

## ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS CHILDREN ASK

Lauren Eby Sept. 8, 2002

My brother mentioned the fact that we need the wisdom of God in teaching our children in relation to money matters. This afternoon I feel like we're looking at a subject that also needs much wisdom. It wasn't for me a particularly easy subject but we will share what we have.

Those of us that have been parents or are parents I'm sure we can identify with what we are looking at here this afternoon. It can be a real challenge to answer children's questions can it not? And for some reason it seems like the smaller the child sometimes the harder it is to answer the question. I would like to say that it is a tremendous privilege to raise children, to rear children. It is a privilege because of the enrichment that it brings to our lives, the opportunity to teach, to mould, to influence a child for truth and for right. I believe we are looking at something that is one of the most fulfilling things that we can do, the matter of child rearing and answering their questions.

We might also notice that it is a tremendous responsibility for parents to answer their children's questions. It is a tremendous responsibility and we believe it carries with it accountability. Every child that comes into our home is a never dying soul and will spend eternity in heaven or hell and so I believe that parents who take their responsibilities seriously will feel the weight of that on their shoulder to be guiding this little baby, this young child to a happy end in Christ.

Now what we would like to say this afternoon probably will not be new to some of you, Brother Luke when he shared with me, reminded me that years ago, especially in the early years of the church foundation there was quite a bit of teaching on child training, child rearing and there is a new generation on the scene that has not heard those messages and some of the truths that we will share this afternoon we're just simply re-sharing what has been shared with us in the past because the new generation has to think things through for themselves. They have a new responsibility to face. Now before we go to questions and answers I would like to make a few observations in relation to this.

I would like for us to think this afternoon of every child coming to us as a sheet of white paper that God gives to us, it is a pure, untainted, white sheet of paper. This sheet of paper is waiting to receive impressions, it is our responsibility to fill in that sheet of paper with good impressions of all kinds. That paper represents an empty mind, it represents an open mind, it is ready to soak up everything that we tell that child and again I have to remember that that in itself is a tremendous responsibility. To think that that child is relying on me to fill in the right things on that sheet of paper. And for that sheet of paper we have the responsibility of sharing good information, good impressions that will be a help to that child, we also have a responsibility to try to avoid wrong information, wrong impressions that might take the child wrong.

There is a sense in which, I believe, that we as parents are like programmers of a computer program, that we need to be filling in the right information so that our child's perception of truth and reality is right. In that our children are in a sense are at the mercy of us as parents to be filling the right things in their mind that will affect them in later life. I give that as a challenge to every parent, to take seriously that responsibility of what goes on that sheet of white paper.

Firstly I have an observation that I would like to share and that we need to keep in mind in relation to questions that preschool children and a little older will ask. These very young children will believe almost anything that we tell them and so it is very, very important that we tell the truth. Children are not made to discern teasing, to them even the make-believe can be real, so when big

brother starts to tease little brother about the bear that is under the bed, we have something to say don't we? Because we know that little children can't handle that kind of information, they lack the ability to discern between what is real and what may be teasing. I believe that related to that fact is that we need to remember that especially when giving answers to preschool children that they want things black and white, the grey areas are difficult for them. In their questions they want a black-and-white answer. Is neighbour Sally a Christian or isn't she? Yes or No.

And that is the thing that complicates our job here this afternoon to be able to give the right kind of answer, to be truthful and fair to the child and I would say with that and might suggest that in a sense the simpler the answer the better. Again I was thinking of preschool children.

Secondly: On the other side of the coin we're looking at the credibility of the child. This is tremendous in the first years of their life and we need to seize the opportunity to be teaching the truth about God, the attributes of God. There is no better time because in that time the child will believe what we tell them and so it is important that we are telling them the right things, it is important that we be teaching what is correct from the view of the Bible. Now I have been told that the Catholics used to have a saying that, I assume its true; "Give us a child that is six years old and they will be a Catholic for life." Now we know that that is not 100% true even in a Mennonite setting, but there is a lot of truth about it that in that what we teach the preschool mind, a mind that is very impressionable, ready to soak up every little bit of information we give and it is left with lasting impressions. So there again the challenge is to take that seriously and to make sure we are doing that right.

Thirdly an observation that we would like to share this afternoon is that parents have an accumulation of wisdom to share with their children and God is expecting the parents to take that responsibility, to take that opportunity to share the truth of God and His word with the child. On the other hand we have a child that wants to know and so we come together and try to have that wisdom and that knowledge transferred to that child. I would like to suggest and would like to notice that God has a plan for that transfer. I ask you to look at Deuteronomy 6 and notice a few verses there about God's plan, I believe in Deuteronomy 6 we have the dynamics for that transfer of wisdom from the parent to the child. The first verse I would like to notice is verse seven, here we want to see the parental initiative that God expects of the parent.

