

Karl Barth's wisdom for fathers (and mothers, and all children of God)

Before you had a human parent, you had a perfect one.

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



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When my children were little, not a month went by when my wife and I didn't get the letter from our kids' school: "Your child has been exposed to head lice." Three blocks from our house, there is an upscale salon devoted to nothing but nit-picking. When our kids caught lice they were unfazed. I wasn't. I'd internalized the stigma from my childhood. We waited until after dark, then rushed down the street and through the nitpicker's door. Flustered, I made a sad joke. Gesturing to my bald head, I told the receptionist, "I hope I don't have them too."

He replied, "Don't worry. Dads *never* get lice. Moms do." He pointed toward a few women, sitting patiently as the nitpickers did their work.

I didn't understand. "Why not dads?"

He said, "Moms get down on the floor to play, or the kids get in their laps to cuddle. Their heads touch. The lice climb in."

Parenting is stressful. We want to make our children happy and keep them safe, so we assume a set of impossible obligations. Even the best parents stumble under the load. Because we love our children, we can't accept futility and we burn with resentment instead.

No wonder we need to escape. I live across the street from a playground. On Saturday mornings, the young fathers buried in their cell phones make me think of Kierkegaard: "The yes of promise making is sleep-inducing. He who says 'No' becomes almost afraid of himself." In other words, when your kid cries "Look at me!" and you've got your phone in your face, it is better to say no than to look up from Twitter for a half second. Kierkegaard concludes: "An honest no can stimulate repentance."

Is anything so easy as judging other parents? My oldest son just graduated from high school. I didn't teach him woodworking or how to use a semicolon. I didn't even teach him how to drive. I did model the importance of telling the truth and cooking dinner. I also provided a nonstop master class in irritability and hiding out at the office. Parenting is difficult.

And being parented is heartbreaking. We come into the world longing for perfect love. We get broken parents. It takes decades to recognize both truths, longer still to forgive your parents. I didn't see the truth of Philip Larkin's poem "This Be the Verse" until I was 45. ("They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do. . . . But they were fucked up in their turn / by fools in old-style hats and coats.") In the interim, we bring colossal expectations to the table. For the most part, they don't get met.

Flames fly upward, but resentment burns in both directions. You should set your cell phone down and watch your kid hang from her knees for the 500th time, but you can't. You should call your mother, but you probably won't.

At my first church, I organized a social hour for new parents and church grandparents. "Share questions and wisdom," I said. Five minutes in, a church matriarch spoke with sincere authority. "This is the secret to raising good children," she said. "Keep a cup full of water in every room. When one of your kids gets mouthy, fling some at him."

The few parenting books I've read aren't much better. Parenting is too relational, and therefore too particular, to benefit from abstract guidance. My mouthy kid is different from your mouthy kid, and not just because he's dry. This leads me to believe that the best parenting is so deeply contextual it becomes singular. And it is probably improvisational as well. There are no reliable instructions.

Still, I give the same photocopied set of parenting notes to almost every young parent I know. I believe these words have an almost alchemical wisdom. They come from a suspect source, are hard to accept, and rely on a particular theological framework. I am not sure they make sense, but they have made me a better, more relaxed parent—and an easier, more loving child. They come from the 54th section of the fourth book of the third volume of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, in a short section titled "Parents and Children."

This section is preceded by a brutal passage extolling the "natural dualism" of men and women, in which Barth insists that harmony between people is only possible if men and women are "faithful to [their] own sexual characteristics." This dualism should not connote equality, given the "divine order" in which man was created first, woman "second in sequence, but only in sequence," yet nonetheless "subordinate." Yes, some men will exploit the power differential between male and female. Yes, some women will suffer. Nevertheless, "the goodness and justice of the divine order are not transformed into evil and injustice even for those who have to suffer from its misunderstanding and abuse by others."

Tell it to a rape survivor, Karl. It should not be hard to find one, given that one out of every six women has been sexually assaulted. Barth ignores the reality of misogyny and downplays the violence of sexism, in order to safeguard a "divinely ordered" gender rigidity that turns human beings into men like Harvey Weinstein.

Given the dangerous bullshit Barth advances—and considering his infamous quasi bigamy—it might be wise to ignore his thoughts on parenting. I probably would if they hadn't affected me so profoundly.

Toward the end of "Parents and Children," Barth states a few plain facts. Your father cannot make you happy. Your mother cannot make you healthy. Parents must understand that their "task is limited . . . it cannot amount to more than offering their children opportunities." Before you had a human parent, you had a perfect one. God is your original parent. Children are made in the image of God, not their

parents.

Yet, in the eyes of infants and young children, parents do have “a Godward aspect.” They loom over their children physically, and they shape their lives. They have a sort of superiority, yet it “does not belong to them either as a physical or as a moral quality. It is the brightness of a light which falls and rests upon them from outside, from above—the light of the free grace of the Creator turned towards them as parents.”

