

Philosophy of Child Conversion

by

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PHILOSOPHY OF CHILD CONVERSION

Do a quick search on the topic of “child evangelism” or “childhood conversions” and numerous websites with a wide variety of philosophies are available for perusal. You will notice some individuals believe that children are born innocent thus are judged by God as being without sin. Others feel the child is born a sinner, but immature in his or her thinking so to make a long lasting, meaningful decision about salvation is not possible. This philosophy believes talking with children about being saved would only cause them to make a decision now that they do not understand, resulting in them having a false sense of security and thinking they are saved when really they are not. People holding this view feel that the possibility of children walking away from the faith later is very high. Another philosophy you will find is that children cannot really understand salvation because they think concretely and much about salvation is abstract thought. These individuals would wait to evangelize children until they are in the upper elementary grades when they are better able to reason things out for themselves. Still another ideology believes that if we nurture children in the truths of the faith eventually children will understand what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ and will embrace the faith personally. Another prevalent thought is that when children are born into Christian families they are safe under the covenant, so it isn't really imperative that we actively evangelize them.

Where do these philosophies originate? Does understanding them really matter?

Yes! Our philosophy overshadows our thinking and actions and affects how we view child conversion. Four philosophies about child conversion seem to be prevalent. For our purposes they will be referred to as the “Traditional”, the “Educational”, the “Psychological” and the “Child Evangelism” philosophies.

Before looking at the philosophies one should understand that in most evangelical circles, the common thought is that every person is a sinner, including children. The teaching that Jesus died for the sins of all people and provides salvation is for all ages, including boys and girls is also accepted.

“Rooted in the theological work of Augustine (fourth century church leader and theologian) concerning human nature, this view sees children as similar to adults in their basic human condition, sinful by nature and separated from God, spiritually dead. God’s grace must come to them in some fashion if they are to be made spiritually alive and in right relationship with God.”¹

Scripture teaches that every person has been born in sin (Psalm 51:5) so the only hope for children and adults alike is the redemptive work of Christ. Ephesians 2:1-5 tells us that

“...you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world ...all of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.”

Only as we are converted is it possible to have a meaningful relationship with Christ. Before conversion, the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God and other experiences to draw us to Himself. After conversion we are being transformed into the image of Christ.

¹ Lawson, Kevin, Ed.D "Childhood Conversion in the Evangelical Church" (River Forest, IL: Children's Spirituality Conference, 2006, cd), 2.

With this in mind we will explore the four main philosophies of child conversion and their implications.

Traditional Philosophy

This philosophy teaches “the Christian life of the child is formed by his environment. Conversion is a phenomenon of adolescence and until he has the use of reason (around 12 years of age) the child is not lost, since he is safe under the covenant by belonging to a Christian family. The emphasis is placed on the family and the Christian home.”²

Groups holding to this philosophy often practice infant baptism as baptism serves as a covenant or sign that the child is a part of the family of God. The practice of infant baptism began because Augustine believed if infants died they would be condemned to hell. If baptized before they died they would go to heaven.³ This belief is based upon passages like Acts 2:38-39 and 1 Corinthians 7:14.

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for whom the Lord our God will call.” Acts 2:38-39

“For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” 1 Corinthians 7:14

According to advocates of this philosophy “you and your children” in Acts means that even infants should be baptized. From the passage in 1 Corinthians they ascertain that “since a child of at least one believing parents is already ‘sanctified,’ the child is already saved and that, therefore, children of Christian parents should be baptized in

² Child Evangelism Fellowship Inc, *Teaching Children Effectively Level 1 Instructor of Teachers Manual* (Warrenton, MO: privately printed, 2009), 40.

³ Roy B. Zuck, *Precious In His Sight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 238.

anticipation of their holy or sanctified position.”⁴ Both Luther and Calvin embraced this position.

Traditional philosophy emphasizes the importance that the church’s communal life plays in the choice of the individual to later follow the faith.⁵ The church is to partner with the family to both nurture and teach the child until he or she becomes old enough to embrace faith for himself or herself. Because John Calvin was convinced that the church had an obligation to educate children in matters of religion, weekly catechism classes were instituted on Sunday afternoons as well as being taught in the schools in 1541. Parents who were deemed to have a lack of proper understanding of the faith were also to take part in the lessons.⁶ Today, lessons and principles are taught that lead to first communion around eight years of age, signifying that the child has begun to receive God’s grace in deeper ways.⁷ Confirmation usually takes place around age 12 after additional teaching. In confirmation the child is making a public profession of faith in Christ. This age seems to tie into the Jewish practice of *bar mitzvah*. In this philosophy childhood conversion is not a concern since the child is safe under the covenant.