**Deuteronomy 6:7** says; "And *thou* shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when *thou* sittest in thine house, and when *thou* walkest by the way, and when *thou* liest down, and when *thou* risest up." Who is the *thou*? Well the parent. The parent I believe we see here has the primary responsibility and initiative for child instruction, it is not the school, it is not the church, it is not some day care centre. We believe, and teach that the church and the school are to assist, the way it says in our discipline is that they shall assist in this matter of teaching our children, and we are certainly glad for that.

Sometime ago I was challenged in Guatemala with an example that helped me to really think this whole thing out for this to take place. We have a family that is attending our church at La Cumbre from a neighbouring town, professing Christians, that are dissatisfied with the church and had been attending for a little while at our church and one thing that impressed us was the job that these parents have done with their children. These children are very respectful, very obedient and the father and the mother both have a very good relationship with their children, they sit down and explain things, and teach things and there is just something very beautiful about that home. The children started to go into junior high school, the oldest two I think he sent to seventh grade, and all of a sudden he realised that there were some influences out there waiting to undermine all of the good that they had done. And so they became concerned about the need for a Christian day school and this year they chose to put their children in our school because they saw, that in spite of all the best that they did, there is in this society much wanting to undermine all the good that they did, and they have awakened to the need of a Christian school.

Then I had to think on the other hand of the family that comes to our church that is not what it should be, the parents are not as diligent as what they should be in the teaching of their children, they have sent their children to our school all their lives, some have been in and passed through and never became Christians and I had to be impressed by the difference between the two parents. Here we have one set of parents that is trying to do it without a Christian school and up-to-that seventh-grade they were a doing a better job of child training than the parents that had their children in our school all those years.

Children will ask questions. In the Bible we have a number of examples where children ask questions. Isaac had some questions for his father Abraham when they went out to Mount Moriah, We read in [Joshua 4:1-7](#) how when Israel passed over Jordan to the promised land they took 12 stones and they built an altar and they were told to do this, the idea of it was that there would be a memorial in the years to come, 50 years 200 years down the road of time the children that would be the descendants of those who passed over the Jordan would ask what is that about? And an answer would be forthcoming.

Memorials serve a very important aspect of maintaining information of things that have happened and so there again it is understood and assumed to the children will ask questions. The Bible says even Jesus asked questions, [Luke 2:42-46](#) when Joseph and Mary were looking for Him and they found him in the temple and said he was sitting in the midst of the doctors, was hearing them and asking them questions.

What we are looking at this afternoon is how that part of the transfer of wisdom and knowledge will come through the questions of the child, we have to understand that that is part of God's plan. Another thing we would like to notice in Deuteronomy 6 as something that needs to be in place for that transfer of wisdom is the idea of parent/child togetherness. In other words where a proper transfer of knowledge and wisdom is to take place the parent must be with the child. We are looking at the need for togetherness so that right things are going to happen.

I would like for you to turn back to verse seven of Deuteronomy 6 and notice the importance of togetherness. Let's read verse seven again: *"And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."* For that to happen the parent will have to be with the child. We could say it like this, making it practical, I shall talk with them, it says that when we are sitting down at our house, more than just at meal time. I believe there is a lot that should happen, right things should happen, around the meal table, and then it says; As thou walketh by the way, we could say while we are driving, while we are working, but together. And then it says; When thou liest down, we are looking at bedtime, and risest up, in the morning. The question is how is this to happen? For example the father gets up early in the morning, leaves for work at six o'clock, he is gone all day, comes home at four or five, he's tired, he may sit down to rest for a little bit or maybe he wants to read the newspaper, some magazines, and then supper comes and then maybe he might have to leave after supper for some engagement or some appointment, and so therefore the mother, since father isn't there, the mother has to take charge of the family devotions that they didn't get done in the morning, it has to be done in the evening, the father is not there, he is not there in the morning and sometimes he is not there in the evening. Then it comes to bedtime and there is no time for a bedtime story because mother is tired out, and the children also, so we may think; Well tomorrow we will do better right? Well I think we can understand what the difficulty is and the stress we have in our society, where father has the work away from home and that I believe is one of the plusses for living on a farm or again for self-employment because the possibility of togetherness is greater.

