

Cherishing Children

THE VALUE OF
CHILDREN IN
OUR CHURCH

Sarah Hobba

WHY BOTHER
WITH KIDS?

Kerry Kettlewell

GROWING
CHILDREN IN
FAITH

Anna Johnson

BOOK REVIEW:
TOO BUSY
NOT TO PRAY

Judy Searle



Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

Welcome to this issue of *ishah*, Cherishing Children.

This one is not just for parents or people working with kids. Our hope is that everyone may be encouraged to value and relate well to the children they know. I often thank God for the wise and godly adults who take an interest in my children and show them what a difference knowing Jesus makes.

In God's wisdom, those crying newborns up the back of church, the crazy runabouts after the service and the thoughtful ones alongside Mum or Dad have been given to us all as members of our church family. What an amazing responsibility to engage with and to help these little people to grow in faith.

Many thanks then to our contributors for sharing their wisdom and knowledge in a thought provoking and accessible way. I was challenged by Sarah Hobba to consider Jesus' attitude towards children and reflect on how I value them. Anna Johnson has given us great insight into the faith development of children and practical points for encouraging their growth. Lindy Mulherin and Kerry Kettlewell have shared personally to answer two big questions: Why have children? And, why work with children?

My prayer then is that we will love children as Jesus does, and be better equipped to serve them. May God give us energy and inspiration to do so, and may many young people grow to trust in Jesus for their whole lives.

By the way, if you've sat down to read this with a cuppa and you're debating whether or not you should indulge in a little chocolate... then you'd better take a look at Starting Point. It may just change your life. And speaking of life changing, our book review is of a classic that is worth revisiting or reading for the first time.

Enjoy.

Beck Miller

ISSUES TO COME...

ISSUE 21:
Be Not Afraid

ISSUE 22:
Perseverance

our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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The Value of Children in our Church

BY SARAH HOBBA

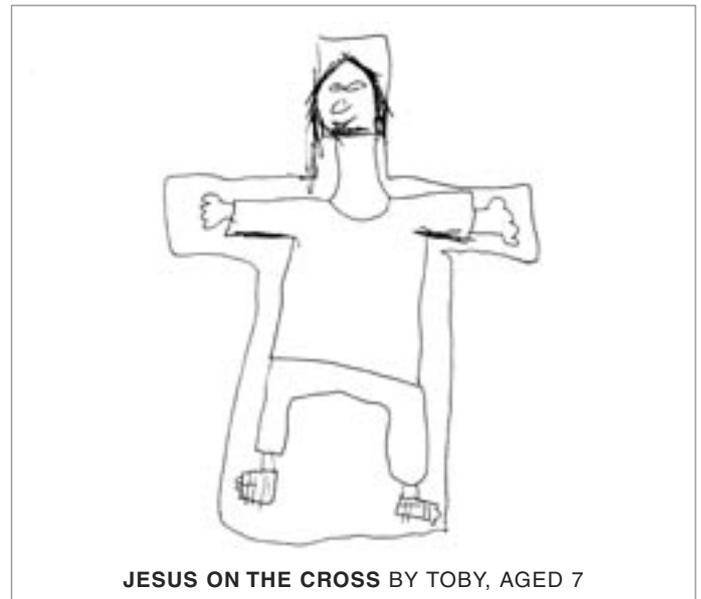
My two and a half year old niece loves church. For a while, we thought this was because of the toys she found in the crying room – until she had the experience of crèche. She is the only child in the church (apart from her 8 month old sister) and she had a lovely morning with the sole attention of two elderly women and an even greater range of toys. However, the following Sunday when discussing going to church and crèche again, she verbalised opposition. She wanted to go to 'real church'. No adult had used this term with her; it was a distinction she made herself. Her concept of church was to be not playing in a separate room, but where she can see and participate. In fact, after remaining in church for the service that week, she broke into spontaneous applause after the last hymn, and then a second time after the benediction. Not relief at the end of the service (as the minister said, tongue-in-cheek) – it was genuine appreciation and happiness. It was a reminder to me that I had reduced the importance of church to her merely to toys and adult attention, while she herself is probably starting to develop her own awareness of God and belonging.

How do we think about children and church? Over the church's history there have been numerous responses to the value of children. Probably the dominant view for well over a century was that of Augustine (354-430 AD). He focused on 'original sin' and concluded that even infants display sinful tendencies and are implanted with Adam's sin. Hence, the infant child was in great need for baptism in order that his or her damnable tendencies might be remedied. Although Augustine and other theologians (eg. John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards) focused on the child's sinfulness and original sin, their teaching and personal practice with children was often wider than damnation. They personally showed compassion and believed in children having rich spiritual lives.

