

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
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The Stewardship of Our Life Together
“Our Commitment to Children”

Proverbs 4:10-27

10 Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many. 11 I instruct you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths. 12 When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble. 13 Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life. 14 Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evildoers. 15 Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way. 16 For they cannot rest until they do evil; they are robbed of sleep till they make someone stumble. 17 They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

18 The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. 19 But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.

20 My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. 21 Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; 22 for they are life to those who find them and health to one’s whole body.

23 Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. 24 Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. 25 Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. 26 Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. 27 Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

Matthew 18:1-14

18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

2 He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. 3 And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

6 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their

neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! 8 If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

10 “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

12 “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.”

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! We’re continuing with our series, “*The Stewardship of Our Life Together*”: a look at our church and its ministries, opportunities, and where we are right now as a church family. Church is not a place we visit now and then; it is not a meeting we attend: the church is the people of God, indwelt by his Spirit both individually and corporately to proclaim God’s truth, share God’s love, and display God’s ways in this world. Together we have a stewardship from God, a responsibility to manage the gifts he has entrusted to us: resources, facilities, opportunities, and people. We are answerable to God for what happens at FCC and what doesn’t happen that God wants to happen.

[Slide 2] *Review*

Last week we looked at one of the most important aspects of our stewardship, namely, our responsibility to care for children. The day is long gone when we could assume that the culture around us would reinforce Christian values that were taught to our children at home and in the church. Today, in our society, we have descended to the point where the wider culture is characterized by the embrace of values and lifestyles that are diametrically opposed to Christian faith, and where the institutions of public media, education, and government are actively promoting ungodliness and ridiculing, even punishing, those who hold that such things are wrong.

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But living in such a world has the advantage of clarifying for us our responsibilities. It was always God's plan for parents to raise their children to know and serve him. And it was always God's plan for the believing community to assist parents in that task. Instructing one's children in the faith, in godly attitudes and behavior, in moral wisdom and the pursuit of what is good, and right, and true—this has always been the mark of Christian parenting. And it has always been the mark of a healthy, growing church.

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Our commitment to children begins, therefore, with our commitment to follow Christ ourselves, to model for them what it looks like to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We cannot teach them what we do not know ourselves. And many of those children who have grown up and abandoned the faith that they were supposed to have learned in Sunday School did so because what they heard in church didn't line up with what they saw and heard at home.

So, the church does not bear the responsibility for teaching our children alone. But we certainly want to do as much as we can to help children experience God's love, understand Jesus' teaching, and choose to follow him instead of following their own selfish desires or the siren songs of the culture in which we live.

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The best way we can do that is to provide age-appropriate, kid-friendly ministry when we gather together at church. We know that we must base our ministry on the word of God—to saturate their minds with biblical truth. But we also know that children learn best when that learning includes fun activities, play, stories, music, and interaction with loving teachers. And as I mentioned last week, that takes a lot of work and it takes a lot of hands. But there isn't a better place to invest your life and see spiritual fruit that shapes a person's life than to get involved in ministering to children.

I'll say it again: We have a very few people who are sacrificing a great deal to minister to our kids. They're doing a wonderful job. But the lack of adequate teachers and helpers is hurting our church; it's wearing out our volunteers, and it's cheating our children. We need to do a better job here, and I believe we can.

[Slide 6] *Matthew 18*

The passage that we read from the gospel of Matthew, chapter eighteen, makes it very clear that Jesus valued children. In verses 1-5, Jesus uses the example of a young child to demonstrate for the disciples what it means to be great in the kingdom of God. Those who are "great," who have status, who are

important, are those who assume the position of being the lowest. That is, they are unconcerned about status and importance; they are not seeking to be recognized or admired by others. Instead, like little children, they simply come to Jesus out of love for him—they respond to his love with love in return and delight to be with him, to play with him, to listen to him, to be around him.

