

MBS TEXTE 199

Thomas Paul Schirrmacher

Generations and different criteria for child rearing



Pro mundis

Pro mundis

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Generations and different criteria for child rearing

Thomas Paul Schirmmacher

I. Rearing children to become independent

The finest illustration of how training should lead to independence and self-reliance is Jesus' pedagogical approach to the twelve apostles. Jesus' three-year training program included but was not limited to individual and group discussions. His teaching, everyday life, lectures, instruction, individual pastoral care, work among the public, and conversations not conducted in public were so intertwined in the training of his disciples that the result was a holistic education.

Jesus limited himself to a small number of his disciples "that they might be with him" (Mark 3:13–16), just as a father can care for only a small number of children. Thus, the Twelve were meant to share life with Jesus. No one can share his life with many people at once. No one can fulfill the role of an educator fully for 40 children. If someone has 40 children to care for, that person is probably running a children's home or is teacher in a school class which is too big. Without calling into question the sacrificial work of home directors and staff, they can never replace the intensive child rearing that a father and mother provide for their small number of children.

But beyond that, Jesus' intensive fellowship with his apostles while they learned from him had the goal of producing independent and mature co-workers. The disciples were not meant to live forever in close fellowship with Jesus. Rather, in the end, they were to continue the mission of Jesus independently. In John 20:21, Jesus told them, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (cf. similarly John 17:18). From the beginning, Jesus' ultimate goal was the coming Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18–20). The disciples were to do all over the world precisely what Jesus had done with them, not under his constant personal supervision and presence but rather in a convinced, independent, and distinct manner. In the same way, rearing children should lead from extremely close attention to an infant, through the gradually increasing independence of the child in a constantly changing community, and eventually to complete independence, which also changes the living community. Adult children no longer owe obedience to their parents, and they can live as they wish. What remains is the values that have been taught to them.

2. Flexible lifestyle or lasting values?

Different cultures arise when people have children who slowly but surely move away from the culture of their ancestors. And since they were brought up to be independent, they have not only the right but also the necessity and duty to shape their environment as they see fit. This constant change of lifestyle and culture from generation to generation is not a consequence of the Fall but is God's will.

Certainly, this process of change can be burdened by sin on both sides or can even degenerate into a war of generations. Nevertheless, even without the Fall, the diversity of people created by God ensures that no one really lives in exactly the same way as someone else and that children are never identical to their parents.

The decisive factor is therefore not that the children adopt the lifestyle of their parents. Rather, what should be decisive is the fundamental values that the Creator has placed in creation. That is why the law plays such an important role in the Bible with respect to rearing children. The law only gives basic values for life but does not regulate everyday, small decisions. For "the sum of this command" is not a formalism but "love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5).

This also means that different generations can have common moral standards only in relation to the basic values

of God's law but not in relation to everyday lifestyles. Our educational goals and values should unite Christians who were born, for example in 1930, 1950, and 1990 and have raised or are now raising children. They will not necessarily agree on everyday child-rearing standards. Are children allowed to go skateboarding unsupervised? What should parents or grandparents or great-grandparents say about this? Are children allowed to say that they do not like eating something? This question was not answered in the same way in the postwar period as it is today. However, gratitude to God is the decisive criterion for every generation, and we cannot simply tether this value to external things.

3. The God-given diversity of cultures develops from generation to generation

The diversity and difference of peoples and cultures is not to be understood negatively as a consequence of sin and is not a consequence of God's judgment through the confusion of languages at the building of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). Through the confusion of languages, God wanted to achieve precisely what he had previously given mankind as a command, namely the spread of humanity throughout the whole earth ("fill the earth," Genesis 1:28; 9:1) and thus the segmentation of humanity into a diversity of families and peoples, but also of vocations, abilities, and cultures.

The building of the Tower of Babel was intended precisely to create a world-unifying culture, which was always Satan's goal, as the book of Revelation and the person of the Antichrist illustrates (cf. Revelation 13:1–10). God, on the other hand, did not want a global centralized state, government, or culture, not even a pious one! God, the Creator, and his Word guarantee global unity but do not call for a visible centralized structure and culture on earth.

