



Thoughts on
Children



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 The Plough Publishing House

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Foreword

It is sometimes said that each child is a thought in the mind of God. But even if we believe this, and approach the children entrusted to us with the reverence that such a belief ought to instill, we may often feel helpless – whether in the face of a two-year-old’s tantrum, or a teenager’s silence.

In this little book, two fathers (themselves a father and son) share their thoughts on the essence of bringing up children. Both lived in Germany in an era when parents and teachers tended to be overly strict, and we live in a time when they tend to be very lenient. All the same, there is plenty in what they say that is timeless.

Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–1880) studied theology in Tübingen and became a pastor. He longed to experience the reality of

viii God, and this he did in a very concrete way when he dared to take up an intense two-year battle (1842–44) with the demonic powers that possessed a tormented woman in his congregation at Möttlingen. As in New Testament times, demons were driven out, and the woman was cured. And all over Germany, Möttlingen became known for the motto that expressed its inhabitants' joy: Jesus is victor!

In the following months, a movement of repentance and conversion spread far beyond his parish, and many other people were healed of physical illnesses. So many came to him that in 1852 he felt he had to leave Möttlingen, where he had worked with his wife for fourteen years (1838–1852), and move to the large and imposing spa at Bad Boll. As housefather there, he was able to continue his growing work of caring for the thousands that came to him—sick, wounded, and sin-laden souls.

In 1920 A. Albers, a writer for a well-known publishing house, described the father Blumhardt's life in these few telling words:

The atmosphere in which this Swabian pastor lived with unwavering certainty was that of early Christianity and the expectation of the final breaking in of the kingdom of God. This is where he drew his strength. In this atmosphere he helped the people of Möttlingen and Bad Boll, who turned to him day and night. His life was one uninterrupted exercise of the powers of love. Here was a man who had a part in what God was doing and who was an instrument in his hands.¹

Johann Christoph Blumhardt's son Christoph Friedrich (1842–1919) was raised in this atmosphere of expectation and the reality of the presence of God. He too studied theology at Tübingen, and then returned to Bad Boll in 1869 to help his father. In 1880 the elder Blumhardt died, and his son carried on his father's pastorate with similar gifts. He followed so truly in his father's footsteps that the witness they gave to Jesus and the kingdom of God was one and the same.

Christoph Friedrich saw that Christians were turning the biblical expectation of God's kingdom on this earth into a waiting for their personal

reward in heaven. He took a sharp stand against this religious egoism and proclaimed God's love for the whole world. He saw that healing for its own sake was another great danger threatening the true surrender to the will of God, and therefore he eventually gave up healing the sick. In a letter he wrote, "Do not look at yourselves and all your suffering. Look at the suffering of God, whose kingdom has been held up for so long because of the lying spirit of men."

The atmosphere in the household at Bad Boll is described by a guest who visited in 1852, shortly after the father Blumhardt had moved there with his family:

A spirit of freshness and joy blows through this house, a spirit that gives a vivid impression of what the peace of God is all about, the peace that surpasses all understanding. It pervades everything, practical and spiritual, significant or insignificant. This atmosphere affects the soul as fresh mountain air affects the body.²

What a place for children! Here is an anecdote told by this same visitor:

One evening there was a woman at supper with her little four-year-old daughter. She was sitting near Blumhardt, and the child was just behind a pillar. Blumhardt had sent someone to fetch the Bible, as we were waiting for the evening reading to begin. Suddenly, when everything was quiet, Blumhardt's voice was heard: "Peek-a-boo! Peek-a-boo!" And so he had fun with the child for a while. Then he broke off, saying, "So, now be nice and quiet, like a good little girl. We left off at the second half of the second chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians" – which he proceeded to read.³

In his biography of Johann Christoph Blumhardt, Friedrich Zündel tells the following story, which also illustrates Blumhardt's great understanding for children and young people:

Now about that difficult age for boys, the "terrible teens" so feared by many educators for its thorns and thistles. Blumhardt found the right way, especially with boys whose hearts were filled with bitterness and confusion, possibly owing to an excessively strict and pious upbringing.