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Jesus also makes it clear to the disciples that they must assume this same stance toward children, valuing them as God values them: “*whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*” The phrase, “*in my name,*” or, as we see it elsewhere in Scripture, “*in Jesus’ name,*” or “*in his name,*” means, “*as someone who identifies with me*”—that is, “*as a disciple of Jesus.*” To welcome a child “*in Jesus’ name,*” therefore, means to welcome that child into the fold of the followers of Christ, to receive him or her as a fellow disciple, someone who is learning to live according to Jesus’ teaching. Jesus’ disciples must recognize that God wants and welcomes children; he invites children to follow and expects that they are able to learn what he has to teach them. His disciples are to take up the stance of being doorkeepers—not to prevent children from coming in, but making it easier for them to follow Christ. Receiving or welcoming children “*in his name*” means that we are opening the door to the kingdom of God for them; we are removing hurdles and obstacles that are hindering children from learning about Jesus and becoming his disciple.

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Verse 10 offers a warning that reinforces what Jesus has said about children. His disciples must not despise them, look down on them, consider them unworthy of their time or their efforts. Instead, we are to consider them highly valuable, for God certainly considers them valuable—he himself is available to them. They have open access to his presence and his protection.

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Verses 12-15 continue the theme: the parable of the lost sheep points to the value of the individual believer, whom God will seek out like a shepherd would seek for a wandering or lost sheep. And Jesus specifically applies this to the case of children.

The image of the lost sheep is quite striking, and would have been especially familiar to peasants in Israel, such as Jesus’ audience, including the disciples. Whether or not they were shepherds themselves, Jesus’ audience understood what it meant to be a shepherd, and how valuable a single sheep was. A sheep that was lost was extremely vulnerable—and whether that sheep had

wandered away out of ignorance or belligerence or because of some random event, the shepherd was concerned about its welfare and would take every measure necessary to restore it to the flock. His greatest joy would be for the safe return of his sheep. So it is with God, says Jesus, when one of these children returns from a life of sin. Whether they went astray out of ignorance or their own stubborn belligerence or some random, tragic misfortune, God still wants them and welcomes them back.

[Slide 10] *Jesus' warning*

It is in the context of these surrounding verses and lessons from Jesus about the value that children have to God that we find the sharp and striking warning in verses 6-7. Let's read it again:

"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!"

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Whoever causes one of these little ones "to stumble"—that's the key part of the warning. What does that mean? It has to do with one of the primary metaphors in the Bible—the image of life as a pathway on which we're walking. "Stumbling" refers to tripping over something that would cause us to fall and lose our way on this path. The pathway is the way of righteousness, that is, living in accordance with God's law, God's covenant, living in accordance with God's ways. Even God's life, as it were, is described as a "way," a path, his normal route. To walk in his way is to be like God in behavior, attitudes, values, choices, desires. Causing someone to stumble, therefore, is doing something that leads them off of this path. That could be introducing them to sexual impurity, or to a life of thievery, or to addicting drugs. It could be encouraging them to be rebellious or dishonest or drunkards. It could be training them to be racists, to be vindictive, to be hateful, to be manipulative or greedy or lazy or bullies.

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Causing children to stumble can also refer to damaging or destroying their faith, their capacity to trust, to believe, and their desire to follow Christ. Jesus particularly makes note of this aspect of "stumbling" when he specifies that he is speaking about these children "who believe in me." The children were coming to Jesus—they were eager to follow him, eager to believe in him. Of course they couldn't see all of the possible problems that adults could see—but Jesus isn't

concerned about their naivete, he's concerned about the adults who might wreck the child's capacity to believe.

Causing children to stumble, then, can look like ordinary neglect—failing to encourage their faith. One of the biggest lies and copouts that I've ever heard when it comes to parenting is the line that “*We're not going to teach our kids anything about religion; we're going to let them decide for themselves when they're older.*” That is such a crock, it makes me want to scream. Because those parents are absolutely teaching their kids about God and religion. They are teaching their kids what they themselves believe. By their refusal to instruct their children, they are teaching their children that God is not real, that faith is imaginary, that religion is unimportant and has absolutely nothing to do with life.

And guess what happens? Those kids grow up spiritually dead, trying to fill the God-shaped hole in their heart with anything they can find, which leads to devastating lives of emptiness and frustration and all kinds of hurt. Fortunately, some of them hear the gospel when they talk to friends or when they go to college or when they're on their third divorce or in prison or whatever—and they realize that their parents failed them, but God wanted them and welcomes them in.