► The status of a child: a model for adults

In Jesus' time, children were mostly viewed as deficient and ignorant. Children were seen as foolish, speaking nonsense and failing to think rationally. Children fell well short of the standard of the free, adult, male Roman citizen. It is worthwhile therefore examining how Jesus responded to children in his ministry and what that means for children in our churches.

Jesus' response to children turned the normal societal views of the time on their head, just as he did with outcasts and sinners. Jesus not only welcomed children, but said 'the kingdom of God belongs to such as these' and that 'anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it' (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17, NIV). Likewise Jesus used the humble status of children as a model for discipleship (Matthew 18:1-6, Mark 9:33-37 & Luke 9:46-48). After hearing the disciples discussing who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus once again turned normal concepts of prestige, social status and greatness on their head. It is not the greatest of the world who will be the greatest in heaven, but those who are least; those who are humble. What greater insight into the value of children in our churches can there be than these remarks by



JESUS ON THE CROSS BY TOBY, AGED 7

Jesus? Christ himself is the ultimate example of such humility, coming into his creation and becoming a human child and dying on the cross – it is the wonder of the Christmas and Easter stories (Philippians 2:5-11). The child-like relationship is an example of the relationship of humankind's dependence on God for salvation, not on our own strength, abilities and pride. It is this beautiful simplicity of trusting in God that is reflected in the children's song, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but He is strong.'

► Out of the mouths of babes

In Jesus' ministry, we see children expressing deep spiritual insight into his identity. The chief priests and the scribes were supposed to be the theologically astute of their day. It was they who should recognise the Messiah. However, full of scepticism and disbelief about Jesus, they are a stark contrast with the unlearned, nonsense-speaking children who recognise that Jesus is the 'Son of David' (Matthew 21:14-16). As the apostle Paul puts it, God has chosen the foolish, weak and lowly things of the world to shame the wise and strong, so that no one can boast (1 Corinthians 1:27-28).

Children can be examples to adults of spiritual truths and the reliability of God. An example from my own life comes from two young girls I used to teach at Sunday school. At the age of eight, they were challenged at school one day by some older boys who said God wasn't true, he was make-believe. These girls not only faced the boys about their beliefs, but then afterwards went and prayed for the boys that they might understand God's love for them. As the girls recounted this story I was both delighted and shocked. I was delighted to see their 'guts' for God. He was like their best friend and they were sticking up for him. I was also thrilled at their wisdom to turn to God in prayer and their

evangelistic heart for others. I was shocked because, as an adult, I didn't know if I would have done the same thing. Would I have been embarrassed about my faith, not so trusting and convinced of my God? Would I have just left the person to stay with their own perceptions and agree to disagree? There are numerous other stories of children clearly speaking about the truths of God, including biblical figures such as the young David and King Josiah.

► **Children are a blessing to the community**

Turning from Jesus' ministry, how do other biblical passages refer to children? Both those with and without children can acknowledge the great delights, rewards and benefits that children bring to fulfil our lives. The Bible speaks often of children being a great blessing. God blessed Abraham and Sarah with Isaac and promised he would have many descendants (Genesis 17:1-8). Hannah (mother of the prophet Samuel) also exclaimed the Lord's greatness in the blessings of her child (1 Samuel 2:1-10). These children did have significant purposes in the salvation plan of God, but other passages support this idea of children as a sign of blessing. Part of Job's blessing by God as a blameless and upright man was his seven sons and three daughters (Job 1:1-5 & 42:13). God gives children to the community and that is a great blessing to the community.

► **Jesus loves me – for the Bible tells me so...**

The clearest teaching on the value of children in the people of God and what inspires me to do my job every day is the repeated call through the Bible to teach children about God. In Deuteronomy 6, with the Israelites on the edge of the Promised Land, they were reminded to love the Lord, keep his commandments and 'impress them on your children' (Deuteronomy 6:5-9). When crossing the Jordan River on dry land, God commanded the Israelite leaders to take twelve stones and make a memorial so that their children may ask what the stones mean and the Israelite parents could tell them of God's care and provision (Joshua 4: 1-6). The Proverbs are full of sayings to help bring up children wisely. My own mother's favourite is: 'Train up a child in the way s/he should go, and when s/he is old s/he will not depart from it' (Proverbs 22:6). In the New Testament, Timothy's faith is attributed in part to that of his grandmother and mother, who have brought him up in the way (2 Timothy 1:5).

