

Raising Christian Children in a Secular World



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Co-missioners,

Carol Braun writes this week about an issue that surely weighs on countless Christians parents in 2022. Her candor will refresh you. So will her gritty trust in the One who gave his life for every child or grandchild that you happen to know and love.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Raising Christian Children in a Secular World

by Carol Braun

The first time I felt anxious about raising children in the Christian faith was long before I became a parent. I was about fifteen. My own faith, my own doubts, felt like more than enough to handle from week to week. How could I ever have faith enough to let me pass it along confidently to my children? And if I didn't pass it along, what a terrible failure! At very least a disappointment to my family; at most, well—my head swum with images of millstones and outer darkness. Too much responsibility. It would be better, I decided (quite reasonably, given my premises), to have no kids at all.



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For reasons I cannot fathom, I confessed my thought about not having children to my Catholic grandparents on the other side of town. I doubt I mentioned my reasons. I remember my grandfather's response as short and confident: not having children is a selfish choice. My grandmother, who was raising seven children of her own when she and my grandfather took in my college-aged mother from India, was warm and equally confident:

“Don’t worry, dear,” I remember her saying. “You’ll probably change your mind when you’re older.”

She was right. By the time I hit twelfth grade I’d felt a new kind of tenderness in my heart that seemed just right for taking care of my own little child someday. What I’m inclined to see now as a change of mind based on underlying faith, I saw back then as a passionate, reckless choice: I would shove my worries down for as long as I could, and just deal with the problems of raising-in-faith when they came.

That this anxiety loomed so large for me, for so many years, I attribute in part to the arc of my life in and outside the context of church and faith. It’s an arc that’s hard for me to disentangle from the larger arc that my country has traced at the same time.



I was born in 1980 to two Christian parents in suburban Cleveland. I was baptized at the Lutheran church a mile from our house, and I attended that church for the next thirteen years, in a congregation bursting with multigenerational families and children, in a pew filled out by my relatives. I attended the elementary school attached to that church—the same one attended by my father and grandmother and their siblings before me. In religion class every weekday, in Sunday school every weekend, I was lovingly instructed in the faith, as I was by my parents at home through daily prayers and occasional stories from our

children's Bible.

In those grade-school religion classes, when I was encouraged to tell people about Jesus who may not know about him, my first thought was that I didn't know any such people. That wasn't quite true, but in my mind my family's few non-Christian friends were compartmentalized away from the religion-class discussions, and in any case I didn't see them as often as I did my family and my friends from church and school, or my neighborhood friends who went to the Catholic school down the street.



Photo by [Katerina Holmes](#) found on [Pexels](#)

When I reached junior high, things changed. First I transferred to a non-religious private school in a distant suburb. Suddenly none of my close friends were Christian. The next year, my family transferred to a Lutheran church farther from home. It had plenty of kids my age, but I didn't know them. It was as if my world had flipped into the negative image of what it had been: my religious life became compartmentalized away, while most of my daily concerns and relationships and teenaged dramas took place in a secular world where the name of Jesus felt taboo, and where my Christian identity was an exotic thing that made me different from my friends.

I attended a Lutheran college in part to regain some of what I'd

lost, and to experience intellectual rigor in a setting where Jesus' name was not taboo, where God's law and gospel were welcome topics of conversation. But after that hiatus I returned to a secular environment. I went to grad school in physics, and there fell in love with the wonderful man to whom I'm now married, with whom I am fantastically compatible, who also happens to be an agnostic raised outside any religious faith. We moved east, and since then the churches I've attended have been much smaller than the ones I grew up in, and mostly gray-haired.

That brings me to where I am now: in a family with two young children and one Christian and one non-Christian parent, in a town where none of our closest friends are practicing Christians, with a church community that's wonderfully caring but currently gives my sons no kids their own age to connect with in their faith. All this in a nation with [falling rates of belief in God](#), where [Gallup polling shows](#) that the percentage of the population who belong to a house of worship has plummeted since my adolescence, as has the percentage who call themselves Christian.

(One wrinkle: As far as I can tell from [more Gallop polling data](#), considering the overall increase in the U.S. population, the actual *number* of Protestants attending church each week in America has *increased* since the 1950s. The fact that I'm seeing emptier pews may have mostly to do with which pews I'm seeking out.)

And the time has come for me to face the anxieties I shoved down when I was eighteen. The first steps were easy: I had both boys baptized and have been bringing them to church—which they're happy to do for now. But habitual worry lurks behind that "for now." The context of their young childhood is so different from mine. Am I up to this task?

The monthly church school for kids in our three-point parish never bounced back after its Covid hiatus ended last summer. Some kids never returned, and after a few months the program shut down again.

We've kept up our home Sunday school lessons—a practice we [picked up during the early days of the pandemic](#). Although my boys sometimes wander away mid-lesson or fall into tussles, I've been amazed by how engaged they are with the stories, the discussions, the prayers. Still I worry: will I push back if they resist? Sometimes I rush through a lesson or prayer for fear of losing their attention; I ask less of them for fear of turning them off if I ask for more.

To my dismay, I also find myself worrying when our lessons do take root. When my older son was in nursery school, he taught his class to sing the Doxology—and amidst my joy I had a moment of panic that we'd be seen as pushing our Christianity on the other children. Ditto this year when my younger son came home and said he'd been telling his classmates that Jesus is their good shepherd and they are his sheep. Alongside these feelings, I file away my reaction when my older son told his friend at school that Santa isn't real, and she retorted that Jesus isn't real.

When my sons were baptized, I promised to “help them grow in the Christian faith and life.” Perhaps part of what I'm feeling is frustration with God, that my corner of the world seems to be moving in a direction that makes this task harder instead of easier.

I see some overlap between my predicament and that of the disciples in Acts 1, when they're impatient for Jesus to take control the way they'd like him to. They ask, “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He answers, “It's

not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses.”



Photo by [Andrea Piacquadio](#)
found on [Pexels](#)

We don't get to know or choose God's timeline for the world. What we do get is the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and—children of God in Christ that we are—that gift is ours for the asking. (As in Luke 11:13: “If you, being wicked, know to how give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!”) I see that gift of the Spirit every time my boys break into prayer, or draw me a picture about God and love, or repeat a lesson learned from the Bible.

I can't create faith in my children, any more than I can in myself. Like Paul in 1 Corinthians 3, I plant and water but it's God who gives the growth. Nor need I rely on myself alone for the planting and watering. No matter how few children there are at our church, it's still a place where we encounter word and sacrament, making it a fertile place for the Spirit to do God's work on us.

Freed from worry, I can slow down and take risks, confident that my boys are as precious to God as they are to me. Next week I'm

going to run a mini VBS program with another member of our parish, her two grandchildren, and my sons. I have no idea how successful it will be, but I'll jump in and try, counting on God's Spirit to support us.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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