

Ethical Considerations  
When Giving Altar Calls To Children

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## **Introduction**

The idea for this paper began to germinate about six years ago. I was sitting in a recliner on the deck of the Disney Magic cruise ship in the harbor at Saint Thomas. I sat there, with the umbrella shading me from the tropical Bahamian sun, reading Sam Doherty's book *How to Evangelize Children*. I came to the part that read, "I never ask children to raise their hands, or look at me, or stand up, or come to the front if they want to be saved. This can easily result in a quick and emotional response which has not been thought through, or there might even be the possibility of following the leader, when children do what they see others doing."<sup>1</sup>

I couldn't believe it. This guy was promoting a children's sermon that ended without the traditional Assemblies of God altar call. At first I was taken aback by the thought, but the more I pondered it, the more Sam made sense.

For these last thirty-three years, I have served in children's ministry. In this time, I have participated both along side of the children, and as the leader during countless altar services. I have seen children come to Christ and have experienced the sweet presence of the Holy Spirit filling children to overflowing. I have participated in many prayer services where children have been saved, healed, and delivered at altars. It is not about these sweet times, that I write today. For the purpose of deeper study and increased enlightenment in the area of altar calls and children, I must focus for a moment on the negative.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Doherty. *How to Evangelize Children*. Northern Ireland: CEF Specialized Book Ministry, 2003. 94.

Matthew 19:14 reads, “Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them...”<sup>2</sup> He did not say, “Drag, coerce, push, force, threaten, or brow beat them to come to me.” Over the years, altars calls for, and with, children have included many different styles, uses, and sad to say, abuses. I have witnessed people holding children down until they received. At one camp an adult was shaking a child by the shoulders, and demanding that the child receive. I have even heard an agitated altar worker yelling at children to repeat phrases in order to be filled with the Spirit.

In 1878, Edward P. Hammond wrote, “The devil knows how much easier it is to get children to come to Jesus than the old hardened sinner. Therefore it is that I believe he is the more keenly on the alert when any attempt is made in this direction.”<sup>3</sup>

I do not doubt the sincerity of Hammond’s words or the possibility of satanic disruption of the direction and intent of altar calls and altar services. Some of what I have seen could scarcely be conjured up by human design alone. Much of what I view as abuses of the altar call and the child participants may not be credited to the enemy of our souls, but rather to the ignorance or innocence of the altar leader. Had that person been confronted with a few ethical imperatives prior to leading the service, his approach and the results may have been godlier.

It is my assertion that a positive ethical approach can be made to this important aspect of ministry to children. The altar call given without ethical consideration may do more harm to the children present than good. I will begin this hike down the trail of ethical considerations by looking at an ethical response to the age of accountability. This will be followed by three segments addressing: (1) Faith or Fear; Setting aside scare

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:14. *New International Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing 2000

<sup>3</sup> Edward Payson Hammond. *The Conversion Of Children*. New York: N. Tibbals and Sons, 1878, 19.

tactics and letting God be God, (2) Pressure or Pleasure; Relaxing the altar time so that children can enjoy the presence of God, and (3) Let or Limit; Allowing children to come to Jesus rather than engaging in psycho-spiritual coercion.

I trust that by the end of this work, you will have a better understanding of ethical considerations in giving altar calls to children. It is my prayer that in better understanding these, that those who read will endeavor to lead altar times with children in a godly, loving manner.

### **An Ethical Response to the Age of Accountability**

Although the “age of accountability” is not so much an ethical question as a theological one, I felt that this work could not proceed without some thought given to this subject and our ethical response.