In other words, parents are like the moon. We are lit with a light of authority that we do not generate on our own. Once aglow, our parental role is that of an “ambassador,” a “distant and pale reflection” of the child’s “primary parent.” To be a parent is to commit yourself to being an “imitator of God’s action.” This means parenting must convey tenderness and correction, love and authority, generosity and protection.

When I was ten years old, my parents took my sisters and me to the Ocqueoc Falls in Northern Michigan. The falls weren’t huge, but water thundered through them. My older sister dove in. My dad whooped and jumped in after her, then stopped, waved, and called me to join them.

I stayed on the riverbank. I’d seen whitecaps, but I’d never seen one in a perpetual churn. I didn’t move. My dad waved his arm at me again, and I could see the irritation growing on his face.

Then he saw the shame on mine. In an instant, his face went gentle. He spoke, louder than the waterfall: “Don’t be afraid. I’m here.” Then he came to me and picked me up. He hadn’t carried me in years. I wrapped my arms around his neck. My feet dangled to his shins. He walked us into the waterfall, leaned into the turbulence, and found a rock to sit on. I clung to him.

The rapids were strong and fast. The cold water roared and foamed. It pulled at us, as if it wanted to pull me out of his arms. He held me tightly. It was terrifying, and yet I was safe, held in my father’s arms. I could not hear his laughter above the fall’s crash, but I felt it. I felt his heartbeat and his warmth.

The moon is not the sun, but it is beautiful. God is not like our parents, but for a little while, parents are called to represent God. To receive even a pale reflection of the one who spoke creation into being is to receive a miracle.

But still, a pale reflection. Parents who cannot admit this risk obscuring God. Absentee parents get blamed for not loving their children enough. We rear back from Lori Loughlin and LaVar Ball for the opposite reason: they seem to love their children too much. Ball's domination and Loughlin's enmeshment share a whiff of idolatry. Your children are called to conform to Christ, not you. An occasional solar eclipse is remarkable. A daily solar eclipse is disastrous.

Barth's method of sidestepping these problems is liberating. Even as a father imitates divine attributes, his most important job is to make sure his children know their original parent. The same is true for mothers. Christ has a direct connection to our children. They are his "little brothers and sisters," just as we are. They are God's children, just as we are. Our role is to live lives that reflect this truth. "The attitude which arises from this understanding is the true parental attitude."

In other words, if you want your children to be respectful, show them that you are a child. You can do this by saying grace before dinner. Praying with your children makes parenting easier, because every prayer contains the same essential confession: "God alone is properly, truly, and primarily the Parent." You can also do it by putting your impossible obligations down. You aren't God. The truth is, your children have a relationship with God that is independent of their passing dependence on you.

This is not easy to accept. The impulse to cling and control is powerful. I have winced at the doorway of an elementary school, and I am preparing to wince at the entrance to a dormitory. To get out of God's way, you have to place an immense amount of trust in God's care. This can feel as if you're risking your children's well-being.

Surprisingly, it can also bring a relief that has nothing to do with your status as a parent. Releasing your child into God's care can help you find the father you've spent a lifetime longing for, the mother both you and your mother were born crying for. Recognizing our inability to be perfect parents, to ensure our children's safety and happiness, is painful before it brings ease. In this regard, it follows the pattern of confession and forgiveness, of death and resurrection, of sin and grace.

Barth explains it this way: "Parents are also children of God. This means they are the elder siblings, older brothers and sisters to their children." It's an odd thought. But when it hits, it comes on as relief. At 50, I don't see a Freudian dilemma when I see

my mother. I see a fellow child of God, an elder sibling, and a woman who has accrued no small amount of wisdom through her “slight seniority” over me.

God’s magnitude relativizes everything. Because of this, the more I love God, the more I am free to release my children and to love my mother. If you are a child, put your colossal expectations on God, not your parents. Mother, father, son, daughter: these are temporary titles. In the last analysis, we’re God’s children. No more, no less.

Putting this into action assumes a certain maturity on both sides of the parent/child relationship. Your parents are your elder siblings, not your carefree friends. Strict adherence to Barth’s formulas might require a formality that few contemporary families possess. In addition, his approach might rest on an entitled, remote sort of fathering. I don’t know a thing about Swiss fatherhood in the 1950s, but I doubt there were many dads playing airplane with the baby food. It is easier to release your children into God’s care if you’ve never held their wriggling little bodies to a changing table.

But the point is not to emulate Karl Barth or the norms of his era. The point is to ground your parenting in God’s deeply personal, intensely relational love for you. That love is experienced differently in every age and in every home. This is why most parenting advice fails.

And yet, I do believe in this universal: if you are a dad to small children, you should try to catch head lice.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “God the original parent.”