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Causing children to stumble can also look like an out-and-out attack on Christian faith, which increasingly happens today over the internet or in high school or college classes. We can't stop those attacks from happening; we can't protect our children from every unbelieving voice, every persuasive atheistic teacher. But what we can do is make sure that we're not aiding and abetting those voices either by our failure to prepare kids for the challenges they're going to face or by our failure to protect them in ways that we could.

[Slide 14] *The worst way to cause children to stumble*

You see, one of the ways we can cause children to stumble in regard to their faith is to fail to protect them from one of the most serious attacks they can ever experience, and that is sexual assault or sexual abuse at the hands of someone they trusted, someone who claimed to be a Christian, a part of their family, or their church family. There are few things that wound so deeply, that shatter a child's capacity to trust or to believe the love of God more than sexual abuse. And that's not just true for children, of course, but it is especially true for them.

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If this warning from the lips of Jesus doesn't get your attention, I don't know what will. Let me put it as simply as I can—Jesus says that if you harm or endanger children, especially if you harm them in a way that causes them to

abandon their faith or to take up a life of sin, you are facing judgment that will make being thrown off a boat in the ocean with an anchor wrapped around your neck look like a picnic! If you think God is a warm and fluffy Santa Claus, when it comes to his kids, you better pray that you are not doing them any harm. He is infinitely merciful, but he doesn't issue warnings like this one for nothing.

As those who have a stewardship from God, who will answer to God for what happens in this church, you and I have a sacred obligation to do whatever we can do in order to protect children in our care.

I don't bring this up because we are afraid that our children are at risk in this church. We don't believe that to be true. But we are not willing to do nothing and hope that nothing happens. The statistics are too damning and the last forty years of highly publicized failures in the church world are sounding an alarm that is ringing like a firehouse bell.

[Slide 16] *The reality of our situation in the church today*

Let me point out just a few of the pertinent statistics from the Evangelical Council for Abuse Prevention. First, the stats about our culture in general:

- 1 in 3 girls will be sexually abused before her 18th birthday.
- 1 in 7 boys will be sexually abused before his 18th birthday.
- 42% of women who have been sexually abused were younger than 17 when they were first abused.
- 28% of men who have been sexually abused were 10 years old or younger when they were first abused.
- In the United States, 10% of all children will report experiencing some form of sexual abuse before age 18.
- The US Department of Justice estimates that only 30% of sexual abuse cases are reported to authorities.

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Now, let's consider stats directly related to the church:

- 12% of churchgoers know someone at their church who has experienced or attempted rape.
- According to Lifeway Research, 44% of Protestant churchgoers say they have been sexually victimized.
- 12% of these instances happened within the church.
- 10% of Protestants under age 35 reported leaving a church because of sexual misconduct. *[This would include those who left, not because they were a victim of sexual abuse, but because they observed or knew about it happening in the church.]*

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And here's the monster stat that we must keep in front of our faces: 90% of those abused know their abuser. Most of the time, kids who are abused aren't abused by the scary looking creep that slips in off the street. It's someone they know, someone they are familiar with, someone they have a reason to trust.

Well, you say. But that would never happen here. That's what the Catholics said. That's what the Southern Baptists said. That's what they said at Kanakuk Kamps. That's what they've said at every church where kids have been abused.

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The truth is that churches like us are particularly vulnerable. We are a trusting community; we want to believe the best about everybody. Plus, we're a smaller church, in need of volunteers, especially in our children's ministry. And sadly, there are predators who love to take advantage of churches like us. They are warm, friendly, eager to serve, and looking for ways to get close to children.

Again, we're not bringing this matter up because we are afraid for our children. As a matter of fact, we have no reason to believe that anyone in this church is a threat to our children. And we certainly don't want to turn into people who suspect everyone, who are surveilling each other, who are expecting the worst in people. But we are committed to caring for our children, to protect them from harm as best we can, and to see that our church is a loving, safe environment for kids to learn about Jesus, grow in their faith, and not have that faith damaged or destroyed because we were negligent or careless or lazy. And we need all of you to understand the importance of what we're doing and why we're doing it and to help us steward the care of our children.