The Bible does not use the term “age of accountability,” nor does it imply that there is one mystical age frame during which children suddenly understand and are drawn to a decision for or against God. Edward Hayes writes, “An "age of accountability" is not taught in the Scriptures. In fact, the basis for it is only a logical inference. If we accept the biblical teaching of original sin as related to an Adamic nature, we infer that the infant is born in sin, needs divine grace, and is ultimately accountable for that sin.”<sup>4</sup> The inference in our movement always leans towards the person, young or old being a sinner in need of God’s grace. I am partial to William Hendricks’s teaching as he states, “The

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<sup>4</sup> Edward L. Hayes. “Evangelism of Children.” *Bibliotheca sacra*, 132 no 527 JI-S 1975, p 250-264. 254.

term “age of accountability” means a time or period of life when one is aware enough of God’s presence to respond to Him.”<sup>5</sup>

The question always arises, at what time can a child become aware enough to be saved? How old must he be before we teach him to love scripture and the message it brings?

Irish children’s evangelist Sam Doherty penned, “The Bible does not give an age, and neither should we. Children differ from each other. But the Lord Jesus did speak about little ones trusting him (Matthew 18:6). So the age when a child can trust Christ is generally much lower than what many Christians believe.”<sup>6</sup> The age of a child may very well be a factor, but in my experience conscious accountability has more to do with maturity level than chronological age. Assemblies of God Pastor, Richard Dresselhaus tells us in his 1973 book, *Teaching for Decision*,

“Obviously, it is impossible to determine a uniform age when all children reach this point of awareness. The rate of growth and maturity varies radically, according to ability and background. Some children have a basic comprehension of the gospel at age four or five. Others may reach the age of ten before they seem ready to grasp the message of the gospel. At any rate, salvation is conditioned upon some ability to understand the basic plan of salvation. This is true for children as well as adults.”<sup>7</sup>

My own children professed Christ as Savior for the first time at ages three through five. Granted, each one had a different understanding. I do not believe that my children understood justification or the substitutionary atonement. But each one understood God’s love as demonstrated through parental love and reinforced by loving teachers and leaders

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<sup>5</sup> William Hendricks. “The Age of Accountability.” In *Children and Conversion*, edited by Clifford Ingle, 84-97. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1970. 84.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Doherty. *How to Evangelize Children*. Northern Ireland: CEF Specialized Book Ministry, 2003. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Dresselhaus. *Teaching For Decision*. Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1973. 57.

in the church. The message, “Jesus love me this I know,” was pretty much all they needed for that first time profession of faith.

William Hendricks shows us this when saying, “Tests of children’s alertness and ability are illustrating that children mature at different ages and according to their individual capacity. This fact does away with all attempts to establish a given and fixed chronological age as the time of accountability.”<sup>8</sup>

So we’ve established that there is not designated age of accountability in Scripture and that sometime in childhood, people reach an age of awareness and are therefore accountable to God. Lawrence Richards declares, “We ought to consider the possibility of children giving a true faith response to God without formal understanding of what is involved in our formulations of the gospel. A child’s simple response to Jesus may be analogous to the faith response of so many through history who have not understood the cross, but who have met God in the more simple Word he spoke to them, and who have believed.”<sup>9</sup>

We have also come to the juncture where ethics come into play. If we are uncertain as to when a child can understand and accept salvation, then we have an ethical responsibility to do what we can to see that child come to Christ at as early an age as possible. Let me put it another way, if a child reaches the age of accountability and does not accept Christ as Savior, that child may spend eternity without Christ. He may go to hell. Our ethical imperative, as it relates to the age of accountability, is to present the Gospel to children so they can make a decision for salvation.

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<sup>8</sup> William Hendricks. “The Age of Accountability.” In *Children and Conversion*, edited by Clifford Ingle, 84-97. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1970. 90.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Richards. *Children’s Ministry (formerly A Theology Of CM)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1983. 375.

The church must involve itself in pre-evangelism training of the young children. From the time they are born, we can begin to surround them with the message of God's love. This happens as caring, loving workers serve the children week after week. All of this time, the church is reinforcing what is happening in the home. Lawrence Richards emphasizes this when injecting, "We can never overestimate the importance of the relational climate. This climate is perhaps the most powerful single influence in child development. Wrapped in the love of parents and valued by other adults in the close-knit faith community, each child was gently guided to and nurtured in faith."<sup>10</sup>

Can we allow boys and girls the possibility of spending eternity in hell? No! In an interview for an Assemblies of God publication a few years back, Pastor-Evangelist Tommy Barnett answers, "Our number one priority in children's ministry is soul winning. As soon as children begin coming to church, we tell they must have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ."<sup>11</sup> This begs the question, "How?"