Starting with the sons of Noah “came the people who were scattered over the earth” (cf. Genesis 9:19), and thus the “nations” (cf. Genesis 10:5) “spread out,” which is why the origin of the individual nations can be explained by family trees (Genesis 10:1–32), at the end of which it says: “From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood” (Genesis 10:32). God is therefore the Creator of all peoples, for “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live (cf. Acts 17:26; similarly Genesis 32:8; Psalm 74:17).

4. Unity and diversity: the meaning of the law

Let us look at the relationship between boundaries and freedom in a more fundamental way. Just as the triune God himself is unity and diversity in one, so the church of Jesus should be characterized by unity in doctrine and faith

on one hand, and by a diversity of personalities, gifts, and ministries on the other.

In the Bible, unity and diversity are equally eternal and ultimately valid because God himself is triune. The biblical concept of unity in diversity has far-reaching implications. It means that there are boundaries and unity with the law of God, but also that within these limits there is boundless freedom and diversity.

Already at the time of creation, God created the world in unity and diversity, within boundaries and in freedom. For Adam and Eve, their freedom included permission to eat from every tree in the garden, but at the same time a boundary was set, telling them not to eat from a certain tree. The serpent twisted God's instruction, maintaining that human beings were not allowed to eat from any tree (Genesis 3:1–2, 16–17). Man, however, takes liberties where God demands unity and has stipulated limits (e.g., sexuality belongs only in marriage), while at the same time he sets limits for himself (e.g., sexuality is considered nonspiritual even in marriage, cf. 1 Cor 7:1–7) where God makes diversity possible, even demanding it. This already becomes clear at the beginning of the Bible, in the account of creation and the Fall. After God has created man, he does not give him innumerable regulations and prohibitions. God tells man that he is free to choose what he wants to eat; that he can move freely; that he can name the animals freely, and that he should subdue the earth freely. In

contrast, the prohibitions we find in the creation account are relatively small. Adam and Eve are to avoid one tree, whereas they are free to eat from many trees. Certainly, God as Creator knows what is best for creatures and therefore has the right to set limits. However, these prohibitions are very modest in comparison with the tremendous freedom he has granted us in shaping man in his own image. If we had no mind, no conscience, no responsibility, and no language, we would not be able to live freely and independently at all. God sets clear boundaries, and he wants them to be respected. But at the same time, God gives us great freedom and opportunity for development. Humans are responsible beings, both where God has said what his will is and where God has given us freedom. Boundaries and freedom are inseparable with God.

Whoever speaks only about the freedom God gives but never about the limits God has set will claim that he can do everything In the name of God. On the other hand, he who always speaks only about boundaries and never about our freedom forgets what everything is all about. God already established this principle in nature. The creation account indicates that God created the plants and the animals “according to their various kinds” (Genesis 1:11–12, 21, 24–25; 6:20; 7:14). On one hand, there are fixed boundaries for each species. On the other hand, we know that creation contains, in the true sense of the word, a fantastic diversity.

This diversity in unity is also of great importance for the education of children.

5. God does not destroy personality

Does God destroy our personality? Does he make everyone the same? Something is not right here! After all, God created us as distinctive personalities and he loves tremendous diversity. The more God frees us from our sin, addictions, and dependencies, the more clearly our unmistakable personality is expressed. God does not work by compulsion. Coercion and possession are the hallmarks of the devil. The devil does not ask us, does not support us, does not help us. Rather, the devil seduces and forces us and brings us to sin before we have come around to deliberating. God, on the other hand, gives us everything but still wants real personality—a personality that is self-controlled, sober, and calm, deciding for the way of God and then pursuing it in God’s power.

Only the devil governs people by robbing them of their personality, as the gospels illustrate through extreme cases of possessed individuals, who sometimes lived like animals but who then were restored when their demons were expelled. This is most clearly seen in the healing of the possessed Gadarene (Matthew 8:28–34; Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39). This person was completely robbed of his personality by the

demons. He did not clothe himself, lived in caves, spoke to no one, and attacked everyone (Mark 5:3–5; Luke 8:27–29). Jesus' word of deliverance brought the Gadarene's personality back to the surface, so that he ate normally, got dressed, and talked reasonably with others, as outsiders noted with horror (Mark 5:15: "They ... observed the man who had been demon-possessed sitting down, clothed and in his right mind ... and they became frightened"; Luke 8:35: "they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting down at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they became frightened").

