

# BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #10: THE “TRAIN UP A CHILD” PROBLEM



By John Temples

A young man sold Bibles one summer to make money for college. The Bibles he sold had a concordance--a feature that lets readers look up passages by key words. To demonstrate the feature, the young man would offer to look up passages. He said *the passage most often requested* was Proverbs 22:6. People would say to him, “I want to make sure I am reading that verse right, because it sure doesn’t seem to work out right in real life.”

Here is Proverbs 22:6 two ways:

- The way it reads in most Bibles: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”
- The way many people **think** it reads: “Teach your child the true religion, and when he reaches adulthood, he will never leave the church.”

We have a problem with Proverbs 22:6, because probably every one of us can name a person--maybe even our own child--who was taught the truth in childhood, but later left God and the church.

Perhaps the most striking example of this tragic situation is the man who wrote these words, Solomon. He was the son of David and, in his early years, a tenderhearted servant of God. But in his old age, he forsook God and served idols. 1 Kings 11:4 says, “For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David.” And to double the irony, the wise man Solomon’s son Rehoboam turned out to be a fool.

Many parents have grieved and suffered heartbreak and guilt because their children went astray. These parents cry, “It’s our fault; we have failed, because Proverbs 22:6 says if we train our children right, they will never leave the faith.”

There are two problems with this.

*First, if Proverbs 22:6 means what the prevailing view says it means, you have the Bible contradicting itself and teaching the impossibility of falling from grace. That is Calvinism, a false doctrine.*

*Second, this view of Proverbs 22:6 fails to take into account the free moral agency of every child. God grants us freedom of choice, and He jealously guards that freedom. He does not force anyone to be a member of His family. Parents can provide guidance, love, example, and correction, but a child can reject it. The Bible is full of accounts of godly parents whose children turned out to be *rotters* (such as Cain, Ham, Esau, and the prodigal son). And sadly, our own experiences mirror this reality. Whatever Proverbs 22:6 means, its meaning must harmonize with the ironclad principle of free moral agency taught throughout Scripture.*

WHY IS THERE SUCH A WIDE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN WHAT PROVERBS 22:6 SAYS AND WHAT WE SEE IN REAL LIFE?

Here are some ways people have tried to explain it:

- “If a child goes astray, it’s the parents’ fault; they didn’t raise them right.”
- “Proverbs 22:6 is just a saying; it’s true generally (well, occasionally), but it doesn’t always work.”
- “Proverbs 22:6 is just Solomon’s opinion or observation, not inspired, invariable truth.”

None of these, I believe, is true.

The truth is this: we are misreading Proverbs 22:6, and it’s not our fault--it’s the fault of Bible translators. They’ve been mistranslating the passage for years, and for some reason they continue to do so, even in most modern versions.

To begin with, scholars are agreed that the word “should” is not in the original Hebrew text. Instead of “train up a child in the way he SHOULD go,” a more accurate literal translation would be “train up a child ACCORDING TO HIS WAY.”

And just what is that “way”? Not the way of truth, as many people understand it (although such training is good and necessary); but rather, the child’s “way” of doing and perceiving things. In our modern vernacular, we would say, “as he is wired.”

Here is brother Guy N. Woods’ explanation: “The phrase, ‘in the way he should go,’ is often misapplied. The assumption is that it means ‘in the way of righteousness and the true religion’—a course which all, both young and old, ought to follow—but this is not what Solomon meant here. The Hebrew phrase from which the words ‘in the way he should go’ come, means ‘according to the tenor of his way’—that is, in harmony with his disposition, his natural talents, and his individual character. Taught here is the obligation of parents to study the nature and disposition of their children and to train them accordingly....Instead of giving all the emphasis to a rigorous standard to be applied indiscriminately, each child’s temperament is to be closely considered and the teaching is to be done so as to achieve the greatest possible adaptation to the child’s need.” (“Questions And Answers, Open Forum, Freed-Hardeman College Lectures” (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman College, 1976)

The Ryrie Study Bible footnote on this verse says that “according to his way” means “in harmony with the child’s habits and interests.”

Here is still another explanation: “...[T]he term “way” refers to a *characteristic manner*. We are to train a child according to his or her characteristic manner. Some will be artistic, others athletic, and still others academic. One may be strong-willed, and another compliant. One child can be encouraged by rewards or recognition, while another couldn’t care less....[S]tudy your children by developing an intimate relationship with each one. Help each child discover his or her road—the path he or she was created to follow. Then ask God to help you make the most of *your child’s natural tendencies* so that he or she can live in harmony with God’s design.”

(<https://www.insight.org/resources/article-library/individual/a-better-way-to-train-up-a-child>)

Children come in many different flavors. By *flavor* I mean personality, temperament, nature, character, makeup, bent, bias, inclination, capacity for learning, and way of thinking. Some kids are no-nonsense, action-oriented, assertive; others are passive, delicate, and tender. Solomon is saying, “If you are a wise parent, you will study your child’s individual temperament and adapt your training in harmony with that temperament.” And when your child is older, he will not change his temperament or way of making decisions and dealing with life. (We often describe older people as “set in their ways”--but those “ways” were ingrained in them long before adulthood.)

So when Solomon said “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it,” he did not mean that it is impossible for a child brought up in God’s way to leave the truth--it happens all the time. Rather, it means that as a parent, you should tailor your training to each child’s personality, disposition, learning style, and way of making decisions. THAT they will not depart from later in life.

One final quote, which hopefully will ease some of the pain of parents: “If your conscience is clear before the Lord, we'd encourage you to take heart and stop blaming yourself for the mistakes of your children. You can't make their decisions for them or control their relationship with God. If they have rebelled against you and rejected your faith in spite of your best efforts to defuse their hostile attitude and behavior, try to take some comfort in the thought that you've been faithful to your responsibilities and obligations as a parent. Bear in mind, too, that the final chapter of their story has yet to be written.”

<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-q-and-a/parenting/parent-disillusioned-by-train-up-a-child-in-the-way-he-should-go>

--John Temples