My first response is that we cannot force this issue. "Transformation is a work of the Holy Spirit alone. All we can do is to help facilitate that process. Much of the time that means we, as adults, need to get out of the way so that the Spirit of God can do that work."<sup>12</sup> So the Holy Spirit must work, but children's leaders must be used in His work. God chooses to use us in this grand salvation scheme. Scottie May and her team tell us, "God grants us the privileges of partnering with the Holy Spirit in helping children come

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<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Richards. *Children's Ministry (formerly A Theology Of CM)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1983. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Tommy Barnett, Earl Banning, Peter Hohmann, and Jay Hostetler. *Mobilizing a Millennial Generation, Enrichment*, Spring 1999. Volume Four, Number Two. Assemblies of God, Springfield, MO. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Scottie May. Beth Poterski, Catherine Stonehouse and Linda Cannell. *Children Matter*. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing, 2005. 24.

and see Jesus. We can point children to Jesus by helping them enter the stories of Scripture and follow Jesus there, getting to know him, love, and believe in him.”<sup>13</sup>

We become eternal tour guides, pointing children to Jesus as they walk this road of life. The leader in the Sunday school, small group, or children’s church must take seriously the need for salvation of the children. I met a children’s church leader once who admitted that in three years he had never given a salvation invitation in his church time. The kids had enjoyed teaching, puppets, and games, but had never been given the opportunity to respond to a loving Savior. Dresselhaus reminds this worker and others like him, “Only through a careful teaching of the Word of God, and as the Spirit is active, will these children recognize their need and feel drawn by the Spirit to salvation.”<sup>14</sup>

Our ethical response must not be to give altar calls for the sake of numbers. Nor can it be driven by the possible guilt of losing children to a Christ-less eternity. Instead, we must be driven by love for children and the leading of the Spirit to bless the kids and, with God’s help, win them for Him before their hearts become old and cold. We must, with enthusiasm and godly wisdom, present the gospel in ways that boys and girls will understand. If we fail in this, we would be ethically negligent.

The church must do all it can so when that individual time of accountability comes, we can walk the child into God’s presence. “The time of accountability is the moment of grace when one is brought to a decision for or against Christ by the Spirit. This moment requires the proclamation of the Word, the drawing of the Spirit, and the yielding of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>14</sup> Richard L. Dresselhaus. *Teaching For Decision*. Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1973. 56.

individual to God. Until this moment is possible, one may leave children in the hands of God.”<sup>15</sup>

So our ethics drive us to proclaim the word to children through godly settings, relationships, and programming. We teach with a sensitivity to the Spirit’s leading and yield ourselves to God. Then when the child reaches an appropriate level of accountability, the salvation step taken can be both meaningful and eternal.

### **Faith or Fear; Setting Aside Scare Tactics and Letting God be God**

Daniel Smith writes, “Perhaps one reason so many children go into a period of spiritual stagnation in their teens is that they were frightened into “jumping on a fire escape” rather than being warmly attracted to the Person of Christ. Although the danger of a lost eternity is a part of the gospel, it is not the central issue.”<sup>16</sup>

It was the first Assemblies of God kid’s camp I had ever attended. I was a counselor for twelve elementary aged boys. We sat through the long Monday evening service. My boys were restless, some were sleeping. Then the lighting changed and the evangelist began drawing a colorful chalk picture on a large drawing board. Dynamic music played in the background.

The evangelist spoke as he drew. He told the story of a drawbridge operator who, in order to save an entire trainload of passengers killed his only son in the gears of the drawbridge. This man then invited children to accept the sacrifice of Jesus. I witnessed children crying as they went to that altar rail. For the most part, they were not convicted

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<sup>15</sup> William Hendricks. “The Age of Accountability.” In *Children and Conversion*, edited by Clifford Ingle, 84-97. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1970. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel H. Smith. *How to Lead A Child to Christ*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1987. 21.

by the Holy Spirit. They were scared by a story. They were full of sorrow for the boy who had been killed.