Throughout the Bible it is expected that children will be a part of the community of Israel and be brought up knowing and learning about their God. They are an important part of the

people of God, and being part of this community plays a vital role in children understanding their own faith. Belonging to a nurturing community, where children are taught and valued, has been demonstrated to assist children as they move to a greater awareness of Christ's sacrifice and its relevance to their lives. Often quoted, yet still relevant, is the research by the Billy Graham Foundation finding that 85% of adult church goers made a positive response to Jesus before the age of 16. Family, friends and the wider church family were a large part of this process. If this research is indicative then there should be no question about the value of children in our churches. They are extremely valuable.

Recently, a boy in my Sunday school class said: 'This is my church and I am always going to go here, even when I am big.' He may not, and he may not have a complete grasp of Jesus' death and resurrection, but he does know that he is cared for by others who love Jesus, valued, welcomed and he feels he belongs – which is an excellent start.

■ *Sarah Hobba has been involved in children's ministry for ten years in both parish and schools. She currently teaches and coordinates the curriculum development of Philosophy and Religious Studies in the Junior School at Lowther Hall AGS, Essendon. She is a member of Berwick Anglican Church where her husband, Jason, is the Assistant Curate. sarahhobba@hotmail.com*

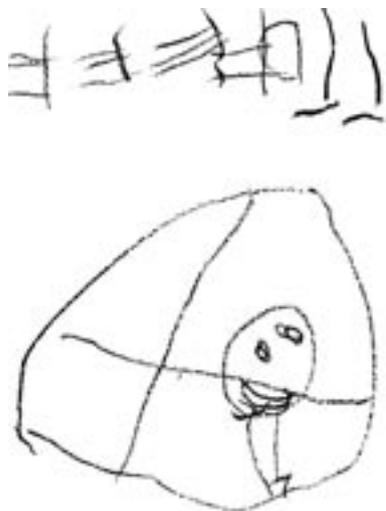
► **For more reading:**

Francis Bridger, *Children Finding Faith: Exploring a child's response to God*. Bletchly (London): Scripture Union, 2000.

Ron Buckland, *Perspectives on Children and the Gospel: excellence in ministry with children and their families*. West Gosford: Scripture Union, 2001.

Marcia Bunge (editor), *The Child in Christian Thought*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

John H. Westerhoff, III, *Will our Children Find Faith?* Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2000 (revised edition).



JESUS ON THE CROSS BY CELESTE, AGED 3
(SIGNED BY THE ARTIST)



A SCARY MONSTER AND HIS ROCKS
BY CELESTE, AGED 3

Why bother with kids?

BY KERRY KETTLEWELL

Ask any Christian woman the question 'Why do you bother working with children?' and the answers come immediately. The reasons are self-evident: Jesus told off people who found kids a bother, or they are lovely kids, or that in our church women 'do' kids and morning tea. Of course I bother with children!

Although all these things are true, I work with children because I believe that children, though young, can respond to as much as they learn of God. I long for them to know God very well, so that they can respond to Him deeply. At first they know God indirectly, loving the God of their parents and teachers. As they mature they come to understand that God offers them a personal, 'first-person' relationship. I want that understanding to come to children as soon as possible. I want to show these children all the dimensions of God's person, from His absolute holiness to the lengths to which He was prepared to go for their salvation, so that they can respond fully to God, their creator and saviour.

Our church undertakes to work with parents to teach children about the God who loved them. After 42 years getting really good at teaching adults, I now find myself working equally hard to help little children learn. I now know not to let a three-year old near a pot of paste unless I want all the little girls to end up with paste on their best Sunday dresses. I know to let mothers know when we will be painting (only on Wednesdays so they dress their children in older clothes), I carry 'wet ones' and drink safe lukewarm coffee, and I have a great time making birthday and Christmas presents 'just right' for each child.

Now something wonderful is happening while I am teaching them. They are helping God teach me. I see their trust in the Jesus they hear about and pray to. I examine God's word to be sure I understand it myself before I teach them. I enjoy the relationships they are building with each other, and the ways they help one another already – what wonderful fellow travellers they will make. I love,

also, to watch the joy in the faces of the older folk when the children make them something special, like the 'God is with me all day and all night' they made for one of the older women in hospital. How wonderful for the elderly saints of God to see how these cherished children are cherishing and growing in understanding of God and His people. If ever you get the chance, let the children of your church minister to you as you seek to serve them in some way.

