

Can a parent's faith be effective for their child's salvation?

As Christian parents observe their children growing through the teenage years they may begin to wonder about the standing of their children before God. Teenagers are eager to assert their independence-- and this is part of becoming a mature adult who takes responsibility for their actions, their choices and their lives in general. But how does this work out spiritually? If the young adult appears not to have taken on the Christian faith of their parents and made it their own, where do they stand with God?

At issue here is the way that God views us in our families. When it comes to salvation, does God save the dependent family members on the basis of the faith of the family head? In the scriptures, we do see that the promise of salvation has a 'family inclusive' aspect to it. Paul alludes to this in 1 Cor 7:14 where he calls the children of a believing parent 'holy'¹. The children of Christian parents are also addressed as among 'the saints' in the books of Ephesians and Colossians (Eph 6:1, cf Eph 1:1 and Col 3:20, cf 3:12ff).

At the end of his Pentecost sermon, Peter calls all to repentance and baptism, saying that the promise of salvation extends to parents, their children, and all who are far off (Acts 2:38-39). But notice carefully the final phrase of Acts 2:39.

Acts 2:39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

This final correlative phrase works to qualify the object of 'the promise'. The promise is for 'you', 'your children', 'the far-off ones', indeed 'all whom the Lord our God calls'. This qualification works to specify that the promise is for the benefit of 'you' who are called, all your children who are called, and anyone else whom the Lord will call to himself. Logically, those who are not called are not beneficiaries of the promise, whether they be 'far off' or 'children'. Hence, being the child of a Christian person does not guarantee election to salvation.

In the case of children when they are very young, it is not possible to know whom the Lord has called to salvation. Instead we treat them on the basis of 'covenant inclusion', as the language of the Old and New Testament teaches us². But as children grow into adults, a time comes when they take responsibility for their own faith relationship with God.

It is true that in the New Testament, we read of whole 'households' being baptised together and would reasonably assume these extended family units included teenagers, older relatives, servants, and other dependants. In Acts 16:31-34, Paul declares that the promise of salvation extends not only to the Philippian Jailer but to his 'household' as well. His whole family is baptised together but notice that, by then, the whole household has heard the gospel proclaimed by Paul and all are described as having come to believe in God. So while this example would reasonably demonstrate the practice of infant baptism by the apostles, the 'responsible adults' of the household would appear also to have a Christian faith of their own³.

¹ The 'sanctification' of the unbelieving spouse is not explained or qualified and so it is difficult to know exactly what Paul has in mind in 1 Cor 7:14. Further, Paul does not specifically state that being declared 'holy' guarantees the child's ultimate salvation.

² For an extensive treatment of 'covenant language' used in relation to infant baptism, see my article on "Why should my infant child be baptised?" posted on this website.

³ Paul also says that he baptised the household of Stephanas, the first converts in Achaia, but we have no further information on this event.

Another case of an entire household coming to God through the head of the household's faith concerns the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18). Luke would seem to have included this account in the book of Acts primarily to show the progress of the gospel across the Jew /Gentile divide⁴. Our interest in this account centres on Acts 10:44-48. It is clear that the entire household (including the wider circle of relatives) hears the gospel, and by the work of the Holy Spirit, believes and is saved. Consequently, they are all baptised with water. Once again, this account does not show that the head of the household's faith is effective for the salvation of the entire household. Instead, every member of the household hears the gospel and together they believe and are saved.

So from all the evidence we have considered so far, 1 Cor 7:14 provides the only indication that the Christian faith of a parent may be effective for the salvation of their child. The limits of this salvation, however, are not made explicit. Supporting this assertion, we have the Acts 2 extension of the 'promise' of salvation to 'your children who are called'. We also have the examples of whole households believing together on the gospel message and being saved, although none definitively proves the Christian faith of the family's head was effective for salvation on behalf of their children.

Constraining the extent to which we may consider the parent's faith to be effective for the salvation of their children is the concept of personal responsibility for sin emphasised in the New Testament. While the Old Testament showed examples of shared familial responsibility for sin⁵, the new covenant is different. The prophet Ezekiel teaches the responsibility of the individual for their own standing with God, apart from their parents, in the new covenant (cf Ezk 18). The prophet Jeremiah also states the same in Jer 31:29-30.

When does a young person become 'accountable' to God?

As we consider the growing independence of teenagers from their parents, it is reasonable to ask when an individual becomes responsible for their own standing with God. Is it on their 18th birthday, when they also gain the rights to drink alcohol, vote and go to war? Is it on their 16th birthday, when NSW law dictates that they are now 'emotionally' independent of their parents and responsible for their own sexual practices and choices⁶. Given that teens as young as 12 and 13 frequently express their own opinion on spiritual and religious matters, have they already taken up responsibility for their own standing with God?

While we must allow for great differences in culture and maturity, the bible does show us some examples of 'young' people interacting with God in ways that demonstrate that they are accountable for their own decisions. We are reminded of the 'rich young ruler' whom Jesus called to 'sell up' and follow him (Mt 19:16-22). Though 'young', he appears accountable for his decision not to follow Jesus. The young man, Saul (who became Paul), is implicated as blameworthy for his consent in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58; cf 26:9-11). The young David, Israel's future king, acts in a manner demonstrating that he is 'responsible' for his own faith in God, something which his father and brothers allow, albeit with some disquiet (1 Sam 17).

We do not have any biblical data that will provide an objective and fixed age when a young person crosses a threshold into being personally responsible for their own standing with God. We see God taking seriously the words and actions of young people, while also showing special compassion for them in their youth and immaturity (Mk 14:51; Acts 20:9-12; 23:17-22; 1 Tim 4:12; 1 Jn 2:13-14 etc).

⁴ Hence, the conclusion, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." (Acts 11:18)

⁵ eg Exodus 20:5-6, Joshua 7:1-26

⁶ The 'Age of Consent' varies from 16-18 across Australian states for varying practices.

With this in mind, it would seem wise to allow for the diversities of culture and maturity among teenagers and allow them to tell us when they are 'of age' to take responsibility for their own standing before God. I do not think 'spiritual responsibility' is a right to be wholly claimed by teenagers from their parents at the first petulant outburst following a discussion on morals or spiritual matters. Rather we might think of a gradual transference of responsibility from parent to teenager, where there is discussion and dialogue (and prayer!??). We might think of this process being analogous to the negotiations parents have in relation to the teenager's social world. Essential in this process of transference would be the teenager's initiative in seeking to be responsible before God rather than a parent simply absolving themselves of their responsibility.

Eventually the day must come when our children become 'adult' enough to be fully responsible for their own faith and standing with God. As parents, we may still provide coaching and wise advice, but they 'own it'. This 'maturity' could be recognised in many affirming and encouraging ways. In the Anglican tradition, Confirmation might be one way of expressing this. In the Baptist tradition, Believer's Baptism would be appropriate. Whatever 'rite of passage' is chosen, its aim should be to encourage the young person to continue to grow as a disciple of Christ and to now take up the responsibilities shared by all adult believers in their Christian Community.