One such boy complained that he had had to put up with too much religious instruction. On the whole he felt quite happy in the free atmosphere of Blumhardt's house, but he was still capable of playing all sorts of tricks. One day a maid came storming into Blumhardt's room: "Pastor Blumhardt, now he went and stole the eggs from the hen house and put this hymnal there instead!" What did Blumhardt do? He said, "The rascal hiding in the boy's heart is also hiding in yours. And behind your anger, aren't you really enjoying it too? We must overcome the boy's mischief in our own hearts. Just put the hymnal back in the hen house. And don't make anything of it."

He told the others also to put things back as they had found them. For a long time the boy was in suspense, waiting, not without a certain impish glee, for the blowup he was sure would follow. When he realized that nobody was going to take any notice, he gave up his nonsense. The hymnal was probably ruined. But to Blumhardt, a boy was worth more.⁴

The father Blumhardt had eight children of his own. He wanted them to grow up under the influence of the spirit that ruled in his house. So he taught his boys at home with the help of a tutor until they were fifteen or sixteen years old. How much time and effort that must have cost him! But he was indeed rewarded when later four of the five children that lived to grow up and marry worked with him at Bad Boll or close to him in a neighboring village. In time he was blessed with many grandchildren—more than twenty living at Bad Boll. His son Christoph Friedrich had eleven children.

Zündel describes how the father, Johann Christoph Blumhardt, gathered his children and grandchildren each morning about seven o'clock, before breakfast, for prayer and singing:

Blumhardt's big family gathered in a large room for devotions. They were especially for the children, twenty-four of his own grandchildren as well as other children who had become part of the family. Here Blumhardt was happy. I think he looked upon these children as his bodyguard,

his picked troops, and he believed in their pure, simple trust in God and what God wants to bring. He prayed with them as a child among children—not as one stooping to their level, but straight and simple—a fruit of childlike trust.

When the group of parents and children were gathered, Blumhardt would come in, sit down, ring for silence with his little bell, and say a prayer. Then those gathered would sing, “May the Lord bless us,” and toward the end of the song all the children would start wriggling.

As soon as the last note died away, all those big enough to walk would start toddling up to Grandfather. The mothers would follow, carrying their babies, and then came the older children. Blumhardt would put his hand on each child, saying, “May the Lord bless you!” and so on down the line.

Of course when there was a special reason, for instance if a child was sick or had a birthday, he would say a few words in addition to this short blessing. The meeting would close with another song. All these songs were sung to tunes that Blumhardt had composed, and the tiniest

tot would join in lustily, without being the least disturbance.⁵

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It was during these years, when Johann Christoph Blumhardt was a grandfather in his seventies, that most of the excerpts in the first part of this book were written. At this time he published a weekly letter for his many friends, and here he took time to answer questions and write down some of his thoughts on children. In these letters he asks parents, teachers, and adults in general to respect a child's play and innocent joy and not to disturb the child or pester him with grown-up formalities. He even warns us not to offend the angels that accompany a small child. All this he writes with such directness, even bluntness, using down-to-earth Swabian colloquialisms, that it is hard to reproduce his words in English.

Early in his life the father Blumhardt had been moved by the tenderness of Christ. He wrote to his fiancée, Doris Köllner:

This I want to learn, and I need you to help me. It is this gentleness in Jesus that attracted people to

him; this is what he called people to. At the same time this gentleness becomes an important tool for the pastor in his handling of sinners. I mean, of course, not just the outer gentleness, but the hidden, inner tenderness that enables us to feel and think in a tender way.⁶

This heart-warming tenderness went out to children and to parents, especially to parents of sick children or to those who had lost a child. He and his wife had also lost two children who lived less than a day and one who died under two years old.

Tenderness and love for children can be strongly felt in the second part of the book, which is made up of extracts from sermons on the subject of children by both father and son Blumhardt.