This also has great significance for the origin of the Bible and the proper understanding of inspiration. God did not have His Word written by compulsion, as is the case with many mechanically inspired revelations in religions, including Christian sects. When God's Spirit works in and through people, He makes them real persons. Wherever the inspiration of a Holy Scripture is justified by the fact that the human authors were completely uninvolved, i.e. that they wrote under duress, were possessed, were not composed in ecstasy, as is the case in many religions and movements, there is, according to the Bible, diabolical inspiration. Even the prophets, who saw incredible images in ecstasy, were able to converse rationally with the angels who interpreted the visions in the Old and New Testaments (e.g. in the Revelation of John or in Daniel and Ezekiel). Indeed, in 1 Cor-

inthians 14:32, Paul takes it for granted that prophets are in control of themselves and of revelation: "The spirits of the prophets are under the control of the prophets". Therefore, they can stop their prophecy at any time or keep it to themselves (1 Corinthians 14:30–32).

Even the Bible was not written mechanically by puppets. Rather, and on the contrary, it was written by real personalities whose distinctiveness is precisely expressed in their writings. Divine inspiration does not exclude human personality. On the contrary, it leads it to its full development. That is why there is no religious book that presents its own purely human genesis and considers it as essential as the Bible. The human side is not a proof against the divine inspiration of the Bible, as is the case in other religions, where the divinity of the Scripture is proved by the fact that no human was involved, or that the human involved was incapable of such a thing. A good example of this is at the end of the Second Epistle of Peter. There Peter writes: "... just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes in the same way in all his letters, talking about these things. His letters contain some things that are difficult to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:15–16). The human side of the Bible, in this case the peculiarities of the Petrine and Pauline styles, does not detract from its divine side. Even Peter has difficulty understanding Paul's let-

ters. And yet for Peter there is no question that Paul speaks in the name of God, and that Paul's letters can only be twisted to one's own destruction.

6. Parenting and the Scriptures

The question of education is inseparably linked to Scripture. In particular, the New Testament text, which most clearly teaches the divine inspiration of Scripture, clearly describes the educational mission of the Bible: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The previous verses make it clear that this is also about the practical task of raising up the next generation: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and been taught, knowing those from whom you have learned it, and how from your childhood you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:14–15). (Incidentally, in this case the rearing was only done by "mother Eunice" and "grandmother Lois", 2 Timothy 1:5).

The goal of parenting here is a holistic education and training that encompasses all areas of life and "equips you for every good work". The aim is not to copy the lifestyle of the parents,

but to enable them to do good in their own right. People, including children, should not copy the details of their parents' lifestyle, but should, like all people, "acquire wisdom and discipline" (Proverbs 1:2), learn that "humility goes before pride" (Proverbs 15:33), "learn righteousness" (Isaiah 26:9), "know and understand the mind of the rash" (Isaiah 32:4), and "devote themselves to doing good" (Titus 3:14).

I repeat it again: It is not important for children to adopt the lifestyle of their parents, but rather to adopt the basic values that the Creator has given in creation. For "the end of this commandment" is not formalism, but what "comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5). We will look at this in more detail below.

On the occasion of my father's 80th birthday, when he was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit, I made a short speech in his honour on behalf of the family. The prominent politicians present, none of whom were practising Christians, were not a little surprised when I told them that my parents had brought us up to be citizens of the world and that, thanks to my upbringing, I was emotionally unable to understand what hatred of foreigners or contempt for the disabled meant. How did my parents do it? Well, when we were older, we occasionally talked about such things or commented on what the newspapers said about them. But the real influence against hatred of foreigners etc. came from the fact that

my parents held love for all people as a high value and practised it. That's why we met many people from all over the world at home—not on television or through jokes—and saw that my parents respected and appreciated them. Being allowed to stroke an African's hair as a small child taught me deeply that he was a person who loved me and was worth loving.

