

Where Did We Go Wrong?

There is a tragic parable that repeats itself all too frequently in our Christian homes. While it has many variations, there are common threads that run through all its versions. The concluding punchline is usually a question raised very quietly: *Where did we go wrong?* The story is seldom told publicly, and when shared, it is delivered in hushed tones.

The story is about how many of our baptised sons and daughters have made their exit from the Kingdom of God. They do not attend Christian worship services, they no longer confess Christ, and they often show animosity toward those who do. In the Christian's spiritual warfare against the world, the flesh, and the devil, it seems they have lost. Many parents are left asking themselves, "*Where did we go wrong?*"

What is it that the Christian community needs to understand and implement here in Australia in the twenty-first century to meet the challenge of faithfully nurturing our young baptised in the Lord? More pointedly, what do we need to know and do as parents, pastors, and congregations to prepare our children for the spiritual assault that they face today in our current anti-Christian culture? What do we need to provide that so often is not being provided, so that future parents will not be pondering the same question, "*Where did we go wrong?*"

The last things needed to conclude reflection on this parable are some sentimental spiritual platitudes or words that gloss over the severity of the spiritual warfare our children face to retain and grow in their faith. Yes, we will pray for our now not-so-young children who no longer confess Christ. Yes, with God all things are possible, and He has not given up these children. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in search of the one who has strayed and is lost (Luke 15:3-7). Let us take comfort in these realities about our gracious Lord and God. Nevertheless, often not taught or explained to parents, especially to fathers, is that their child's Baptism has landed him or her in a spiritual war zone where the devil relentlessly prowls to get our children for himself. The often-unspoken truth is that the Baptism of our kids has landed them in a life-long spiritual war with the devil. Jesus taught; he who endures to the end will be saved (Matthew 24:13). With his close allies - the fallen world (say, youth culture) and the sinful self - Satan is working to see that your child is not one of them. They are out to make our children collateral damage in the Kingdom of God.

The Christian faith is all about understanding and appreciating that the problem of sin will always be our children's greatest problem. Sin has resulted in a death problem, and as with all of us, they have it 24/7 (Rom. 5:12, 21). Unsolved, it cancels the possibility of having a Happy Forever. About our death problem, Christianity presents only two options: you can die to sin in Christ, or you can just die. Dying and rising in the cross of Christ and being covered with His righteousness is the only solution to the death problem (Rom. 5:3-11, 20-21). All other avenues just present escape and coping mechanisms. These biblical truths must command our greatest attention in the care and spiritual nurture of our children regardless of their age. Life with God in Christ means enjoying His undeserved forgiveness and favour, but it also means sharing in His undeserved suffering and the world's disfavour. If these realities about human existence and life in Christ are not understood and appreciated, being or remaining a Christian can make little sense. Then other options, most any other options, can easily be seen as more attractive and fulfilling. We pray that God may enlighten and use parents, pastors, and Christian friends as His instruments to help our children deepen their understanding and appreciation of these realities or recover them for a Happy Forever.

Nurturing children in the midst of their spiritual warfare to live in the freedom of grace and the bondage of the neighbour corresponds to a dual citizenship that God has called all His children to occupy as the Church Militant. Under the lordship of Christ, we are simultaneously citizens of the Kingdom of God and worldly, earthly communities. We live a secure life as beggars of the grace that makes us free, and we live significant lives with works that bind us to our neighbours. These are great and wondrous truths about the fundamental identity of all of us, including our children - yes, even the smallest of these. Yet we must always remember our children's very real spiritual warfare that will continually attack them in both communities. Attacks that will assault the life-giving freedom of grace, the bondage of the neighbour, or both. These children are simply on loan to us from their heavenly Father and, through adoption, our brothers and sisters in the Gospel. Let us put away (or demand to be put away) the glitter, the finger painting, and the silly things that we do in the name of Christian education and teach this paradoxical identity of life in the Cross of Christ. Let us rightly divide the Word of Truth, teaching and applying God's Law and His Gospel that our children might adopt a lifelong habit of dying to live - dying to sin, and rising unto newness of life, serving Christ in the neighbours need - lords of all, beholding to none, and servants of all and subject to all. Let us nurture our children with the goal and confident hope that in that day, when you gather your earthly family together in the fullness of salvation, by the grace of God, they will be there.