

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

5 THINGS JESUS WANTS YOU TO 'C' IN CHILDREN'S MINISTRIES

A TERM PAPER SUBMITTED TO DR. BILLIE DAVIS

FOR THE DEGREE REQUIREMENTS OF A

MASTERS IN CHURCH MINISTRIES

CEE 640 SPECIALIZED STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

BY

DICK GRUBER

JUNE 25, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Charles Spurgeon once said, “Children need the gospel, the whole gospel, the unadulterated gospel; they ought to have it, and if they are taught of the Spirit of God they are as capable of receiving it as persons of ripe years.”¹ I believe Charles Spurgeon.

I am Dick Gruber. I have been directly involved in bringing this Gospel to children since March of 1975. I have served as a helper, leader, children’s pastor, daddy, consultant and now the Children’s Ministries Specialist at Valley Forge Christian College in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.

Over the years I have studied various aspects of children’s ministry and have developed this paper to enhance your understanding of this vital ministry in our dying world. George Barna writes, “The world is becoming more complex, but kids maintain the same basic needs as they have for decades: to be trusted, to be loved, to feel safe and to identify a significant purpose in life.”² I believe that Church and more specifically, the Christian family in cooperation with the Church is the God-ordained agency for meeting the needs of children.

In this paper, I will show the reader five concepts which need to be in place in order for effective children’s ministry to unfold. The 5 things Jesus wants you to see in children’s ministries are: calling, care, communication, cultivation, and cooperation. You will discover that each of these springs from a Biblical mandate. Church leadership desires a balanced growing ministry to boys and girls. The implementation of these five concepts can bring that goal to fruition.

Jesus loves the little children. He always has and always will love them. I believe that the closer a true believer comes to our resurrected Lord, the more that believer will have a love

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Come Ye Children* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publishing, n.d.).

² George Barna, *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003).

for children. That love, when transferred to service in the church will do much to bring boys and girls to the Lord. That love, coupled with these five principles will break down strongholds and release children and families into new life and ministry in Jesus.

CALLING

Colossians 1:29 reads, “To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”³ Like Paul, we each have a calling. This calling translates into compassionate labor for His Kingdom. My calling is to reach, teach, and disciple children. It is a very personal and very real calling. The Church is also called to children in a very real and very personal way. Throughout Scripture, God’s people are commanded, encouraged, and exhorted to teach the children. In Psalm 78 the writer admonishes God’s people to teach the children. Verse 8 reads, “We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.”⁴ The Psalmist goes on for several more verse giving good reason for this kind of training. We find in verse 7 the ultimate reason that children need to learn of God. It says, “Then they would put their trust in God.”

I find it interesting that this communal calling is encouraged throughout the Old Testament and that within it we find a Scriptural presupposition concerning children. The Old Testament believer assumed that children could understand and put their trust in God. Jesus reinforced this concept through his teachings in Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:13-16, and in Matthew

³ *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Wheaton, IL: International Bible Society, 1973).

⁴ *Ibid.*

11:25 where he says, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.”⁵

We cannot ignore the Biblical calling to reach and instruct children. One of my students, Jennifer served as a children’s pastor while in college at a local church. One week a little girl, Maria, from her church was rushed to children’s hospital. She was having severe headaches and non-stop convulsions. Jen prayed with her Wednesday night crowd for little Maria. Maria was healed at the instant the children’s group prayed. Jennifer called me on Thursday morning and said, “Now I know that children’s ministries is more than just snack time and puppets.” Jennifer had begun to understand the calling.

A church that understands the calling will provide finances, people, and other resources to winning and discipling children. The church must value children because Jesus values children. It is part of my calling as a children’s leader to cast the vision of this important ministry into the waters of church normalcy.

CARE

When Jesus admonished his followers to “let the children come,” he showed Godly motivation acted out through human kindness. We must care for the little ones. The act of caring comes easily for the children’s pastor for he or she feels a divine empowerment to care for the little ones. The church however must be nurtured into caring for the children.

Lois Lebar wrote, “Whereas many adults must be compelled to come to Christ, the children are eager to come if only we adults get out of their way and let them come”⁶ we must care enough about the children to get out of their way. We are so busy sometimes dragging,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lois Lebar, *Children in the Bible School* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell Company, 1952).

coercing, scaring, or pushing children towards Jesus that our very actions are driving them away. We must let the children come through loving nurture and age-appropriate language and lessons. Charles Spurgeon describes the kind of caring needed to win a child when he says, “Here then is the secret. You must impart to the young your own soul; you must feel as if the ruin of that child would be your own ruin.”⁷ Let us as a church begin to care for the children as if each little one was our own.