Educational Philosophy

This philosophy believes “the child should receive biblical knowledge from a very young age and develop Christian habits and attitudes. One day he will make a

⁴ Ibid, 230.

⁵ Scottie May et al., *Children Matter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 59.

⁶ Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 186-187.

⁷ Scottie May, et al., *Children Matter*, 58.

personal decision for Christ and be saved. Emphasis is placed on a good program of Christian education in the church.”⁸

Throughout history Christian education has vacillated between a concern for conversion and a concern for nurture. Both sides would agree that children are lost in sin and need to be brought into relationship with Christ. However, a major difference lies in the emphasis on one over the other. The educational philosophy seems to originate from a single phrase in Horace Bushnell’s book *Christian Nurture* published in 1847. In it he challenged the idea that children exist outside of God’s grace until their spiritual capacity reached maturity.⁹ Bushnell believed, “a child is to grow up as a Christian and never know himself or herself as being otherwise.”¹⁰ As a result of Bushnell’s ideology, children began to be taught differently. Advocates of this philosophy teach that children need to be progressively nurtured in the foundations of the faith.

In his book, *Schooling Christians*, John Westerhoff calls this type of nurture, spiritual formation. He said,

“*Formation* aids persons to acquire Christian faith (understood as a particular perception of life and our lives), Christian character (understood as identity and appropriate behavioral dispositions), and Christian consciousness (understood as that interior subjective awareness or temperament that predisposes persons to particular experiences). For example Christian formation is the participation in and the practice of the Christian life of faith.”¹¹

⁸ Child Evangelism Fellowship Inc., 40.

⁹ Scottie May, et al., *Children Matter*, 105.

¹⁰ John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 35.

¹¹ John Westerhoff, *Schooling Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 10; quoted in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, ed. Kenneth O. Gangel & James C. Wilhoit (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 34.

Initially more liberal churches latched on to this philosophy however, the idea has become foundational for much of Christian educational thought today. Passages in Deuteronomy are used to back up the thinking of this philosophy. In Deuteronomy 6 parents were instructed to teach their children diligently at every opportunity. Later in the book the children were gathered together with the parents and community to participate in the reading of scriptures and to have them explained. Psalm 78 reminds the people of their responsibility to explain the faith to the child. In each of these passages a strong emphasis is placed on rehearsing the truths of who God is and what He is like. Since there isn't a passage in scripture that talks about salvation of children specifically, these passages would seem to indicate that children need to be nurtured into a relationship with Christ.

A concern raised in my mind regarding this philosophy is the strong emphasis on learning and knowing. Children are encouraged to take part in all aspects of the church community; communion, prayer, worship, listening to preaching, being taught, learning, service and outreach with the goal of these things leading them into encounters with God. Childhood is viewed as a preparation time for when they will make a conscious lasting decision at a later time in life. It is thought that if they are taught the law and principles of the Bible, they will recognize their inability to obey them and thus make their way to Christ.¹² Parents and teachers are encouraged to patiently teach children, recognizing that “childhood is a time for cultivation and not real fruit bearing.”¹³

¹² Dennis Gundersen, *Your Child's Profession of Faith* (Amityville: Calvary Press, 1994), 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*

In churches where this philosophy is adhered to the emphasis is on teaching Christian principles not really on evangelism of children. However, 1 Corinthians 2:14 reminds us that “the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Teaching Christian principles to the spiritually dead child is not going to bring about change; it could be likened to watering a dead plant with expectation that it will grow. There is no hope of new life springing forth from something that is dead! If children are to embrace Christian principles and life, there must be a transformation first. There must be nurturing (knowledge) but spiritual formation comes once a child has a relationship with Christ. Ephesians 2:8-10 reminds us that when anyone is saved through faith in Christ it is because of God’s grace. Once saved, he or she is then able to “do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.” “Formation and the good works for which God saves are inseparable; they always accompany each other in the Christian life.”¹⁴

Psychological Philosophy

This philosophy could be stated in this way: “The child is incapable of understanding symbolism and abstract concepts and is unable to reason; therefore, he cannot make a decision for Christ.”¹⁵

This philosophy seems to align itself with Piaget’s and other educators’ observations about the different cognitive stages of development seen in the chart below¹⁶.

