

Teaching Our Children About the Visible God

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One of the great duties and privileges of parents is to teach our children about the Lord. For example, in the General Church baptismal service parents are asked, “Do you for yourselves and for *this child* acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ, as He is now revealed in His Second Advent to be the one God of heaven and earth?” Making the One God, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, *real* to our children then becomes the cornerstone of our religious heritage.

It is a most moving experience to be the means by which little children first grasp the concept that there is a Lord—a Heavenly Father—who made them and loves them. The ages at which young children receive their first concepts of God vary, of course. Some can have first ideas at 2½ years old, others not until 3½ or later.

There are definite things we can do to foster these first innocent ideas of the Lord. The Lord’s Prayer could be introduced from infancy and your children encouraged to kneel and join in. It is a good idea to show pictures of the Lord just before prayers and after prayers; children can be told of the wonderful Man who loves them and takes care of them. They may be taught simple songs of praise to the Lord. Short readings from the Word which include the Lord’s name can be read at family worship or at other times. Brief and simple conversations and explanations during the day about the Lord can be introduced once the first concepts have been instilled.

It will not be long before the children begin to ask questions about the Lord and about heaven. Answer these questions as best you can, but use simple words and concepts and be as brief as possible. Young minds grasp truths singly, for the most part. In young children, the sensual mind is the degree that is most active. Their ideas about the Lord will be sensual, but this needn’t cause alarm. For instance, if a little boy wants to know if the Lord has big muscles, the answer is a simple “Yes,” for the Lord has all power and, in a young child’s mind, He is the strongest Man. Above all, present the Lord as Human—as a Divine Man—to your children. Stress His qualities of love, forgiveness and protection.

By the time your children are 4 years old (or a little older) they are ready for regular instruction from the Word, and their concepts about the Lord increase rapidly. They may be concerned because they cannot see the Lord with their physical eyes. Explain simply that the Lord is everywhere, but that He can be seen only in heaven. We will see Him there when we go to heaven and have our spiritual eyes opened. To most children the Lord and heaven are “up in the sky.” This seems to be an almost necessary idea to the young.

It is important, at this time, to instill the truth that the Lord has given us commandments and rules to live by. The Lord is a God of Order. Tell your children that the Lord is very happy when we are in order and obeying His rules.

Make the instruction of your young children as visual as possible. Use pictures and whatever projects you can find. The Christmas representation is a prime example of this. The Writings for the New Church tell us that representations are used to teach children in heaven, as described in the following passage from Heaven and Hell:

I saw represented by them the Lord's descent...and His ascent...into heaven; and this with incomparable sagacity and piety. A child-like feature of the representative was that...they let down cords that were almost invisible, and that were very soft and tender, with which to lift the Lord in His ascent; with a constant holy fear lest anything in the representative should touch upon something in which there was not what is spiritual celestial. Besides other representatives wherein the little ones are, as by plays, brought into knowledges of truth and affections for good (335).

From this passage we see how important it is for our children to enjoy their religious instruction, for that which enters with delight remains. It is very important that in learning about the Lord children do not become afraid of Him. "Holy fear"—a sacred fear of making the Lord unhappy when we do wrong—is certainly necessary. But if children become actually afraid of the Lord, real damage can be done.

As your children grow older, their knowledge of the Lord will increase and their concepts will mature. If there is regular reading and instruction from the Word, these maturing ideas about the Lord can be Divinely ordered. The understanding that the Lord is all-powerful, all-wise, and is everywhere will grow in your children's minds. Knowledge about the Lord as the Creator of the universe (with all its marvelous order) will be reinforced. His Divine patience can be learned from the stories of the Israelites and their wrongdoing. The Lord is always willing to give us a new chance if we are sorry.

A difficulty may arise about places in the letter of the Word where it says that the Lord becomes angry and punishes. What the letter of the Word states must certainly stand. But it is a matter of wisdom to balance these essential concepts with the Lord's mercy and forgiveness. Punishments are *permitted* from love. Always try to elevate children's minds to higher truths—but never give the impression that the letter of the Word is incorrect.

As our children mature, their sensual ideas about the Lord, so intertwined with things of space and time, can be elevated by teachings about the Lord as Savior and Redeemer. Stories from the New Testament establish these truths, if they are read to the child and explained. The Divine Love, which caused the Lord to be born on earth to redeem us, should be explained clearly, yet simply. The Lord's life on earth, as told in the Gospels, can reinforce the early concepts of the Lord as an all-powerful, all-loving, all-wise Divine Man. There is great power in encouraging growing children to visualize the Lord as He was on earth. Gospel pictures can help with this vital step in truly viewing the Lord as a visible God.

As your children enter adolescence, New Church doctrines about the Lord can begin to be presented in the rational terms of the Writings. The concept of the Divine Human of the Lord should be taught quite simply at first. The absolute necessity of the virgin birth and the nature of the Lord's temptations and victories can be presented. The idea of the Glorification can be introduced. The fact that in the New Church we worship the risen, glorified Lord Jesus Christ is essential to young minds.

Present the Lord Jesus Christ as a knowable, understandable, lovable and obey-able God. Stress His constant loving presence, His all-wise guidance. Teach your children that we see and find the Lord in the pages of His threefold Word and that we are conjoined with Him through a life of living and loving the Divine truths of His Word. Strive to make the Lord truly living to your children—a truly visible God.

Resources to help parents teach their children about the Lord are available through the General Church Education. Call 267-502-4949 or email gced@newchurch.org for more information and assistance.