Now I want to say with that at the same time, for the encouragement of the day labourer, that it does not mean that the day labourer can't get it done. I believe simply what it means that it will take more effort, it's going to take more planning to ensure that togetherness, but we must see that it happens and to do that we need to keep right priorities. Someone said recently, and I had never thought about it but I like the thought, he said: "That the day labourer at least should not be working on Saturday if he has children so that can be family time." I like that thought. I believe if a father, a parent has quality time with his children on Saturday, has some interaction with the family, in any project or in the matter of just being with the child. I know one parent that likes to have time when he goes away that he just takes one child along so that he could talk and keep connected with his child. I think that is all very good and important, but in any case we need to ensure togetherness or the right things are not going to happen.

The fourth observation I would like to share is that we need to look at questions as splendid opportunities not as a bother. Parents it is a privilege. God forbid that our children should come to us with their questions and we don't have time, or we don't want to take the time to answer their questions, we are losing a golden opportunity that we will live to repent. It is a tremendous privilege to teach, to mould and to influence for the right the mind of our children, and we do that by answering their questions. So be patient and take personal interest in your child's questions and be glad to share your knowledge. We have more or less 20 years to get that job done, hopefully some questions will also come after our children leave home, but principally our window of opportunity shuts within 20 years or maybe a little before, so let's do our job well as the children grow up.

The fifth observation I would like you to notice is that in all of our answering the child's questions we need to protect the innocence of the child. There are two aspects to that, but the one thing that I would just like to share with you that a brother shared is, avoid controversial and scary information. For example; someone knows that in Iraq there is war, there is a lot of talk around the table about the Iraq war and the concern over it, and some little children can't handle that kind of information, because in their little minds they hardly can comprehend what's going on, they know that something serious is at stake. The bombing of the Twin Towers, I suppose every family has talked about that some but the comments that we make especially that surround the type of involvement of other people, we need to be careful that we don't load the child with information that it cannot handle. I think if we can do that it would be a definite plus in this matter of answering questions.

The sixth observation we would like to see is that children ask questions for different reasons and we need to discern the reasons for the questions. Usually it's for information, I believe sometimes that it is to seek attention and security, that they want to have an interaction with their parent. Sometimes children's questions are to challenge the status quo, Why? Why must we do this and that and the other thing? Sometimes it becomes an effort to sidetrack the parent to avoid obedience. We need to analyse a little bit what is motivating the questions.

The next observation before we go into questions. In answering your child's questions you might consider Jesus approach to questions. I have four responses that we could notice throughout the scripture when Jesus was approached with questions. One: we can answer directly with the information, with the facts. Sometimes Jesus answered with a question and that is something to consider when the question is especially sticky or maybe we want them to learn to think through. They can help a child to analyse things if we ask a question because we want to stimulate thought on the part of the child. Sometimes Jesus answered with a little story, I like that, and then He answered the question. Sometimes there is nothing that makes the point better than a little story. You could say: Well let me tell you a little story about a little boy or little girl that did this and then show what the choice of that child was and the outcome, then bring it back to their question and the answer by that time is usually obvious. Sometimes Jesus answered them with silence. I believe there is a place, I don't think it's the normal thing, but sometimes when we know it is not an honest question I think

one of the best thing parents can then do is to be silent and we communicate to that child that he knows better than to be asking that question.

We'd like to look at some questions, I asked around a little bit, I couldn't remember all the questions that came to us from our small children so I got some help, some examples of questions that little children are asking nowadays.

I have I believe four categories that we would like to look here to questions. The why's of God? For example, His existence, His working, why does He allow this? Or why He causes this. And one question that might not always come from the preschool child, but probably will, where did God come from? And this is one of the questions that we need to admit and need to tell the child that we do not know, we just don't know, the Bible never explains it and we can't say. But we can say one thing; we do know that He exists because of this, He has answered our prayers, we have seen Him change lives of wicked men and make good men, we look at creation and we see that there is a mind, there's things we can throw in a package that confirms the facts about God.

Another question that is close to that, that comes I believe sooner or later, is why did God make Johnny not normal? Why would a good God make a retarded child? That is not an easy one. And here again I believe that we need to confess that we don't really know, we don't know why. We can say maybe God had a special plan and we don't understand it at this point. I think somewhere along the line we need to explain that there are some things that God causes and there's other things that God allows and we are not always sure which of the two it might be. **John 9:1-3**, the disciples came to Jesus with a question: Here is a man that was born blind, now who sinned? Did that man sin or did his parents sin that he was born blind? I like Jesus' answer, "Neither has this man sinned nor his parents but that the works of God should be made manifest" I believe that thought needs to be backed up for this kind of question that we are not sure we have an answer for. God for some reason has allowed it to happen and maybe someday we'll understand.

