

# Christ-Centered Coming of Age Celebrations



**Hal &  
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Hal and Melanie Young

## COMING-OF-AGE CEREMONIES

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## **Contents**

1. The Value of a Ceremony
2. What Kind of Ceremony?
3. What Advice Would You Give A  
Young Man?
4. Celebration is Part of the Day, Too!
5. Final Thoughts
6. Planning and Templates





# The Value of A Ceremony

**People often ask as to describe what we do for a coming-of-age ceremony with our boys.** Surely with six boys we've done something of the sort? ... and the answer would be, "Yes, indeed!"

You've probably heard of the Jewish "*Bar Mitzvah*" tradition – where a Jewish boy is officially welcomed to adult status in the synagogue and the community. The term means "Son of the Law" so technically, it's the *person* who's the "*bar mitzvah*," not the ceremony. But at that time, the young man is invited to play a part in the synagogue meetings, counts as one of the men for the *minyan* or synagogue quorum, and is responsible for his own faithfulness towards God.

We think there's some value to this. Psychologists Joseph and Claudia Allen, in their book *Escaping the Endless Adolescence*,<sup>1</sup> relate that many in their field are saying that the time of adolescence now continues into the early thirties, and **"Twenty-five is the new fifteen."** Sadly, the level of maturity we used to see in teenagers is all that is expected of twenty-somethings today.

Instead of accepting this declining cultural norm, we thought it made better sense to call our sons to step up for more adult responsibility rather than settle back for an extended childhood mentality. Where the Bible speaks about "youth" and "youthfulness," it often describes adult roles in the same context – the giant Goliath was ***a man of war from his youth***<sup>2</sup>, men are encouraged to rejoice in ***the wife of your youth***<sup>3</sup>, God

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1 Allen, Joseph and Claudia. *Escaping the Endless Adolescence: How We Can Help Our Teenagers Grow Up Before They Grow Old*. New York: Ballentine Books, 2009.

2 1 Samuel 17:33

3 Proverbs 5:18

blesses ***the children of one's youth***<sup>4</sup>, and a missionary pastor in a pagan culture – Timothy – is counseled to ***let no one look down on your youthfulness***<sup>5</sup>. Being youthful doesn't mean being childish and irresponsible (though there are examples of that in Scripture, too), but rather youthfulness in the Bible is a time extending well into young adulthood – including adult roles.

**So when our sons turn 13, we hold a ceremonial welcome to young adulthood, and throw a celebration alongside.**

Just like the *bar mitzvah* tradition, it's a time both serious and joyful. However, as Christians we *are not under law but under grace*,<sup>6</sup> and since we hope that our sons are growing in the knowledge and experience of God's grace, we call our celebration a “*Bar Chanon*”, or “Son of Grace” ceremony.

**In keeping with that recognition of grace, not law, we have to interject here that there is no commandment to have such an observance.** The Bible mentions at times that there are milestones in life and suggests that at some point, a young man should be respected as an adult and expected to take on adult responsibility. But whether or not you observe this transition in a formal way, or how you observe it, you're at liberty ... and if you decide to do something to mark the occasion, you can include all kinds of things in your celebration!

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4 Psalm 127:4

5 1 Timothy 4:12 (NASB)

6 Romans 6:14

# What Kind of Ceremony?

Some of the earliest questions to answer are **what kind of ceremony do you want to have ... and therefore, who to invite?** Since we're totally at liberty about this, we have both the freedom and the responsibility to consider this question for ourselves.

**Many cultures around the world have initiation rituals. designed for the men of the family and tribe.** The elders will take the young man (or groups of them) away from the home community and conduct their ceremonies in a male-only environment. After all, the focus is on the transition from boyhood to manhood; what is more natural than surrounding the young candidate with the men who represent the world he's about to enter?

**Some families we know make it more intimate, where Dad will take his son away for a one-on-one retreat.** This can take widely different forms. One father we know works in upper levels of corporate management; for his sons, the event is a trip to an upscale, out-of-town hotel, much like the world the father experiences in his work life. On this business trip, the only business is that of father and son.