I know that this is not a pleasant thing to think about. It's certainly not a pleasant thing to preach about. But here is what we are going to insist: at FCC our children's safety is more important than anyone's discomfort.

[Slide 20] *What we are doing*

So, let me share some of what we are doing to faithfully steward our children's safety.

We are currently in the process of reviewing, updating, and strengthening every aspect of what we do to keep children safe when they are here at church, or when we have an activity that would take place away from church, such as a youth outing or a camp or a missions trip. Melinda Saunders, our Church Administrator, is our point person for these efforts—and just as she has done since coming on board as our administrator, she is doing a fantastic job in this new assignment.

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(1) A committee that includes an Elder, a Trustee, and several members of the congregation has begun reviewing our policies and procedures. They are comparing what we have been doing with the recommendations on best practices from Christian Law and Tax Report and the Evangelical Council for Abuse Prevention and evaluating where we need to change what we are doing or where we need to implement new procedures. They are looking at templates and recommended policy statements to see how best to craft workable policies for our church in our situation.

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(2) You may begin to notice some procedures and practices that we have had for a while, but maybe haven't been as diligent in following through with them as we ought to have been. And you will begin to see some changes in how we handle certain things with children's ministry. For instance, you may not even be aware of this, but a few months ago we added a lock to the door that leads from the SW entrance into the stairwell on the west side of the office wing. We did that for two reasons—to keep people who might gain access to the church from going directly down into the Giving Tree preschool area during the week when the children are in class; and to keep people who might gain access to the church on a Sunday from slipping unseen into the stairwell from which they could access the children's area upstairs. It's a small change, a little inconvenient for those of us in the offices, but it increases our ability to safeguard the children (and the children's ministry workers).

By the way, that's also why we lock the SE entrance door shortly after the worship service starts. If we grow enough where we can have someone stationed at that door for the entirety of the morning worship time, then perhaps we can consider leaving that door open. Again, it's an inconvenience, but the safety of the children is more important than your discomfort or mine.

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Here's some other of the recommended procedures to protect children that are either being introduced or enforced more consistently:

- Every volunteer who wants to work with youth or children will be asked to fill out an application, be interviewed, and have a full background check before he or she is approved to volunteer. We will do that even if you have been coming here for sixty years. I will tell you that we really need more volunteers, but we're not going to put our kids at risk by failing to follow through with this requirement.

- To be eligible to work with youth or children, we need to know you pretty well. Normally, that means you have been actively involved at church for a minimum of six months (not just watching online anonymously).
- We'll be following the recommended "two-person rule": two adults, or one adult and an older youth, will be in each classroom where children are. Workers will not be allowed to be alone with a child in a room.
- Our check-in process will be redesigned to ensure that workers know each child's name and have a way to make sure that he or she is released only to the proper person (parent or designee) at pick-up time.
- We'll also be putting some guidelines in place for how the kids go upstairs, so that we can minimize the chaos a little and guard against accidents that are due to excitement.

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There's some other things we'll be tweaking as we learn more and as we get the input from our Child Protection Team. But these are some of the more important aspects of what we want to have in place as we go forward. We're doing a good job with our kids. We don't want to change the way we love our children; but we do want to make sure we're doing the best we can to help them grow in the Lord, nurture their faith, and to protect them from harm.

So, will you help us fulfill our stewardship of caring for, training up, and protecting our children? Here is where we're headed:

(1) We will be a church that welcomes and values children. We will show that by the way we care for children, instructing them in God's word and ways, and helping them to follow Jesus Christ.

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(2) Because we care about children and their faith, we will minister to them in an age-appropriate way to make it easier for them to understand how they can live for Jesus right now.

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(3) Because we care about children and their safety, we will do all that we can to protect them from harm, including any form of bullying or abuse (physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual).

This is our commitment, as a congregation, before the Lord. We are going to continue to take this stewardship very seriously, and we're committed to learning how we can best care for children. They deserve our best, and Jesus expects it of us.

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Transition to communion

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ;
those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]*

Benediction/Blessing

*[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]
Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership*