiritual foundation.

Importance of Laying a Solid Spiritual Foundation for Children's Spirituality

At a children's spirituality conference I attended in Nashville, Tennessee, Dr. June Lee, a scholar from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas, talked about issues that we have today (2018). She stated, "There is a lack of knowledge about faith traditions, inability to relate to faith traditions, illiterate about the Bible, inarticulate about faith and belief in God and understanding of salvation. And so, many young people are leaving the church as they grow up and [are] adrift without a Biblical faith in the strong culture stream of the world" (2018). Lee here is speaking from a Western American perspective, but this is a global issue; it is the issue of this generation. Youngsters are leaving the church because they have found some other interesting things rather than the church.

Similarly, in an article published in *The Tennessean* on June 30, 2018,

Dr. Clay Stauffer, Senior Minister at Woodmont Christian Church Nashville and a fourth-generation minister, talks about young believers leaving the church and states, “Young believers are looking for a faith that is authentic, life-changing, and relevant to their lives” (2018).

From the views of both Lee and Stauffer, we see that the issues are not about non-believers or those who do not know about Christ. These are people who once knew the church or who God is but did not sustain it. Who is to be blamed for all these causes: the parents, the guardians, the church, the pastors? But the point here is this not a blaming game; it is about what can be done so that the young children today would be a generation tomorrow that will still hold on to faith. And this is the reason why, talking from the current human situation perspective, laying a spiritual foundation is a pressing need. Moreover, the Bible also clearly defines the need for a spiritual foundation.

According to Lee (2018), the Bible compares believers' lives to constructing a building: “For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building” (1 Cor 3:9 NIV). The Bible also talks about the difference between laying a strong foundation and a weak foundation (Matt 7:24–27, Luke 6:47–49). Even when it comes to the spirituality of children, strong foundations in the Word of God are necessary for sustenance in faith. Sustaining of faith also requires nurturing with utmost care because “nurturing of the child's spirituality creates an environment allowing [the child] to experience what it means to be a child of God, even when [the child] cannot find words to tell a parent or a caregiver how important this is” (Logan and Miller 2017, 41). In order to nurture the spirituality of the child, intentional creation of the environment is important, whether it is in the home or in the faith community.

Role of the Family in Nurturing the Solid Spiritual Foundation for Children's Spirituality

Family plays a very important role when it comes to nurturing a solid spiritual foundation because the people in the family are the first people from whom the children will learn. It is also particularly important to note that, since “childhood is a particularly important time for the spiritual formation of the children, often setting the basic trajectory of their lives” (Knight 2014,

94), the child needs guidance, support, care, nurture, and love from the family. Building a strong foundation is not the end of the story; it is also important to nurture that foundation. When we talk about family, we cannot help but agree on the importance of the role of parents in this journey.

In the Old Testament, children are considered a reward, a heritage from the Lord (Ps 127:3), and a sign of fruitfulness (Prov 17:6). According to Graves, “Because of these value that God has placed on Children, He clearly desires that they be raised with full knowledge of Him (2006, 167). This also affirms that parents, or guardians for those who do not grow in families with their parents present, have immense responsibility towards not only laying a strong spiritual foundation but also nurturing it.

Graves argues from a Biblical perspective (Deut 1:31; 6:4-9; 11:18-21; 21:18-19; Ps 78:5-8) that parents should provide the primary nurturing and spiritual training of the children (2006, 169). Parents are the first teachers that children meet, and it remains crucial for them to teach them at a young age. As mentioned earlier, all children have a spiritual potentiality in them, which is innate to them since conception. Accordingly, it is necessary to start the spiritual training of children when they are young and inexperienced (Graves 2006, 168). Being able to start teaching at a young age remains crucial, as it sets the foundation of the child. Children begin burrowing ideas from their environment to make sense of their world at a very young age (Yust 2004, 26), calling for parents and or guardians to create an environment that aids the nurturing of the young mind. The adult also needs to tell children religious narratives so that children are “hearing the story of God’s love as it has been told throughout the ages” (Yust 2004, 49). Another crucial reason for nurturing the faith of children at a young age is because, as Nye states, “Research has found that childhood often provides the most crucial impressions of all, the ones that could shape (or distort) all the experiences of the later life (2009, 11).

The Parents or Guardians as Role Models

Parents or guardians need to be faith role models in the family. Karen Marie Yust states, “The encounter with the spiritual world becomes superficial if there are no genuine models of adult faithfulness to observe and emulate” (2004, 39). If spiritual practices are more said than done then, there lies a

possible danger of becoming a cliché. In *Real Kids, Real Faith*, Yust argued that most children construct some kind of God concept from their parents and other significant adults before entering the pre-school years (2004, 12). Thus, it is essential for the parents to set an environment where children can have the right start to developing spirituality.

Creating Space in the Home for Spiritual Experiences

To understand God's ways, children need to see the commandments lived out (May et al. 2005, 33). Children will not reflect on the spiritual significance of their experiences or ideas unless the adults in their lives provide the spiritual categories and concepts of the family's faith tradition for use in structuring their understanding (Yust 2004, 123). Children need intentionally to be given a space to question and to be encouraged to share their spiritual experiences. Parents are to introduce their children to the appropriate behavior and traditions of the church. Yust states, "Parents are the principal guides in children's spiritual formation" (2004, 164), just as they are for children's physical or mental well-being. Adults, most specifically parents, are responsible for being directive in shaping the spiritual lives of the children they influence (Carlson and Crupper 2006, 112). The role of parents in nurturing the foundation of the spiritual life of the children is easier said than done. Since we are all human beings, there is a tendency to make mistakes—sometimes even being the wrong model. But "parents need not be perfect in order to support the children in their spiritual formation; they simply need to be on the journey with them, learning and growing together" (May et al. 2005). Nevertheless, a journey with children is not the sole responsibility of the parents. It also involves the faith community to come alongside.