Another friend goes the opposite direction. This father takes his sons camping in a wilderness area where they canoe, hike, and explore the natural world between times of discussion and prayer. In their view, it's like Jesus bringing His disciples out to a remote area for the same kind of intense fellowship between the Teacher, the disciple, and their God.

**We take a different approach: it's a family occasion.** Sure, we invite the men of our family and church to bring a message and welcome to the young man at the center, but we invite all



ages and generations to come to the event. It's important to us to make a public statement of the new expectations being assumed by this young man, and make a public announcement of the change in status we are now conferring. Though he'll always be one of our "boys," we won't be counting him among the "little ones" and "kids." We want others to hold him (and us) to account, and encourage him to embrace his new role. We want everyone to recognize the change in status.

# What Advice Would You Give A Young Man?

One of the things we want our young men to take away from the ceremony is that higher expectations aren't just their parents' notion – it's common to growing into maturity. It's powerful for them to hear wisdom from many people, not just Mom and Dad, and especially when you hear the same truths your parents have taught, echoed in the words of people across the community.

**The way you present those voices can take whatever form you like.** What suits your sense of style or propriety?

**Some families adopt symbolic rituals** like nobles used to confer knighthood on a squire—even administering the traditional accolade with a long sword, which is then presented to the young man. (Historically, knighthood was sometimes conferred by the monarch approaching the candidate and soundly boxing his ears. We don't recommend this practice!)

**Others assign their sons long periods of preparation and study**, challenging them to memorize passages of Scripture or catechisms, or to prepare a speech or message to deliver at the ceremony.

**We use a less elaborate form**, focusing on words of welcome, exhortation, and encouragement to the young man. In our ceremony, we invite several men of significance in the boy's life to prepare short presentations about what it means to be a man. These will each focus on a character trait and some point of wisdom which the speaker has learned. We encourage the men we invite to think, **“What do you wish you had known when you were 13?”**

We also encourage the men to bring an inexpensive gift as an object lesson to illustrate their point. This can be a lot of fun for all concerned. Some examples we've seen:

= A small pair of binoculars like a hunter would use to spot and identify his quarry. The lesson was that a man should be visionary, looking to the road ahead, and seeking counselors to help him understand things he hasn't seen himself.

= An antique carpenter's plane, from a relative's collection of handmade tools. The lesson was how a man's gifts and skills can be used constructively, to build and to beautify useful objects, but the same skills can be abused and turned into destructive ends.

= A folding multi-tool. A man should be prepared for all kinds of situations!

In our family, the culminating presentation is always given by Hal, encouraging our son to be a faithful student of God's word, looking to the Bible for God's wisdom and direction in every part of life. The gift here is much more substantial—a leather-bound study Bible of the sort both parents have used for years. This actually is a follow up to an earlier gift – when each of our children has learned to read, we celebrated *that* achievement with a large-print presentation Bible of their own. The inexpensive Bible we give them at age 6 or 7 recognizes that young children can be pretty careless with their belongings; by the time they're 13, the old Bible is pretty worn, and a high-quality replacement has double meaning to them!

# Who Does The Speaking?

We think it's only natural for the young man to be welcomed into the adult community by the voices of the older men he will be joining. When it's time for our daughters to step into the ranks of young women, we'll have a similar focus on older women teaching the younger.<sup>7</sup> Which men should you consider including?

The men we invite to take part are men who have some connection and significance in the young man's life already. Obviously, we include Hal, the father, as the closest man and role model in their life. From there, you can include grandfathers, uncles, men and leaders in the church, and others like parents of friends, coaches, or teachers outside the immediate family.

**What about family members who don't share your convictions?** It may be hard on family relationships if certain people were excluded, but what if inviting them makes a mockery of the occasion?

If you're in that situation, **we'd encourage you to consider including them anyway.** We learned this early in our marriage – in fact, at our wedding. We had a very Christ-centered ceremony, and one of the extended family members who came was an militant atheist. To our surprise, he volunteered for a key position and helped out the whole weekend – and we caught him on the video, singing the hymns with gusto. We've seen on many occasions that **people often respond to the tone of a ceremony**, even if you wouldn't expect it from their daily life.