Another question is: How can God live in our heart? We teach children that God lives in our heart. Well, we can explain again the omnipresence of God, I think we can go to scripture and show that the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit lives in the lives of every Christian and since God can be everywhere at any time, why it's quite possible that God can be in our lives and in our hearts and be our companion.

The second set of questions I'd like to look at are the Why's of death, heaven and hell. And here again we get into some really tough ones.

One that comes up many times: Will there be animals and toys in heaven? And if there is not how can we be happy in heaven if there aren't any toys or any animals there? What do you say? Well I believe that one possible answer that we can say is that the Bible doesn't really tell us whether there are these things in heaven or not, I think we can say that truthfully. The one thing I am sure of, God will have some things there to make children happy. I think we can confirm that fact because we know that God is good, He has promised a beautiful place, a beautiful place that He is preparing for us where everything will be happiness and bliss and so we can assure that child that there will be something there, we don't understand exactly what it will be like, but there will be something there to make the children happy.

Another question. How will our bodies come out of the grave? Or what will our bodies be like when we go to heaven. Well, there again we are not 100% sure but I think we can tell them that the Bible does say God's power is going to do it and the Bible does say that our bodies are going to be changed, exactly how they are going to be changed we don't know, but we do know the Bible says that we shall know as we are known.

Another question is; Will we look like ourselves or know each other? I think we will, and the reason I say that is that on the Mount of Transfiguration, you know when Peter, James and John were there and they saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, there was no introduction was there? They just said Moses and Elijah, I think they just knew just by looking and I think that's the way it's going to be in heaven, I don't think we're going to need introductions. I think God is somehow going to make it happen that we know each other. You may disagree with that but I think that is something we can say.

How are we going to talk all the different languages in heaven? Did you ever a struggle with that one? All the different languages, all the people from different languages are going to come, how are we going to talk and understand each other? There again I think we can reassure them that God is going to make it possible because really, after all, all language is thought, we talk with thought do we not? Like if I'm in Guatemala and an American comes down and I meet a Guatemalan brother and we have an exchange with the brother and the American brother says: What did he say? I don't say the words that the Guatemalan brother said, I say the thought. So I think in some way that God will have it that we are all going to be able to talk to each other.

The next category that we would like to look at is the Why of who are the Christians and who isn't and what's right and what is wrong. Remember what we said, that the preschool child is trying to figure all that out, they are setting the basis of their thinking, what is reality and what is true, and how is it? And so they are not able to distinguish between teasing and factual information and so they want this in black-and-white, back to the idea this question that has come to one mother, they had a visit with their neighbour lady and she told them, she talked about God, she told them that she prayed for them, but she didn't look exactly like their children are used to seeing a Christian look. Mother, is she a Christian? She talked about God, she says she prays for us, but she doesn't have a covering on. Or maybe it's something else.

I think there are three possibilities of answering these types of questions. Now our concern is that we don't want to use the term Christian so widely that our children can get confused and think that a Christian can do about anything and look like anything. But I think one way we can answer the questions sometimes is "We do not really know. Some people call themselves Christians and they really are not. But we do not always know who is and who is not." If you have doubts, serious doubts, reasons to have serious doubts, you can say, "I have my doubts, but I do not really know."

The second possibility we can say is that "Some people call themselves Christians but since their parents did not teach them all of the Bible like our parents taught us, well, they need to read their Bible and learn more about the Bible. And maybe that is the case with our neighbour lady." Now this is probably the preferred one if we have interaction with our neighbour lady where the feedback from the child could reach the neighbour lady, but I would say especially if our professing Christian neighbour shows a Christian spirit and there is something "Christian" about them, about the person's character. I think we can say this.

Now, the third possibility is if you have serious doubts you might say it like this. "Is she a Christian?" You might say, "Does she look like one?" And then it is their laps to say, "Well, no," and then you let it rest. There again if for some reason there is exchange and you are protecting an embarrassing situation like if you would have another interaction with a neighbour and we say that the neighbour is not a Christian because [of] so and so, the children will sometimes embarrass us and they just tell the neighbour that. So, let us try and avoid unnecessary embarrassments.

If a neighbour is not a professing Christian we can clearly say, "No, they do not believe in Jesus and they do not believe in the Bible so no they are not a Christian," There is no problem at all with that.

Now, here is a question that came, that happened, "Is that lady going to hell since she drives a

red car?” Or this question comes about another thing, “Is that person going to hell because they have a TV?” or they have a radio, or something we forbid? Then, what do we say? I would say this, “Driving a red car, or having a TV is not a guarantee they are going to hell.” And I will give you an explanation why I believe I can safely say that. I know of a Mennonite Bishop that was invited to a wedding out West. He flew out planning to rent a car to go to the wedding. When he got there the only thing that was available was a red car. And that is what he drove to the wedding. Now, if he would have died in that red car would he have been lost? Well, no.