¹⁴ Kenneth O. Gangel, & James C. Wihoit, ed., *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 45.

¹⁵ Child Evangelism Fellowship Inc., 41.

Stage	Age	Characteristics
Sensorimotor	0-2	Develops schemes primarily through sense and motor activities
Pre-operational	2-7	Gradually acquires ability to create and use symbols, symbolic play, & animistic thinking, unable to mentally reverse actions.
Concrete Operations	7-11	Capable of operations but solves problems by generalizing from concrete experiences. Not able to manipulate conditions mentally unless they have been experienced.
Formal Operations	11-15	Able to deal with abstractions, form hypotheses, solve problems systematically, engage in mental manipulations.

Individuals holding to this type of philosophy would say that one must be extremely cautious in speaking about matters of conversion to children at an early age because the child is immature in the way he or she thinks or speaks, therefore, the child may understand what is being said differently than what is intended by the teacher even though he or she is using the same words.¹⁷ They would contend that because young children think in concrete terms and much of spiritual teaching is symbolic, they cannot understand enough in order to be saved. Many who view children in this light would wait until the formal operational stage to begin talking to children about a personal relationship with Christ. However, more recent study has shown that children in the second and third stages can do more than Piaget originally thought when a variety of methods are used to convey truth.¹⁸

Another concern advocates of this philosophy have about child conversion is that children are easily manipulated and may simply be imitating or seeking to please an

¹⁶ Michael J. Anthony, ed., *Introducing Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 68-69.

¹⁷ Dennis Gundersen, *Your Child's Profession of Faith*, 20.

¹⁸ Michael J. Anthony, ed., *Introducing Christian Education*, 70.

authority figure without understanding the long range implications of the decision being made.¹⁹ However, one of the things missing in this line of thought is the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the children. As a teacher understands the ways in which children learn, he or she is able to communicate truth simply through language, experiences the child has and a variety of methods. As they teach, the Holy Spirit brings enlightenment to the mind of the child (John 16:13). Dr Francis Schaeffer (theologian and author) made the following statement when speaking about the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating minds in regards to conversion.

“Children’s evangelism is not a different Gospel but is a translation problem in which we must proclaim the great truths of the Christian faith in a very simple manner. The greatest reason for my belief that little children can really understand the vital truths of the Gospel is that I believe in the Holy Spirit’s ministry to communicate the message of salvation and sanctification to them. There is no adult, however intelligent, who can understand the Gospel without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰

The earliest that individuals holding to this philosophy would talk to children about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ would be the concrete operations stage of Piaget’s model.

Child Evangelism Philosophy

“The Gospel should be presented to the child at the earliest age possible so that as the Holy Spirit works, he will come to know Jesus as his personal Savior. As a result the child can begin to develop Christian character, which is the outward expression of a new inward life.”²¹

¹⁹ Dennis Gundersen, *Your Child’s Profession of Faith*, 21.

²⁰ Dr. Francis Schaffer, "Child Evangelism," speech delivered to European Congress on Child Evangelism, Kilchzimmer, Switzerland.

²¹ Child Evangelism Fellowship Inc., 41.

While reading a book by Charles H. Spurgeon, J. Irvin Overholtzer came across a statement that caught his attention: “A child of five, if properly instructed, can savingly believe as well as an adult”²² Overholtzer did not believe Spurgeon, but through searching the Scriptures and experimentation he realized that Spurgeon was right. In 1937, Mr. Overholtzer founded Child Evangelism Fellowship with the purpose of evangelizing the children no one else was reaching with the Gospel.

Individuals holding to this philosophy believe that

“evangelization of children is clearly supported by Scripture, through personal testimonies of Christians saved as children, perspectives from theologians and great Christian leaders and from research studies which establish that young children can make a solid decision to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.”²³

They would implore teachers to simply and clearly share the Gospel with children from an early age, allowing the Holy Spirit to illumine their minds so they can grasp the saving truth.

Proponents of this philosophy believe that when a child is old enough to knowingly sin he or she is able to believe. James 4:17 says, “Anyone, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” Although children are not specially mentioned in this passage, the implication is present. When children are able to understand the difference between right and wrong they are able to recognize their sinfulness in light of God’s holiness.