Role of the Faith Community in Nurturing a Solid Spiritual Foundation

Religious communities share with parents the responsibility to help children receive the faith story through godly human actions (Yust 2004, 39). The process of spiritual nurture of children can be exhausting if undertaken by a single parent or one set of parents. We need a community of faithful people to study, work, pray, and worship alongside our children and us so

that we do not need to shoulder the responsibility in isolation from the resources others can provide (Yust 2004, 164). Yust writes about the impact and importance of the community in the spiritual lives of children. She says,

Parents are the principal guides in children's spiritual formation, yet children need a religious community within which to experience God as something other than their own friend and or possession. They need the benefit of others' discoveries about divine love and others' testimonies to the challenges of faithful living. They need to rub up against different ideas about God and experience the affirmation of shared understanding. They need opportunities to be shaped by communal rituals and practices that extend beyond the narrow confines of their immediate family so that they realize their kinship with other spiritual people. They need to realize that their religious language belongs to many others and that they can speak this language outside the home as well as within it. (2004, 164)

Children have the ability to reflect on, wonder about, wrestle with, and question deep issues related to life; they just need to be given an opportunity to do so within a godly community with the proper support, structure, freedom, and listening ears of adults (Newton 2014, 229). The faith community needs to be a safe place where children are allowed to practice what is being learned at home. Adults in the faith community need to understand that they are seen by children, which also calls for careful examination of thoughts and actions because children are watching. The commitment of the faith community must be to improve the lives of the children in their neighborhood, whether those children are members of their congregation or not (Yust 2004, 169).

Welcoming Children, the Role of the Church.

The church plays a significant role in introducing children to Jesus and then helping them grow and become more like him (Graves 2006, 174). After the home, the church is the primary—or in some cases, the only—place where children learn about God and the only community they come across. Again, for some children, the church is the only place they learn to nurture their faith.

The Old Testament states that Scripture calls for children's presence and involvement during worship. During the renewal of the covenant, Moses specifically addresses the children (Deut 29:11), while Joshua read all the words of the law as Moses had commanded to the assembly of Israel, including children (Josh 8:35). In the New Testament, the children were also present when it was time to bid farewell to Paul (Acts 21:5) as he continued on his missionary journey. When Paul's letter arrived and was read in early house churches, specific instructions to children were also included (Eph 6:1). When the disciples stopped the children from coming to Jesus, he commanded his disciples to let them come to him. Jesus not only told the children to come to him but also took the children in his arms, placed his hands upon them, and blessed them (Mark 10:16). These instances highlight the cruciality for children to be invited into the faith community where God's presence is real, where children can experience that presence and the love of God through God's people (May et al. 2005, 71). The church must be a place where children feel that they are a part, not just because their parents are a part of it. Welcoming children could be in the literal sense of using words and expressions to welcome them when they are seen in the church.

Ways of welcoming children to the church include involving the children in the worshipping community through the incorporation of children's experiences in the sermon, corporate prayers, and responsive readings, through the inclusion of a reference to children's lives, and through the utilization of hymns and songs that will attend to the multiple comprehension levels represented by an intergenerational congregation (Yust 2004, 168). By welcoming children to the church, we cannot expect them to behave like little adults. When we involve children, it is important to see that, from maintaining an appropriate pace during the activities in the service to the use of language, there needs to be careful consideration. For example, long sermons may make children restless, or gender insensitive words might create confusion for children.

By entering God's story together, experiencing God, sharing our discoveries, and honestly processing our questions, a deep sense of community is built (May et al. 2005, 136). Citing Ivy Beckwith, Holly Catterton Allen, and Christine Ross Lawton observe,

Children need frequent, regular, ongoing opportunities to interact with people of faith ‘who struggle, who trust God, who make mistakes and are forgiven, who work for mercy and justice, who model kingdom values.’ Beckwith says children will remember the stories and the lives of people they have known in their faith communities more than Bible facts they may have learned. (2012, 53)

The vicarious experiences of faith could strengthen and guide the children as they continue to journey in faith.

Personal, meaningful relationships are crucial for nurture in a faith community (May et al. 2005, 144). The character, integrity, and spiritual vitality of the faith community will affect children profoundly (May et al. 2005, 132). When the children worship together with their parents, their experiences provide intentional opportunities for the whole family of God to worship together (May et al. 2005, 240). As children engage in tasks and activities with people who are older than them, their learning is enhanced, and their formation is spurred forward (Allen and Ross 2012, 144). When the church experience includes children, it shows that the adults and children are all together in the journey of faith. Children learn to be comfortable with adults in the church, they are assured of adults valuing them, they find their place in the faith community, they learn to explore faith, and most of all, they see the church as a family of God learning to help, share, grow, and learn from one another despite the differences in generations.

In conclusion, children’s spirituality is not just a concept that is created. It has deep roots in the Bible. Spirituality is innate and inborn in every child, but it needs to be awakened in order to be truly transformed. Spirituality in children needs to take a deep root, a solid foundation rather than just being a creamy layer. This solid foundation has to be nurtured. In this nurturing process, the role of the family and the faith community remains essential.

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