■ *Kerry Kettlewell lives in Hobart, Tasmania. She attends Sandy Bay Baptist Church where she is responsible for children's ministry in the church and helps with an outreach program to one of the local primary schools.*

Conversations with a future Ishah reader

(Aged 3)

The Gospel according to Celeste

- Mum: *Celeste, can you tell me something special about Jesus?*
- Celeste: Yeah! Jesus died on the cross! He died and he died and he died and then he didn't die on the cross!
- Mum: *What do you mean he didn't die on the cross?*
- Celeste: He's all better now in his bed.
- Mum: *Why did he die? Was it for you?*
- Celeste: Yes, 'cause he is my friend and Jesus is BIGGER than me.
- Mum: *How does that make you feel?*
- Celeste: HAPPY! Yeah!

Jesus and the Monsters

- Mum: *What else do you know about Jesus?*
- Celeste: Jesus fights the monsters!
- Mum: *Really?*
- Celeste: Yes. The monsters are scared of Jesus and they laugh 'ha ha' at him. Very rude!
- Mum: *Is Jesus scared of the monsters?*
- Celeste: No. He says 'Get away from me you monsters.'

Growing children in faith

BY ANNA JOHNSON

A child's faith generally looks different from an adult's faith, but their faith is just as valuable in the kingdom of God. The expression of a child's faith is closely linked to their cognitive development, as well as the development of their personality.

During infancy, the ability to trust is developed. An infant learns that they can trust their caregiver to meet their physical and emotional needs. Trust in the caregiver is an important foundation for the later ability to trust in Jesus.

Between one and six years of age, a child's understanding of the world is filled with imagination. Fantasy and reality often merge together. As adults, this stage of cognitive development is hard to understand, because it is so different from the way we think. Children learn about the world through experience, such as play, and hearing and telling stories. A child's faith at this stage is heavily reliant on the stories that are told to them by important adults.

Around seven, children begin to think logically about things they can see and touch. Kids develop the ability to understand the concrete aspects of Christianity. There tends to be a strong focus on fairness and reciprocal justice, which can lead to an emphasis on good works to justify a relationship with Jesus.

During adolescence, kids develop their ability to think about an idea without needing to see or touch it. They're also developing their own identity, so they think about themselves a lot. Because of this, their trust in Jesus focuses on having a personal relationship with him. For instance, a 15 year old girl once stated that one of the best things about being a Christian was that you could talk to Jesus whenever you wanted to.

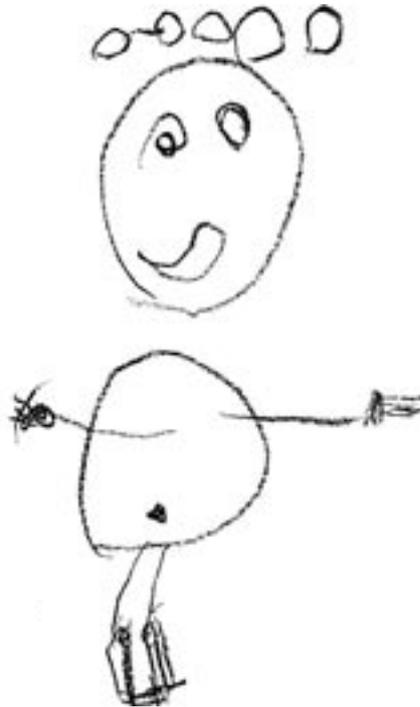
The Bible tells us that faith is a gift from God, not something we can gain through doing good works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Research can help us identify earthly things that seem to help or hinder a child's faith development, but it will never be able to tell us exactly what we need to do to be sure that our children grow up to have a saving faith. However, we do have some knowledge of what a child's faith will look like at different ages, and some things that parents and other adults can do to encourage the faith of children.

Things that help:

► **Talk about Jesus.** Young children learn through stories. Teaching children Bible stories will help them to learn about who Jesus is and the things he did. Encouraging children to learn about the world of the Bible will give them a solid foundation to build on later. Continue to talk about Jesus as they get older. Let them know how Jesus influences your life, and – particularly

when your children reach adolescence – about your personal relationship with him.