²² Sam Doherty, *Biblical Basis of Child Evangelism* (Kilchzimmer, Switzerland.: privately printed, 1986), 66.

²³ Dr. Martha J. Wright, "Theological Perspectives of Children in the Church: Child Evangelism" (River Forest: Concordia University, 2006), 1.

Supporters would agree with the educational philosophy in that it is vital for believing parents to teach their children diligently about God; His Person and His works (Deuteronomy 4, 6, 11, 18, 31; Psalm 78). The difference lies in more intentionally looking for opportunities to share the Gospel and lead even young children to a personal saving faith rather than believing that children will be nurtured in such a way they never know anything other than being a Christian.

A key passage for advocates of this philosophy is Matthew 18:1-14. In this passage Jesus used a young child as an object lesson to show adults what they should be like as well as affirming that even young children can have a saving faith. Believers are reminded that it is possible for children to believe in Jesus as Savior, that they can be offended as believers and that it isn't the will of the Father that "one of these little ones be lost" (v. 14).

The Pauline epistles are also cited as Scriptures which uphold this position. Since Paul began both Ephesians and Colossians speaking to "saints" and later in the books speaks directly to children, the implication is that they are "saints" as well.

Support for this philosophy also comes from Christian leaders who made solid professions of faith in Christ at an early age:

Dr. James Dobson age 3, Amy Carmichael age 3, Matthew Henry age 11; Dr. Isaac Watts, hymn writer, saved at age 9; Corrie ten Boom age 5; Jim Elliot was saved at age 6; Max Lucado age 10; Dr. Charles Stanley was saved at age 12; and Henrietta Mears age 5.²⁴

Research also shows that it is important to evangelize children.

²⁴ Dr. Martha J. Wright, "Theological Perspectives on Children in the Church: Child Evangelism", 5.

George Barna discovered that the probability of someone embracing Jesus as his or her Savior was 32% for those between the ages of 5-12; 4% for those in the 13-18 age range and 6% for people 19 or older. He found that if people do not receive Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim.²⁵

From these statistics we can see the importance of teaching children at an early age about their sin and their need to trust Jesus as their personal Savior. It is once they have believed on Jesus as Savior they can develop Christian character which is an outward manifestation of new inward life.

In examining the different philosophies we have seen a gamut of thought about child conversion. In the Traditional philosophy children are seen as safe under the covenant, therefore it is not necessary to evangelize them until they are older. Through baptism and confirmation the child will eventually proclaim faith in Christ. The Educational theory teaches that children are to be nurtured in the faith by parents and the church community. As the children are surrounded by teaching and example, they will never know what it means not to be a Christian. There isn't an emphasis on the child making a personal decision to trust Christ as his or her own Savior. The Psychological theory rests on waiting until a child is able to cognitively understand symbolic truths before talking to him or her about salvation. However, this philosophy does not include the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of children and His ability to make things plain to even the very young. Statistics show us that if we wait to evangelize children until the concrete or formal operational times in the children's lives, there is a small window of opportunity left before they are hardened to the Gospel. The Child Evangelism

²⁵ George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura: Regal Books, 2003), 34.

philosophy would agree with parts of the Educational and Psychological theories. Children do need to be nurtured in the faith, they do need to be taught in language they can understand, they do need methods that will help them to more clearly see truth and they do need to be questioned carefully to check understanding before leading them to Christ. But, I believe that Christians need to be intentional in presenting the Gospel every time they have the opportunity to do so, giving children a chance to trust Christ as Savior at a young age. Lionel Hunt, a Canadian evangelist who has worked with many children, put it this way;

“Scripture fixes no age for the conversion of the child, and neither must we, seeing it is not a matter of intellectual attainment, but of spiritual revelation—the Holy Spirit revealing Christ to the heart by the Word of God. It is not for us to fix ages—for it is as easy for the Holy Spirit to reveal Christ in the heart of a small child as it is for Him to do so in an older person.”²⁶

Over one third of the world’s population is comprised of children under the age of 15. If we are to fulfill the Great Commission, then a greater emphasis should be placed upon child conversion since those under 12 years of age comprise the majority of those who come to faith!

²⁶ Sam Doherty, *The Biblical Basis of Child Evangelism*, 49.

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All scripture is taken from the NIV Bible.