**One thing which will make them comfortable in the**

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7 Titus 2:4-5

**unfamiliar situation is to schedule their presentation late in the ceremony.** They'll be able to observe the tone of the earlier speakers' remarks, and adjust their own to be in keeping with the flow of the ceremony. They'll also have a feel for how long to speak, and how to pace their remarks. Generally, we think, people will grasp the seriousness you place on the event, and try not to become the awkward part of the day.

**It also helps to remember that the experience of growing up and assuming the role of manhood is not exclusive to any faith, culture, or philosophy.** Someone whose personal code is quite at odds with your own may still share useful experience about the value of integrity, diligence, work-life balance, health, or financial management. Even someone with a broken relationship in his past may have some hard-won lessons to share. If you have reason for concern, you might phrase your invitation as a request to share on a particular subject: "Uncle Bob, I've always admired the hard work you put in to pay your way through college. Would you be willing to share a few thoughts on the benefits of going the extra length to stay out of debt?"

**What if a generation is missing?** Both our fathers passed away before we were married, so there were no grandfathers to invite for our sons' *Bar Chanons*. Instead, we asked our mothers to speak as representatives of the family's older generation. We have been blessed with their contribution to the ceremony!

**One surprise blessing was including older brothers in the mix.** Our sons are all close in age and affection, and the older ones have been delighted to share even their few years' perspective with their younger brother. As parents, you can help an uneasy speaker with his preparation, too.

# Celebration is Part of the Day, Too!

At our sons' coming-of-age ceremonies, we want to gather the wisdom of significant men in the young man's life and offer encouragement, welcome, and exhortation in a public, family-oriented setting.

**But it's not all teaching and ritual.** Another thing we do is invite our guests to rejoice in this time of growth. Our family's birthday celebrations are small affairs (as small as you can get with a family of ten plus some grandparents!), but this party is a big one we plan for months and years in advance!

**The form of the entertainment, just like the form of the ceremony, is entirely up to you.** We let the young man do most of the planning (with advice and consent of the parents) for location, activities, and food. It has been interesting to see how the event reflects the young man:

= One son hosted a hymn sing

= Another asked for a simple time of unstructured fellowship with friends and their families

= Another son who enjoyed the games of Ultimate Frisbee he played with the young adults after church, asked to organize the biggest game of Ultimate he could imagine (over sixty players took part, in the area of three soccer fields)

= Yet another worked with friends in the country to hold a turkey shoot on their rural property.

(If you're not familiar with this custom, it's a traditional target shooting competition still common in the South. The Cary Grant movie *Sergeant York* illustrated the old-fashioned form using a live turkey; we followed the modern custom using



paper targets and awarded a Walmart gift card!)

**For location,** we've used the church fellowship hall, a friend's back yard, our own home, or a city park.

**For food,** you could do anything from simple punch and cake, to a catered sit-down dinner. We've had buffet style (even pot luck) dinners, but discovered that a cook-out format works well with our full-family invitation; the expense is manageable, it's easy to ask guests to bring side dishes, desserts, or beverages, and the usual outdoor venue makes cleanup easy and spills no problem.

**We have also found it works well to have the activities first, then the meal time, and then the ceremony.** The meal or refreshment preparation can take place in the background while the younger guests, especially, have more interesting things to do (and therefore, there's less crowding while the helpers are setting up the food). As the food wraps up, we move to the ceremonial part with the presentations, then close with prayer. The early busyness followed by food helps the little ones work off some energy and then settle down in time for the quieter part of the program.

# Some Final Observations

In this booklet, we've talked about why **a formal "coming of age" ceremony can be useful in a modern Christian family.** We discussed ideas about who to invite, who to have as a presenter, and what sort of presentation to have. Last, we talked about the role of celebration—what sort of entertainment and fellowship you might include. After all, the event is not all solemnity and teaching—it's rejoicing at our son's next step toward maturity!