► **Live your faith.** What you do is far more powerful than what you say. If you regularly read your Bible, children will learn that you believe that what the Bible says is important. If you pray regularly, on your own and with others, children will learn that you value your relationship with Jesus, and that prayer is an effective way to communicate with God. If you prioritise spending time with other believers, such as attending church, children will learn that your faith is important to you. If you say that your faith in Christ is important, but are not obviously living it out in your actions, to children it will seem that the value of your faith is less than the value of other things. If children do not see your faith as a high priority for you, they are less likely to give faith a high priority themselves.



JESUS WITH CURLY HAIR BY CELESTE, AGED 3

► **Encourage their explorations of faith.** Be interested in what they're learning about Jesus. Make it a priority to listen to their ideas about Jesus, even if the ideas are a bit strange! I once heard a seven year old boy trying to demonstrate his understanding of the Trinity at a puppet play where the point was that Jesus is God. Every time it was said that 'Jesus is God', he would cry out, 'and Jesus is the Holy Spirit!' Emphasising the positives (that he is enthusiastic about learning more

about Jesus) rather than the negatives (that he's not quite correct) will be most encouraging, particularly as he doesn't have the cognitive capacity to fully understand a concept that is difficult for most adults to grasp!

► **Be willing to learn from them.** As adults, we can sometimes become so caught up in our adult understanding of faith that we can forget the child-like wonder of what Jesus Christ has done for us, or the intimacy of the personal relationship that we have with Christ. Be open to being reminded of these things by your children, and be willing to share in their wonder and joy as they discover Jesus Christ for themselves.

► Further Reading:

Children Finding Faith. Francis Bridger (2000).

■ Anna recently completed a Masters of Child & Family Psychology and is working as a Counsellor. She is married to Tim and has two cats. She is in the process of trying to catch up on reading all the novels she didn't get to read while studying, and is contemplating new ways to avoid cleaning the house. johnsons@bigblue.net.au

GOD HAS NOT CHANGED

BY JUDY SEARLE

R E V I E W

Too Busy Not to Pray: Slowing down to be with God Bill Hybels, Inter-Varsity Press, 1998

When I saw the title of this book, I knew I needed to read it. For years I had made excuses to myself as to why I couldn't manage a regular daily prayer time. I talked to God throughout the day, but I hadn't been seriously confessing my sins, or truly worshipping God privately. My prayer life was totally unbalanced, and nowhere near as effective as it could have been.

By the time I had read three chapters of this book, it had changed my life. I began setting aside a period each morning for prayer. Bill Hybels argues that we need to develop a spiritually healthy habit of prayer. He points out we can discipline ourselves in order to achieve goals such as getting fit, eating healthy, or saving for something. He has made a decision to exercise everyday and, because of a family history of heart disease, considers his jogging time non-negotiable;

"I don't wait until I feel like running before I jog. Let's be honest – how many days a week do I really want to do it? Not today – I need to work late. My biorhythms aren't right. It's a little chilly outside. The list is endless. When we get serious about learning to pray, it's time to make a decision: I will learn what disciplines are necessary to my prayer life, and I will practice these disciplines regularly, without fail. Maintaining good prayer habits is non-negotiable." (page 45)

I was very challenged by Chapter 3, which is titled "God is Able." We believe that God is omnipotent, don't we? God can do anything. We sing hymns about it regularly. We know it's true.

Hybels writes that whilst he had always believed this in his head it hadn't registered where it really counted, in his heart. He admitted this to God with some embarrassment, and then set about studying passages of scripture that record demonstrations of God's power over nature, circumstances, and hearts. He says, "I didn't want simply to agree with the doctrine of God's omnipotence (I already did that); I wanted to own it which is a different matter altogether." (page 37)

In order to do this, it is necessary to believe that *God has not changed*. He still has the power he had thousands of years ago, power to part seas, bring water out of solid rock, send an angel to free Peter from prison, convert Saul the persecutor into the Paul the apostle. God has not changed. We have his word on that: "I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6) and "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8)

Hybels advises, "Whatever it takes for you to own the doctrine of God's omnipotence, do it. Until you own it, you will be a faint-hearted pray-er...You won't be able to persevere in prayer until you know in your heart that God is able." (page 38)

Chapter 6 is titled "A Pattern for Prayer (A.C.T.S.)" The acronym stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. This chapter tackles the "Please God" trap, which is exactly what I was in.