It is with gratitude for the lives of these two powerful witnesses for the childlike spirit of the kingdom of God that we publish this little book.

ADVICE ON BRINGING UP CHILDREN

Younger Children

From a letter: **W**hen my children have been naughty and disobedient, I make it a rule to get them to ask their father's forgiveness. This is very easy for some, and soon they do it quite on their own; but for the others it often costs an inner struggle and considerable strictness before they can be persuaded to do it.

Answer: This rule of yours with your children is quite unfitting and wrong, and you could ruin them with this rigid, moralistic treatment. More often than not, so-called naughtiness and disobedience in children is quite unpremeditated, so that they have no inner feeling of something wrong; they cannot understand what all the fuss is about. Adults so easily call something naughty and disobedient even when this is not the case.

Children are often ordered about too much or in haste; they are hardly able to take in what is expected of them. After all, they are also beings who should be respected. So it is not at all right to make such a big crime out of everything and demand that even the father, who had not been present, should be asked for forgiveness. It is understandable that there is trouble then. But that is by no means all. Many reproaches, then sternness, then scolding, and the children become more and more confused. In the end it leads to great severity and harsh punishment.

Dear mothers, don't do this! This way, all that is childlike and unselfconscious in the children is destroyed, and their endearing ways are taken from them. In regard to anything we ask of little children, it would be a good rule to drop our demands when the children do not respond well because they are not far enough along in their development.⁷

From a letter: My daughter, an adopted child, has been indescribably naughty in the last few

weeks—snitching candy, telling lies, being contrary and surprisingly rude to grown-ups, more than ever before. To me the child was not rude but would give no answer at all when I asked her a question. She chews her nails, her face twitches, and her eyes take on a glassy look; and in the end her whole face sets in a strangely old and hopeless expression. I believe that even if it cost her her life, she would not answer at such moments.

Answer: We should be very careful how we treat this. Severity is the worst thing. Best of all in such conditions is to do almost nothing until the child has come to herself, so to speak. This state often comes about because a child has not been left in peace—her soul has not been allowed to breathe freely because someone has been forever occupied with her, especially when several people are helping. Naughtiness comes from that too. Never question a child who is in this state you describe. Even friendliness gets her excited, and every demand on her makes it worse. So please stop asking questions straightaway as soon as no answers come, and do not insist on an answer.

In bringing up children, it should be kept very much in mind that it is good to stop and think as soon as any child does not seem to get on well or makes us uneasy. If ever we are driven to prayer, it is in cases such as these. You should turn to God, and I too will think of your child in prayer.⁸

As many people have urged me to say more about bringing up children, I will at last do something about it and write a little more. I did not do so until now because I did not know where to begin; and there is so much I would like to say that I would hardly know where to stop. I was also waiting for questions that would lead to a specific theme, and I would still like to ask for questions. But as none have come, I will write as it comes to me at the moment. There is no lack of opportunity for experience in my house as there are numerous grandchildren growing up all around me.

It is particularly important that the merry, contented, and joyful disposition of one-, two-, and three-year-olds is not disturbed, and in order not to disturb it, those in charge of them must

continually exercise self-denial in the broadest sense. But just in this area the greatest mistakes are made. With countless children things soon go wrong, and then later very wrong, because their happy disposition in early childhood has not been treated with consideration and reverence. Instead, it has been interfered with again and again in all kinds of seemingly insignificant ways.

Therefore my first request is to refrain from doing anything that tends to make a child unhappy and that tears him away from his thoughts, or at least to consider it carefully; for you could very easily do differently. A child always thinks for himself and in his own way. His eyes see all that is around him, and everything occupies his mind and urges him to do things with inner joy and delight, quite innocently. He needs full scope to let his own thoughts work and to notice things for himself. That is his first school; he is really teaching himself. One gets the feeling that angels are around the children, leading and teaching them, and whoever is so clumsy as to disturb a child opposes his angel.