At the end of the day, though, **the whole point of the ceremony is not just a special event for a day or a weekend—it's a milestone along a pathway to independent adulthood.** And guess what—this is where the parents really get to shine.

The reason we have this celebration, after all, is to make a statement to the public and to our own family that our son has entered a new stage of his life. That means things will be different for him from now on ... and now it's the parent's responsibility to start making that a reality.

**We know that maturity doesn't happen with the 18th birthday,** or the 21st, or the 13th. It's a process of training, growth, and correction we call "growing up"! And it takes time and effort.

**The Bible talks about this period in many places as "youth," but not like we think of youths.** In our churches and homes, we often think of "youth" as "the older kids," emphasis on "*kids*." And the Biblical pattern does show that young men in the stage of "youthfulness" still need mentoring, teaching, or coaching, if you will.

Yet there are many examples that show young men still in their Biblical youth or youthfulness who were husbands, fathers, missionary pastors, church planters, warriors, and kings. **Youth is not childhood, it's the younger stage of adulthood.**

**So how to we recognize this on a day-to-day basis?**

There are many small ways we can recognize this change. To begin with, **don't group your young adult son with "the kids" or "the boys" or "the little ones" any more.** There is a definite break in our home between younger and older siblings. We let our older sons stay up later, we give them more independence or at least more input into their daily plans, and they go more places without their parents. If your Thanksgiving dinner has a "grown up" table and a separate table for "the kids," this year is a good time to move your youngest adult up in the seating!

**At the same time, we start to change our parenting style from *direction* to *advice*.** Your seven-year-old really needs a "benevolent dictator" to keep him on course and out of trouble. Your adult son needs a "trusted advisor" to help him think through decisions as he makes his plans—but he'll need to take responsibility for his final decisions and be willing to accept the consequences. The teen-aged years are our time of transition and training.

**Transition means gradual change, and sometimes you'll have to repeat some things.** We found we have to be both patient and persistent with our young adults. Even grown ups sometimes act childish—self-centered, demanding, thoughtless. We shouldn't expect our young adults to be better behaved than we their parents! But we found that as we made this transition in our parenting, we stopped thinking, "Don't do that - you're embarrassing me!" and more often thought, "Don't do that - you'll embarrass *yourself*!"

Remember this period of training will touch every aspect of their lives—spiritual, academic, social, work-related—and make the most of it!

We hope you've enjoyed this glimpse into what we and our friends do to welcome our sons into the pathways of maturity. As we've walked down this road with each of our six sons, we find that this gateway event helps us focus on the change in our parenting relationship, and it helps our sons embrace the transition they will be making as they step into full independence just a few short years later. Maybe a formal recognition of this sort will do the same things in your family!

# PLANNING and TEMPLATES

# Invitations

Invitations to your Coming of Age celebration can be simple or formal. They can be emailed, hand delivered, posted online or sent through the Post Office. They all need to include the same things: the occasion, the host, the honoree (that's your new young adult), and the date, time, and place.

We like using formal language to help people understand that this is an event that is important to us. This is the sort of language we use:

<p>Mr. &amp; Mrs. John Q. Public</p> <p>Request the Pleasure of Your Company And That of Your Family At the Bar Chanon of Their Son</p> <p>Jason Quincy Public</p> <p>On June 4, 2016 At 3pm At Centennial Park Smalltown, Ohio</p> <p>The Favor of a Reply is Requested.</p>
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Formal invitations often include the acronym *RSVP* for "*Répondez, s'il vous plaît*," -- "Reply, please" in French. We prefer to write that out in English since so few people seem to understand that *RSVP* requires a response anymore!



**We like to try to make the invitations personalized for each of our children.** This one recalled a fun memory from when we had all boys. Whenever it was time to leave, we'd call them with an old cavalry command, "Boots and saddles!", meaning "Get your shoes and get in the van!" We used a painting reflecting that family tradition.