For example, Hybels says that confession is "...probably the most neglected area in personal prayer today." (page 65) It certainly was for me. I never considered that I did things that were really worth confessing. He challenges us about the general prayer "Lord, forgive us all our sins." He says this approach to confession is a colossal cop-out. Sins need to be dealt with specifically, one by one. It's more painful, but it's the only way our lives will change. I admitted to God that I was overly critical towards my teenage step-daughter. Once I confessed this sin and genuinely repented, I became more conscious of controlling my tongue. I also committed myself to pray for her every day, and saw an improvement in our relationship. I know that the change in my own attitude was enough to account for that, but I believe that God has worked in her heart too.

There is a lot more I would like to tell you about this book. If you would like to make your prayer times more effective, or if you need help to get started, this book will really help you.

■ *Judy is married and has five adult children. She is a member of Lilydale Baptist Church and likes pottery, gardening and reading.*

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Why Have Children ?

BY LINDY MULHERIN

The other day, I received a letter from a friend. A successful career woman in her mid thirties, her husband was asking more insistently about starting a family. Worried by her own uncertainty, she wrote to me and asked, 'Why have children?'

Her question was on my mind for the rest of the day. As I left my youngest child at school, I prayed that he would have a good and happy day and felt a thrill of joy as he threw his arms around me with unselfconscious exuberance.

Her question was still haunting me later on, as I phoned a single friend who had been recently diagnosed with an invading cancer and was facing chemotherapy, radiation and then medication for at least five years. She longed to have children, but it was becoming unlikely.

I took my friend's question with me when I visited a young girl from our church in hospital with high blood pressure in her third pregnancy. She hadn't chosen to be

pregnant. She didn't want another child. I thought about all the other women in the large public maternity hospital with her; many of them carrying unwanted pregnancies. Living in extreme poverty, with no education, and no hope. They didn't want more children.

I thought of her question as I pictured an ageing friend with two unmarried sons, a large immaculately clean house full of silence, pining for a grandchild to love and spoil.

I couldn't answer my friend.

'I don't know.'

I wanted to tell her, 'because they're funny and cute, small and noisy, dirty and ratty and uncomplicated and energetic.'

'Because they're selfish and bouncing and we love to watch them grow and change.'

'Because they are life; they give us life as we give them life.'

'Because we see things differently when we look with the eyes of a child. We need them; to challenge our selfishness and our pride and our busy-ness. We need them to teach us as much as they need us to teach them. We grow as they grow.'

But these reasons for 'why' or 'why not' were all self focused. There had to be better reasons for my friend. And there was an answer, all the time whispering in my head. Above and beyond the 'I want' or 'I don't want'. 'Would it help my friend?' I wondered?

Because God said so. And what He says is good.

'It is good to have children'.

■ *Lindy lives in northern Argentina with her husband and three of her five sons, working with students and the Anglican church. She likes boys of all ages.*

Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF CHOCOLATE

We can learn a lot from chocolate. I have been exploring the spirituality of chocolate for a couple of years, mostly as a justification for consuming more of it!

You will notice that chocolate is often advertised as something that is tempting or even devilish. Brand names of chocolate even include the word 'wicked'. So is it true? Is chocolate itself wicked? **No:** chocolate is part of the creation which God describes in Genesis as 'good'.

Why is chocolate good?

Firstly there's the taste: it is the world's most popular flavour.

Secondly there are the chemicals. Chocolate is made up of more than 300 different chemicals, including caffeine, which explains the kick that chocolate gives you. Like coffee, or Coke, chocolate is a stimulant and gives you a boost of energy. Also it has been discovered that chocolate contains phenylethylamine, which is related to amphetamines. Chocolate stimulates a certain area of our brains which gives us a general feeling of wellbeing and happiness.

To top it all off, chocolate contains antioxidants, which prevent fat from oxidising and clogging arteries, thereby reducing heart disease.

So what's the problem?

When we are tempted by something we often blame the object. Something good can become a temptation when we have it, but it doesn't satisfy. We end up wanting more. We are using it to fill a need it was never designed to fill.

Sometimes we crave chocolate when we are depressed, or stressed. If we keep wanting more we should be asking ourselves: What need am I trying to fulfil? If it's loneliness, or low self-esteem, then chocolate will never satisfy. If it's hunger or a sugar-hit, then go for it! Temptation can be our friend, if we use it as a signal to look deeper inside.

■ *Kara Martin is a mother of two; director of a boutique Bible college; lecturer on the spirituality of friendship and a history of Christian spirituality; her past lives include TV journalism and management consultant. You can contact her at kara.martin.socs@rmc.nsw.edu.au*

