

## **Children Are People, Too**

*by Jan Ord*

*Ed: This article consists of two letters: The first was written to Jan Ord and the second is Jan's reply.*

Dear Jan,

I have been a Christian for six and a half years. These past two years have been more up than down, and I praise God for that. I believe I'm in the Lord's will most of the time. I have just begun to hear these teachings on Christ-in-me and what it means. The reason I am writing is that you are a woman and hopefully a mother, because this is where I need help.

I've read Proverbs and other portions of Scripture on raising children and I've tried to live by them, but I haven't been as successful as I'd like. I try to be kind, loving and gentle with my children, but they have a way of really provoking me. I usually end up nagging, yelling, and then punishing them. Because the world is so bad, I know I'm overprotective with them. Of course, I want them to act in a Christian manner—so when they get fighting, or acting selfish, this really disturbs me. I want our family to be a witness for Jesus, but when I see my kids acting as badly as the non-Christian kids, I really get upset. I tell them that Jesus wants us to be kind, to love everyone, and to share, but they forget and continue to act badly.

I believe both of my girls are born again and therefore they have the Holy Spirit within them. I also realize that they too can only manifest the life of God on the outside as they are changed by God on the inside. Just what is my responsibility in this matter? I've tried giving them back to God, and when they act badly I tell God that they are His and it's up to Him to change them. In the meantime, I sit gritting my teeth, having pains in my stomach, and really wanting to get up and correct them.

When I finally do get up and correct them, then I feel guilty—like I didn't give God enough time to work out the situation. If I get mad and yell at them, I feel guilty because I don't feel God would have handled the situation like that.

I realize that I cannot change myself and I've honestly asked God to take over. I feel so badly when I act in an unworthy manner. I feel it's because I'm acting in a very carnal manner instead of letting God flow through me. I just can't sit still and let my kids act selfishly or disobediently without taking some action, but I always feel the action is coming from me rather than God. If I correct them in a more loving way, maybe I wouldn't feel so badly, but because I get upset and yell at them, I don't feel that's God, but me, and I don't know what to do. Can you help me?

When it comes to dealing with others outside my family, I do feel that God manifests Himself in me. Many of the undesirable things I did before I was a Christian the Lord has given me victory over, but I can't seem to grasp how I am to deal with my feelings toward the actions of my children without feeling guilty.

Sometimes I feel I could be such a good Christian if I didn't have kids. I know, however, that God gave me these girls for a reason, even if it's only to keep me humble, which they certainly do.

*Jan Ord Replies:*

When a parent realizes that the life of Christ isn't a set of rules or principles but Christ Himself expressing His life through us as His vessels, that parent is finally ready to answer the frequently-asked question, "How does all this apply to child-rearing?"

Many of us have been taught various formulas for successful child-rearing. But do they all work? How can you be sure that yours will? Which is the right one? Sometimes the answer you would get from the child might be quite different from the answer the parents would give. And if our formula is wrong, when the child has grown up it is a bit late to discover our error.

What is a “successful” child, anyway? A quiet, obedient child who grows into a subdued adult? The way I see some Christian parents handling their children, it would seem that this is indeed their concept of a successful child.

There is a temptation to evaluate success according to certain external behavior patterns advocated by other believers, instead of asking what kind of inner person we have produced. Is the product a child who is happy within himself, despite external circumstances? Or is he someone whose life is “all-together” on the outside, but “all-to-pieces” on the inside?

For a number of years I have bred Siamese cats. The early days of a Siamese kitten are a time when it discovers itself. Life is a series of trial runs. Potential, real-life circumstances are experienced under the safety of the mother cat’s watchful eye. The little ones fight continually, stalk one another, practice the element of surprise by rushing at each other, and learn to climb and jump. (One of my cats took months to learn to judge distances that others took only weeks to work out, frequently missing when aiming for the top of the refrigerator!).

There is no way to produce a “model” Siamese. Each is a unique personality, and the experience of trial runs in early life simply brings out a particular cat’s individual characteristics. I have watched several generations turn out very differently as adult cats. Life is meant to be unique, individual, and full of variety, especially where humans are concerned.

Family life among humans has much the same purpose—to prepare us, via trial runs, for life as independent mature adults. The home and family life were meant to provide us with the right environment for growing into the full persons that God created us to be.

So to live in a home where there are no rules, where there is never any anger or reaction to bad behavior, and where everyone is always “super good,” is neither realistic nor helpful to a child. What a shock going out into the world would be for a child raised in such an atmosphere! Not that many such homes truly exist; but many Christian parents think that a home is supposed to be this way, so they constantly feel condemned because they are not the kind of parents, and their children are not the kind of children, that one would describe as “model.”

The truth is that many of those parents and children that are held up to us as “model” have a special mask that the family puts on when in public view. The true story is often very different, and the families of pastors and deacons are no exception. Usually the teenage years strip the mask off, the child reveals his or her real feelings, and the congregation is then shocked by the minister’s son or daughter!

But do we have to wait until the painful teenage years to find out whether our methods are working or not?

Through the new covenant, Christ comes to be our Life. In place of external written rules, the living Spirit is the law in our lives. Under the new agreement with man, which Jesus inaugurated on the eve of His death, God promised to place His Law in our hearts and minds instead of on stones and parchments (2 Cor. 3:3-6; Heb. 8:10,11). This means that

we have a *built-in guidance system* by which we handle every situation in life. Christ in us is our wisdom, the personification of what the written rules and principles foreshadowed.

Because He is our wisdom, as we follow His internal commands, Christ Himself is the One running our families. We spontaneously do whatever He in us directs, as He expresses His life through us moment by moment. The Creator of children lives in us to rear our children through us.