Another example I think we can think through about is this. We have people from non-Mennonite backgrounds who became Christians. They started seeking the truth. And along the way they realized that “This TV does not really belong in this house,” and they get rid of it. And they keep on growing in their Christian life and eventually come and join our church. We receive them in and we maybe baptize them or just receive them on confession of faith. It depends. But, the question is this, “When did that person become a Christian?” Do you follow what I am saying? Now, I know we are dealing with a delicate situation and maybe you do not all agree with this plan but somewhere along the line I think we can communicate the right thing without undermining our position.

We need to realise that sometime sooner or later the children actually have to understand that there are some things that are not necessarily wrong in themselves but that our church has drawn a line for our safety, for our protection and therefore it is sin for us. But it may not necessarily be sin for the neighbour.

4) The fourth category of questions that is more along the way into teenage years or maybe even before teenage years, but certainly in the teenage years, “Why do I have to wear these shoes or this belt or this shirt or this pants,” and the list could go on. Why? Now, what happens when a question comes like that to a parent? It is easy to get intimidated if we do not have a black and white answer, maybe, to give. But I think that if sometimes we can explain, especially thinking that maybe a minister’s son or daughter has that item, we need to explain that we are not condemning our brother or his child for that thing but we have some standards that we have decided for our home that we feel are good and right and we are planning to do that in our home.

“Why can I not have a dress like . . . that sister?” or the bishop’s [wife] even maybe? Or, why do we have to be different. Why can we not do like other people do. Well, there again I think we are back to the same answer that “This is what we are planning to do in our home and we are not planning to judge other homes on the basis of our own standards.”

One thing children will need to understand, one thing that is important that they understand sooner or later, is that if we justify what we do by what we do or what we can see in another brother or another sister or even in the family of another minister or bishop, if we can find someone somewhere that allows this, there is only one way we are going to go and that is down. We need to have brethren who have convictions for their family which they feel strongly about, which they feel is good and right and we just need to draw a line and stand on it. I know that is not always easy. And sometimes we maybe do back off a certain position depending on the circumstances but do not be too easily intimidated parents, with your children that bring up these objections.

You look around a little bit and see the parents that are making it with their children and you will see there that there are some things probably that they are not allowing that maybe others allow but that parent is setting a line and is standing on it. And that is very good and very important that there is at least a little some of that that our children experience. Otherwise if we do not who has control of our child? Us or other people? We must keep hold of the steering wheel for our home and for our children and some of those things are what tests whether that is getting done or not.

Now, what about though, when it is sometimes said “But, I just cannot make my child be a misfit. I just cannot bring myself to do it.” Well, I would say one of two things. A lot of times they are not misfits because you do not allow say a wrist watch or a recorder or whatever. It does not necessarily make them misfits. Now, it is possible, I believe it is possible sometimes for a parent to

ask that many things that are that different from the norm of the group that it can create possibly another set of problems where children if they feel the rejection of friends and feel that other people look down on them it can start a revolt. I have seen that happen, I believe, a resentment toward parents can occur. But let us not get too concerned. I do not think there are very many of us doing that.

I would say that if we feel that if what we want for our children is that much different from our group maybe we should be considering a different church fellowship.

5) The last category of questions are the Why's of existence. We maybe are asked: "Where do babies come from?" Just a few general guidelines.

1) I think we need to give graded answers according to age. I do not think we need to make the mistake of giving a lot of details to young children.

2) I think our answers should be enough that satisfies the child for the moment.

3) I do not think that a parent should ever tell an untruth.

Our answers should be truthful and hold up on the long run. I would say that the three main general guidelines. I would just say this that if there is any parent that would like to have more help in this area I could recommend Lloyd Kniss' book on *Practical Pointers for Training Your Child*. You might not agree with everything he says but at least there are some ideas that I think are helpful.

In conclusion in relation to this important matter; Let us welcome the questions of our children and let us be fair with them. I think we do need to be careful about keeping the silence. If our child gets to the feeling that we really do not want to answer their questions they will stop asking and they will be asking somewhere else. So, let us be open. Let us be truthful in our answers. And when we do not have the answers or it is a really tricky one just admit, "I do not know. Maybe we can find out the answer somewhere." But just remember that we are dealing with never dying souls and what a tragedy if we fail in this important job of teaching our children what they need to know about God.