Joe taught our three-year-olds class in Salem, Oregon. He cared for his flock of three-year-olds as a shepherd for his flock. Joe had at least five other adult workers by his side each Sunday. Each worker was hand-picked and trained by Joe. In the three years I served at that church I witnessed grade school, high school, and even college age people approach Joe for prayer. He had pastured the three-year-olds for seventeen years. He cared so much about his kids that they knew they could come to him anytime for prayer and encouragement. That kind of connection is needed in our fragmented world. Joe’s caring attitude was played out in his faithfulness to that age level class and all who passed through it. Joe was living out what Lawrence Richards wrote about when saying, “Those who care about children will make a deeper commitment and provide long-term relationships and endless love that make faith community God’s unique context for His kind of ministry with boys and girls.”⁸

COMMUNICATION

A great part of our task as children’s leaders is to communicate. We communicate the gospel to children, the calling to parents, the vision to the church. All we do is communication. In my first children’s pastorate after about three months in the ministry I stormed into my pastor’s office. I shouted, “I can’t get any work done! People keep interrupting me!” My pastor

⁷ Spurgeon, *Come Ye Children*.

⁸ Lawrence Richards, *A Theology of Children's Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983).

smiled and calmly said, “Your work is people.” It is tough to work with people if you lack communication skills.

We communicate the gospel to children. In 1948, Frank Coleman wrote, “No child should be left to grow up in our world of unbelief and flagrant sin without his having heard the Gospel with persuasive invitation to believe it and accept its salvation.”⁹ We must communicate the need for salvation to boys and girls. Communication implies that we understand the child’s ability to understand. We take into consideration the needs of the child, his stage of development, and his environment. I cannot preach the Gospel the same way to an inner city five-year-old as I do to a rural eleven-year-old. A child who is physically hungry must have that need met before he can comprehend the spiritual significance of Jesus’ death on his behalf.

1 Thessalonians 2:8 states, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.”¹⁰ Children often catch more of what we live than what we, as a church say. The church of today must approach children’s work as a life-communication ministry. The sharing of a life will perpetuate the feelings of family, belonging, and importance that a child needs.

We communicate to parents. Post-modern parents need to take a leading role in the Christian education of their children. “Let no Christian parents fall into the delusion that the Sunday school is intended to ease them of their personal duties.”¹¹ Parents are the primary Christian educators of their children. The average children’s ministry may have a child under its care two or three hours a week. The impact of a parent during the many hours a child spends at home, enroute to school, lessons, or sports is crucial to a child’s acceptance of the message presented at church. So we communicate the vision to parents and support them with training

⁹ Frank Coleman, *The Romance of Winning Children* (Cleveland, Ohio: Union Gospel Press, 1948).

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible, New International Version.*

¹¹ Spurgeon, *Come Ye Children.*

and materials to enrich the training of their children in the home. We also provide opportunities for parents to serve their children in the church.

We communicate to the church. I once had a children's pastor complain to me that she could not find any workers in her church. She said, "Nobody cares about this ministry." After evaluating her recruiting strategy, I discovered that nobody knew about her ministry. We must communicate the vision and joy of serving children in as many ways as possible. People do not want to hear about the horrors of serving in the two-year-old class. They want to be part of a ministry that is proactive and on fire for God!

Another point that must be addressed in communication is one of authority. In Matthew 7:28-29 we find, "the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."¹² Our teaching must be that of a sensitive authority. It is not acceptable that Sunday school teachers come in half prepared reading lesson material directly from a quarterly. Children need teachers that live the lessons. We must spend the time necessary in prayer and preparation to become Christ-like in our teaching. "Every real teacher's power must come from on high. If you never enter your closet and shut the door, if you never plead at the mercy seat for your child, how can you expect that God will honor you in its conversion?"¹³

CULTIVATION

"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."¹⁴
The kind of training we are directed to be involved in is more than talking and teaching. We must disciple children and their parents in the Christian life. My grandparents raised chickens on their farm 65 miles west of Omaha, Nebraska. As children we nine Gruber boys and girls all

¹² *The Holy Bible, New International Version.*

¹³ *Spurgeon, Come Ye Children.*

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible, New International Version.*

pitched in to feed, water, and care for those chickens. When butchering day came even the youngest participated. We all had a role to fill in this group project. We all had worth. We all had importance. Concepts of responsibility, integrity, and doing our best were cultivated in us through this activity. The chickens we cared for and eventually butchered would help to feed our family through the winter months. Sunday school is a place where children can participate in a similar manner. Children are not butchering chickens. They are discovering the great treasures of God's word. They learn basic concepts of responsibility, integrity, and doing their best.

Dr. Billie Davis writes of the importance of group. "After the calling of the disciples, every major incident and discourse includes some mention of them. This indicates their presence is not simply an incidental description of the scene. The disciples had a primary group relationship with Jesus." Jesus demonstrated throughout his ministry the importance of his learners. He set an example in cultivating as he trained his disciples to have a Godly world-view.