7. Parenting and the holistic transmission of the commandments

For centuries and millennia, Christian and Jewish education has been closely linked to the Law and its abridged version in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments and their interpretation were already part of Jewish catechisms and St. Augustine's catechism, just as they are today in Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed catechisms for raising children in the Christian faith. This is not the place to examine each of the commandments in terms of the fundamental values they convey, but they have always been regarded as the catalogue of values par excellence. Today, however, the law has fallen into disrepute, especially in Christian education.

The primary goal of education is that children learn to understand and live the law of God as their parents do (cf. Deuteronomy 4:9–10; 6:4–9; 11:18–21; 31:12–13; 32:7; Joshua 4:6–7; Psalm 78:5–8; cf. Ephesians 6:1–4), for “he

who keeps the law is a wise son ...” (Proverbs 28:7). This is why it is important to answer children's questions about the law conscientiously (Deuteronomy 6:20–25). The law is fundamentally about education, for the Hebrew word for “law”, “torah”, actually means “instruction”. God educates people through His Word and His Law. The “law has become our tutor [or: pedagogue, from the Greek *paidagogos*] to bring us to Christ ...” (Galatians 3:24). This function of the law is particularly evident in the education of children. Children are included in the covenant with God and should be brought up in that covenant: “He who fears the Lord has a sure fortress, and his children will be a refuge” (Proverbs 14:26). Mission does not begin at the front door (as is often said about foreign missionary efforts), but behind the front door—in the family.

The central importance of parental education in the transmission of God's law is made clear again and again in Deuteronomy. This includes both the transmission of knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of the law, and the transmission of life-education, i.e. the living of the law in an exemplary and communal way. Since doctrine and life are inseparable in the biblical faith, the teaching of the law is not occasional. Rather, it takes place day and night, and whenever parents say or do something: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

Children and young People learn about God

2 Timothy 3:14–15: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (In this case, only “mother Eunice” and “grandmother Lois” were responsible for the child rearing, 2 Timothy 1:5.) Ecclesiastes 12:1–2: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ‘I find no pleasure in them ...’” Lamentations 3:27: “It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.” Psalm 71:5–6: “For you have been my hope, O Sovereign Lord, my confidence in my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother’s womb. Psalm 71:17–18: “Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation ...”

Impress them on your children. Speak of them when you sit at home and when you walk by the wayside, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:5–9); “Establish these words of mine in your hearts and in your minds; bind them as signs on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children and speak of them when you sit at home and when you walk by the wayside, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be long in the land which the Lord swore to give to your forefathers, as long as the days of the heavens are upon the earth” (Deuteronomy 11:18–21).

Here education is holistic. The faith of parents begins with the fact that they themselves love God with all their heart. But those who do this will recognise that raising their children in the faith on the basis of these texts is the most important task in life. Is this not the law?

8. Once again: The correct Understanding of the Law

The hostility of many Christians to the law, or rather the misunderstanding of the role of the law, is, in my view, largely responsible for the breakdown of the Christian family and the Christian commitment to parenting. The law, and the Word of God in general, is meant for everyday life, and so it can only really be taught in everyday parenting. The law is the “embodiment of

knowledge and truth” (Romans 2:20), so there can be no real transmission of knowledge without the law. God’s law, and the Bible in general, is the best law imaginable (Deuteronomy 4:8–10).

Along with the Law, Proverbs is the great parenting book of the Bible. Here the holistic education of children includes the ability to live independently in everyday life and to live together with other people, for example through work, providing for the future, peacemaking and justice, but links everything to the starting point: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10; similar to Proverbs 1:7; cf. Job 28:28; Proverbs 15:33; Psalm 111:10). It is the declared aim of child rearing in the book of Proverbs that the child – and also the pupil in the figurative sense—learns “wisdom”, the prerequisite for independence, by following the commandments of the parents. It is also the ability to put good knowledge into practice (Proverbs 4:1–9).

Learning obedience is at the heart of child rearing. Obedience to parents is practice for obedience to God, which remains even when the child is grown up and free to make his own decisions about his parents. At first the child must learn direct and “literal” obedience, before gradually being able to use wisdom to judge things in a more sophisticated way. Young children can and should learn the law by heart, but wisdom must be learned painstakingly through experience. It is significant that the Bible itself tells us of Jesus, who was sinless, that he “learned obedience” and

through his obedience created the conditions for “salvation” to be granted to all who “obey him” and thus obey God: “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death [= God the Father], and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son [of God], he learned obedience by what he suffered, and having been perfected, he [= Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Hebrews 5:7–9).¹

9. Parents find themselves under a family constitution

What is decisive for the meaning of the law is that it is a constitution: Just as in a modern constitutional state, following the Old Testament legal state, it is not a person but the law that is supreme (unlike the Emperor, the Chancellor can be sued under this law!), so God’s law plays the same role as a constitution for the family.