Mr. and Mrs. W. Harral Young, III  
Request the Honor of Your Presence  
At the  
Bar Chanon Ceremony  
of Their Son

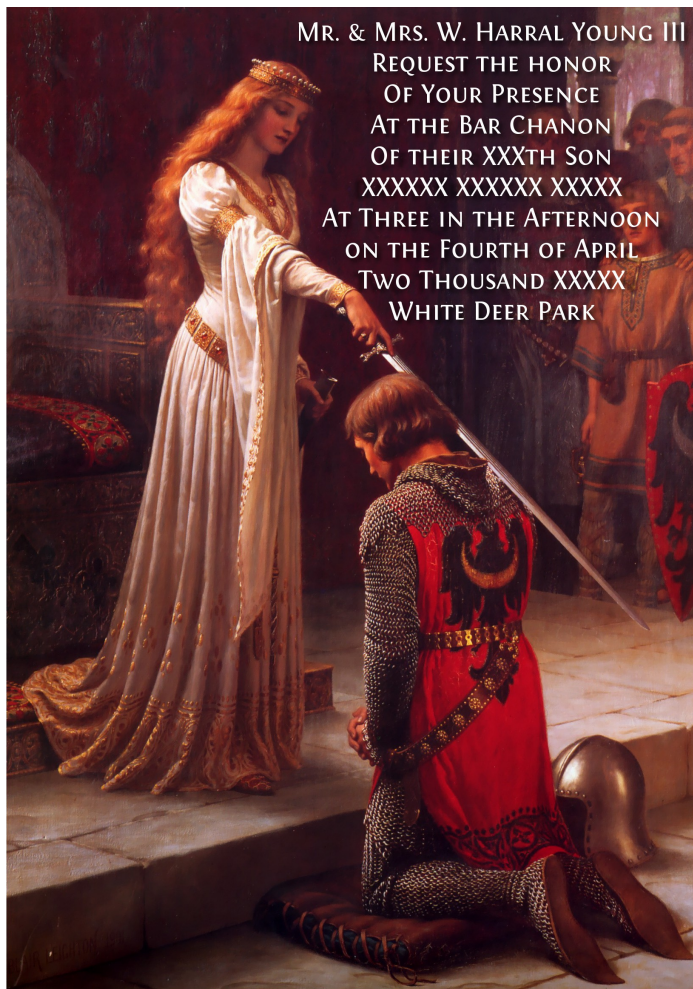
At Four in the Afternoon  
On His Thirteenth Birthday  
Sunday, [REDACTED]  
At the VFW Post on Rose Street  
In Smithfield, North Carolina

The favor of a reply is requested.

Another son loved raptors. We wanted to create an invitation that he would love; this is a more contemporary style.



Another son loved knights and medieval things. He wanted something with an air of chivalry, so for the background of his invitation, we used an old painting of a knight receiving his accolade.



You can use any photo editing program to add text to an image. We use a free program called GIMP; you can use Adobe Photoshop, Microsoft Paint, or any graphic program.

Your invitations might be more casually worded or look very different than ours. That's okay. This is not an event that is required by the Word of God – we have the liberty to do it any way we like.

# Explanations

Most people won't understand exactly what they have been invited to! We include a brief (well, brief for us) explanation of what we have in mind when we send the invitation.

**Here's what we send.** You are welcome to use it for your own family's celebrations. It may not be otherwise reproduced or sold and if you post something containing it online, it must be credited to this book and linked to our site.

Dear Friends,

Our son, \_\_\_\_\_ (has just celebrated / will soon celebrate) his thirteenth birthday. We believe it is important to establish milestones in the life of a young man, and this year is a time traditionally recognized as the threshold of adult life. We are planning to set aside a time of celebration and reflection to mark this as a special day in his life. We would like to invite your family to join with ours on this occasion, to share a meal, fellowship, and a time of challenge and encouragement for \_\_\_\_\_.