In the early childhood years we begin the cultivation process with children. Pre-evangelism attitudes, vocabulary, and feelings are developed. Important feelings concerning the Bible, the church, and the family are planted in the hearts and minds of these little ones. Many children's pastors relegate the preschool area to volunteers in favour of elementary ministries that they are more comfortable performing. I want to encourage the reader to study early childhood development. Cultivate relationships with children and their parents beginning in the nursery class.

During my ministry as children's pastor in Bloomington, Minnesota, I spent the last 30-40 minutes of each Wednesday night serving in the baby nursery. I sang songs, told stories, held babies and played on the floor. I believe this has had impact on the children that came through the nursery in those years. A secondary impact was the growth in numbers of workers willing to serve in our nurseries. I believe I was taking the lead in cultivation. "The Lord Jesus looks with

pleasure upon those who feed His lambs, and nurse His babies; for it is not His will that any of these little ones should perish”¹⁵ If we remember that cultivation of a crop in farming is a long term process it will help us to grasp the importance of consistence ministry to children throughout the first twelve years of life.

COOPERATION

A couple of years ago, I finished my basement. I enjoy carpentry work and this large project was a nice diversion from the normal activities of a college professor. I also enjoyed the assistance of more than a dozen college students on this project over a period of several months. They hauled heavy materials and hung sheetrock on the ceiling. They helped me paint and run wiring. I could have struggled alone in finishing this project, but the students now visit my home and proudly point out their contribution to the finished product. My grandfather used to say, “You don’t build a house alone.” The church is a cooperative effort.

A child’s spiritual development is a progressive action. Over a period of months and years as the child grows under our ministries, he/she is led into a genuine relationship with Christ. “If we provide small children frequent opportunities to say, “yes” to Christ in accordance with their limited comprehension of Him, we shall never err by hindering them from coming to the Savior, nor by being responsible for their making a mere profession before the Spirit has prepared the heart.”¹⁶ Lawrence Richards further emphasizes this concept when he writes,

“Ultimately, our assurance of a relationship with God does not come because we remember when we made a verbal commitment, but because we increasingly commit ourselves to live for Him, and discover a

¹⁵ Spurgeon, *Come Ye Children*.

¹⁶ Lebar, *Children in the Bible School*.

growing trust and love. It would be wrong to deny the possibility of childhood conversion. But it would also be wrong to treat response by a child to an evangelistic appeal as an end in itself.”¹⁷

Cooperate with other ministries in the church. It only does you harm to be walking around mumbling and grumbling about another staff member or a Sunday school teacher that has offended you. Carrying and offense will only harm you effectiveness with the children. I make it a practice to pray for the other pastors and ministries of the church. You can always find some other ministry that gets more money, or better rooms, or greater pulpit announcements. Forget it. We are in this together. You cannot minister effectively if you are mad at the senior pastor. I agree with Jim Wideman when he writes, “I believe you work for the pastor. It’s your job to find out what the pastor wants and to deliver it.”¹⁸ Children will receive the message you live and cooperation in the Body is paramount to their life-long survival as believers.

CONCLUSION

I know that there are many other concepts and principles in children’s ministry to be explored. I cannot neglect the importance of your example. Children watch their teachers. They watch you in and out of the children’s church room. They observe your enthusiasm in worship, faithfulness in giving, and reverence at the altars. “As a leader, how you live your life is far more important than where your name appears on an organizational chart.”¹⁹ We must live a life of holiness and joy. Children are full of joy and love people who express joy in their living.

It is tough to be around children for very long and not become joyful. I recently preached

¹⁷ Richards, *A Theology of Children's Ministry*.

¹⁸ Jim Wideman, *Children's Ministry Leadership* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2003).

¹⁹ Jim Wideman, *Children's Ministry Leadership* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2003).

a children's crusade in a small church in central Pennsylvania. On the first night of the crusade about forty children were present. When the service concluded and all were leaving, a little girl perhaps four years old, ran up to me and gave me a great big hug and a smile. I don't remember how joyful I was during the service, but I certainly was full of joy when I left that night.

In this paper, I have briefly discussed five things Jesus wants you to 'C' in children's ministry. They are; calling, care, communication, cultivation and cooperation. Evaluate your ministries and feed his lambs in each of these areas.

Remember the story of Jairus daughter. Jesus took the little girl by the hand and said, "little girl, arise." Taking another human being by the hand is a very personal act. We are in the business of raising children from spiritual death. We are God's hands in this darkened world. As Jesus with flesh on, we take children by the hand and let them come to Christ. I know Jesus wanted you to see that.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barna, George. *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003.
- Coleman, Frank. *The Romance of Winning Children*. Cleveland, Ohio: Union Gospel Press, 1948.
- Lebar, Lois. *Children in the Bible School*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell Company, 1952.
- Richards, Lawrence. *A Theology of Children's Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983.
- Spurgeon, Charles H. *Come Ye Children*. Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publishing, n.d.
- The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Wheaton, IL: International Bible Society, 1973.
- Wideman, Jim. *Children's Ministry Leadership*. Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2003.