It is not the parents who are the law for the children, but parents and children together are subject to the same law, the same creation ordinances of God. It is from the divine constitution that the authority of parents is derived in the first place. It defines the rights and responsibilities of parents and children.

Concretely, parents are also judged by these rules and must apologize if they have broken them. If parents lie to

their children, they must admit it and apologize, as must the children. And woe betide Christian parents who do not. From my pastoral work I know too many children of Christian parents where—first and foremost—the father never apologized. The father was always right, even when he was wrong. What a message about education! And what a message about the values we talk about: they only apply when you have to obey. If you are in command, you can disregard them!

10. Raising children: The Bible versus Experience?

None of this, however, should be taken to mean that the law says all that is essential about parenting. In fact, parenting is a good example of the justification of a ‘natural law’—albeit a relative one, in my view, when it comes to Scripture. If we take the Word of God as the starting point for our thinking, there is as much room for natural ethics as there is for situational or experiential ethics. Accepting the basic biblical mandate to bring up children, parents will naturally derive much simply from the ‘nature’ of things. The growth and physical and spiritual development of the child offers parents many choices and can also be compared, though never fully, with those of other children. And this development of children can also be accurately and helpfully described by non-Christians.

Is it really possible to raise children with only the Bible in hand? Of course not, because the Bible has nothing to say about children’s health problems, the amount of sleep they need, polite manners, the age at which they should start school, or pocket money, to name but a few. The Bible gives us the divine purpose and basic direction of child rearing, which is why all biblical child rearing is different from other types of child rearing. Parents are to bring up their children “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4), endearing them to God and His Word (2 Timothy 3:14–17), and preparing them for an independent life under God’s authority within the order of creation. Beyond this basic orientation, however, there are few commandments or instructions for raising children. Furthermore, Christian parents are called to put this basic approach to education into practice in their daily lives. To do this, they draw on the experience of past generations (tradition) as well as the advice and research of the present, and use their intellect to find the best possible way for their children. This is impossible without knowing the concrete situation of the children. For example, one must know the culture of the people in which one lives, the family constellation and the living environment.

For example, it is God’s desire and command that each person should use his or her God-given abilities and gifts. But how else can parents put this into practice than by using their intellect and by observing and learning from others

to find out what talents and preferences their children have and to encourage them in these things.

In the Bible, the role model is of great importance in spiritual education and in raising children for independence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about the renewed church as he envisions it: “It must not underestimate the importance

of the human ‘model’ (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul!); it is not through concepts but through the ‘model’ that his word receives emphasis and power. (I will write especially about the ‘model’ in the New Testament! We have almost completely lost the idea).”²

Annotation

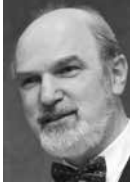
Anmerkungen

1 Cf. again what was said about the law in section 5.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Chr. Kaiser: München, 19588. p. 262. (As far as I know, Bonhoeffer never got around to writing anything more detailed about the idea of the role model.)

The Author

Über den Autor



Archbishop and Professor Thomas Paul Schirmmacher, Dr. theol., Dr. phil., PhD, ThD, DD, DHL is President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights (Frankfurt), President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Costa Rica, Vancouver, Bonn), Co-President of Religions for Peace (New York) and President of the Bonn Abrahamic Center for Global Peace, Justice and Sustainability (BAC).

Schirmmacher was Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance 2021–2024, which connects Protestant churches belonging to 143 National Evangelical Alliances with a total of 600 million members. Before becoming Secretary General, Schirmmacher served WEA in various leadership roles over the last two decades, including being the Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns and Intrafaith and Interfaith Relations.

Thomas Schirmmacher was the founder (1996) and long-time president of the Martin Bucer Seminary (until 2018).

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