God is an expert in child-rearing. As our Father, He perfectly directs every aspect of our upbringing, tailoring it specifically to our individual needs. He does not treat us like robots, demanding that we immediately act like mature adults or in a prescribed “model” manner.

The first thing He lets us know is that He totally accepts us just as we are.

When your child took his very first steps, how did you react? What did you say to your husband when he returned in the evening? Did you say, “Johnny fell over sixty times today while trying to take his first two steps”? No, of course not! As parents, we know that a child taking his first few steps is meant to fall. We rejoice in the few steps that he does take. We don’t look for him to walk like an adult. The same is true of us spiritually.

Too often our reaction to children acting as children is that they should be acting like adults. But why? How did we learn that hot was hot? By theory? Or didn’t we have to touch something hot to find out what Mom meant when she said, “Hot”?

God accepts us, and Christ in us will accept our children as children. We need to let them know that they are loved unconditionally. We may make it plain that we dislike some of the things they do, but they should know that we love and accept them as persons regardless of their actions. Whatever they do wrong, they are still unique and worthwhile persons who have a right to expression. Many times that right has to be subjected to the rights of others as well, and in this area we as parents are the only ones who can decide. But these decisions will be the spontaneous decisions that Christ makes in us when we operate in the reality of our union with Him.

If we constantly feel condemned in our Christian experience, as a spouse or a parent, our “mistake” mentality will permeate the home and our children will be nervous and self-condemning. Our attitude of defeat will put a damper on our family life, and self-confidence will be destroyed. The family will manifest either feelings of failure and depression, or will react in rebellion. The very symptoms we don’t want in our family will be the fruit of our own negative attitudes. It is therefore vital that as parents we know who we are in Christ and live free of condemnation.

To imagine that we can come up with a formula for successfully bringing up children is foolish. Two totally different personalities need individual attention and special handling. Christ in us makes this “customized” attention possible.

The Creator of each unique life knows better than anyone exactly how to treat each child. He knows all the factors that have caused the particular problem we are handling, and He will put within us, at the time we need it (and rarely before), the answer to that child’s problems. Trust Christ in you. He knows your children and loves them more than you can realize.

How will Christ in us handle our children? One day He may cause us to react with anger, so that we raise our voice. You can’t imagine Christ that way? Perhaps you think of Him only in terms of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” Who was it, then, that went into the temple and herded the money-changers out? Did He pad softly across to their tables and say, “Now, fellows, I would really appreciate it if you would just quietly move out of the temple

and take your animals with you”? No, He was so angry that He threw the tables over and made a whip to drive them all out. No one challenged Him because He was “eaten up” with anger! They saw that He was in no mood to be argued with.

This same God more than once during the wilderness wandering told Moses to get out of His way because He was minded to destroy the whole of Israel. At times God blazed with anger (e.g. Num. 16). The point is, anger can result from love; it is not always a manifestation of hate. There are times that our children need to know that we mean business, and at those times Christ in us will express love in a raised voice.

To make anger a habit, so that it is the only way one ever chastises a child, is to fall into a ditch. But to feel that strong emotions are wrong, and that our children should never experience them from us, is another ditch. God chastises every son whom He loves, and there are times that a child may need chastisement. It shouldn't be a public matter, as children are just as sensitive as adults about public humiliation, even if that public is another brother or sister. And there are many forms of punishment, not merely spanking. The Scripture also tells us that “*mercy rejoices against judgment,*” and Christ in us will be a loving and merciful parent, for none of us have been punished by our heavenly Father as much as we deserve to be. God is quick to forgive, and when He does so He even forgets our offenses.

A positive approach to our children, in which we expect the best of them and tell them that we love, appreciate, and have confidence in them and their abilities, will produce a lot more of what we desire in them than constant nagging and the setting of impossible standards that we imagine to be “Christlike.” If we esteem others better than ourselves, our children will quickly pick up the fact that we value the personhood of all people; our example is much more powerful than our words.

But what if you have an unusually difficult child? God works all things for our good, and we have to believe that He has a purpose in this that is greater than we can imagine. Many non-Christians look at believers as “those goody-goody Christians.” They have an image of our children as scrubbed, clean, well-behaved kids, going off to church and Sunday school with Bibles under their arms, untouched by the common everyday troubles of humanity. But when we react like any other mother in the street once in a while, yelling at a naughty child, we relate to them more than if our children were always the perfect picture of decorum. Neighbors will frequently seek our help with their problems, not because we are problem-free, but because we have an inner source of strength to face problems that are driving them under.

If your children provoke you continually, God wants you to turn to the only source of strength that can enable you to cope. Perhaps you imagine that you would be a “better Christian” without children. But for what purpose? We could all avoid problems by having a great “going to glory” ceremony following our conversion, in which we are lined up and shot. But our whole purpose is to be those who live for *others*. And the difficult situations we find ourselves in are what propel us into a vital realization of our union with Christ, whereby He living as us will be we living for others.

We can't expect our children to learn all that we have learned in any other way than by the same method we learned it—experience. There are things you will not be able to spare them from, any more than you could keep them forever in diapers, spoon-fed, and carried about in your arms. We learn by trying our wings. God meant us to experience some of the negatives first, in order that we might come to know our need of Christ as our life.

An adult's body with a child's mind is a tragedy. Childhood is a training ground for maturity and adulthood, not a “showcase” for our Christian beliefs. The child is far more important

than what other people think. Dare to love your children unconditionally, for Christ's love in you is unconditional and infinite.

And trust yourself in handling your children as Christ handles them in you. One day it may be an angry rebuke, and on another day it will be just love and forgiveness with no retribution at all. The inner promptings of the loving Parent of us all are the surest and wisest child-rearing principles of all.