The Jewish *bar mitzvah* ceremony calls a boy to begin the transformation from childhood to maturity, becoming a "son of the Law". Since we are not under the law of Moses but the grace of Christ, our family desires each of our boys to become a "son of grace" – *bar chanon* – with the similar expectation that he begin to put away childish things, prepare himself for the responsibilities of manhood, and pursue his own relationship to God. Doing an event like this certainly isn't in any way required, but we believe it will have a

big impact on our son and become a cherished memory.

As a part of this celebration, we would appreciate it if the men of each family (and his older brothers and grandmothers) would prepare a short exhortation for \_\_\_\_, and if you wish, a small gift as an object lesson and memorial to him. Consider what you wish someone would have told you as you embarked on young manhood. One example might be the responsibility of a man to use his strength and diligence to work, build, and provide for himself and his family, but also warning that his strength can be misused to injure and destroy. It is only in conscious submission to the will of God that a man will be productive in His kingdom. An object lesson might involve a hammer or some other tool.

We don't want this to be a burden to anyone—two to five minutes of sharing, and nothing expensive or elaborate necessary—because the focus is on your wisdom and counsel. Each of you has been a friend to our family and to \_\_\_\_\_, and we appreciate your advice for our son.

For our friends and family who are too far away to join us, we would love to have something from you to read aloud to \_\_\_\_\_ at the party. Please email us anything you'd like to share with him.

For those that can attend, we'll be (grilling hamburgers and hot dogs). If you'd like to bring a side dish and a drink, that would be great! Dress is casual. Please take a look at the attached invitation for details and let us know as soon as possible if you will be able to attend so that we can plan the food. You can easily reply to our invitation here: <Link to Google Form>

In Christ,  
(signed)



## Keeping Track of Guests

We used a Google Form that allows people to input how many people they are bringing of what ages and what food items they are bringing, too. That allows us to plan how much food to buy and how many paper products we'll need. We've put together a editable form for you here:

<http://goo.gl/forms/6p8JWCjgJP>

Be sure to click the three dots in the upper right hand corner and **Save a Copy** so that you are not inputting your information into the form everyone can see!

**Make sure your invitation goes out early enough that people can save the date and you have a good turnout.** We often fail to plan things soon enough and it makes them harder to pull off. We suggest getting invitations out at least a month in advance.

## **CHECK OUT OUR OTHER RESOURCES ONLINE!**

Our conference workshops can be ordered online for immediate download, from our website:

**[RaisingRealMen.com/workshops](http://RaisingRealMen.com/workshops)**

If you find this booklet helpful, you might also enjoy these:

### **“Skipping Adolescence”**

Do you have a pre-teen son? Are you looking forward to the teen years ... with fear and dismay?

Or do you have a vision for something more than a sullen, rebellious, hormone-driven slacker?

We don't accept the conventional idea that all teenagers are simply doomed to be trouble at home and brainless abroad. This workshop session talks about creating and building a new vision for young adulthood - from recognizing the transition from childhood to something more, to dealing with low expectations, cultivating a standard of excellence, and drawing out the young man in your teenaged son.

### **“Parenting Pre-Teens”**

It comes as a surprise, but the years from 9 to 12 can be some of the most challenging of all. Long before peach fuzz or body changes, you have to cope with distractedness, tears, outbursts of anger and the "Nobody loves me" blues, but somebody's got to be the adult around here. Learn how to survive, and make the teen years great!

## **“Teaching Discernment”**

No matter how much we avoid it, we're surrounded by the messages of media, from our computers to songs on the radio. Learn how to teach your children discernment, protect them from being manipulated by the messages around them, and instead to engage their culture for Christ.

## **“Passing The Baton”**

It makes no sense to pour our lives into homeschooling, only to stumble at the finish line. We've got to pass the baton of Christian adulthood to our children and it can't happen overnight. Hal and Melanie talk about this critical time in our children's lives and how to transition from the benevolent dictator our 11-year-olds need, to the trusted advisor of our adult children. Let's all finish well and prepare our sons and daughters to be servants of the Most High, even when we can't make them any more!

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We hope you've enjoyed this ebook. Watch your email for a special discount on the print edition and our upcoming book on parenting pre-teens! Thank you for supporting our ministry.

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