Daniel Smith informs us, “Both Scripture (1 John 4:18) as well as personal experience teach us that fear is a powerful and uncomfortable emotion.”<sup>17</sup> Our task in leading children to the altar should not be one of frightening them. We are presenting a loving God who will accept them in their sinful state, forgive them, cleanse and befriend them for eternity.

Since that first camp experience I have experienced many similar altar services. These were services during which the leader played upon the emotions of children causing them to fear for their eternal destination as well as their livelihood on earth. One night at a camp in the Midwest, a children’s worker laughed and said to me, “That preacher sure scared the hell out of them, didn’t he.” I did not find this funny. There is no solid ethical platform from which I can preach that would allow me to “scare the hell out of them.”

Edward Hayes reinforces this concept as he notes, “Avoid anxiety-producing appeals to both parents and children. In any effort to evangelize children, youth, or adults, the Scriptures give us the clues. We are to balance our zeal with confidence in a sovereign God.”<sup>18</sup> It would seem to me that a preacher who preys upon the fears of children in order to reap a harvest has little confidence in a sovereign God.

I know of a man who performs great feats of magic in his services. Early in his ministry, he used intense colors, lights, and actions to preach his message of salvation. Much of this frightened the children and disturbed the adults. As he grew in the Lord and

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel H. Smith. *How to Lead A Child to Christ*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1987. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Edward L. Hayes. “Evangelism of Children.” *Bibliotheca sacra*, 132 no 527 JI-S 1975, p 250-264. 258.

in his ministry the man simplified his program making it less scary and more understandable at the same time. He essentially did what H.B. London wrote about when he inscribed these words, “The Church can be the place where the child feels safe, cherished, and nurtured.”<sup>19</sup> Casting fear into a crowd of children is not the kind of net that reaps an authentic spiritual catch. Jesus, our Good Shepherd and master fisher of men would use bait and tackle that fit the waters in which he was fishing.

My friend Randy Christensen writes, “Children are searching for the reality of supernatural power in an everyday world. This is the theme of the most popular children’s books, movies, and toys.”<sup>20</sup> In our current spiritual climate, children are being subjected to all kinds of interpretations of the use and misuse of spiritual power. Every character from Sponge Bob to Harry Potter is using magical interaction in some form to entertain. The church must be a place where genuine spiritual power is demonstrated in a non-abusive, Christ-like manner.

Robert Choun puts it beautifully when he pens, “A growing awareness of God takes time. The practice of truth is like piano practice; both take incalculable repetition to achieve proficiency. Children have qualities that require that kind of attention and repetition.”<sup>21</sup> Fear tactics to reap results at an altar are little more than an attempt to bypass a God imposed natural order and rush children to a verbal commitment before their hearts are ready for salvation. It’s like placing them in a piano recital without having allowed them to spend time practicing.

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<sup>19</sup> H. B. London and Neil Wiseman. *A Wake Up Call to Save Our Children, Enrichment*, Spring 1999. Volume Four, Number Two. Assemblies of God, Springfield, MO. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Christensen, Randy. *Crucial Concepts in Children’s Ministry*. Insight Publications, Tulsa, Oklahoma. 2003. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Robert J. Choun and Lawson, Michael S.. *The Christian Educators Handbook on Children’s Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Book Company. 1998. 17.

So let us reiterate the ethical consideration here. The leader of children must put aside personal ambition and rely on faith rather than fear in giving altar calls to children. He must set aside scare tactics and let God be God. The leader must, with a clean conscience, present the facts of the gospel in a consistent understandable way to the children. Witnessing positive spiritual results in the lives of children may take minutes, days, or even years. In this respect, children's ministry is not a sprint, but rather a marathon.

Sam Doherty shows us this saying, "As you evangelize children you should instruct the mind, praying that God will enlighten it; involve the emotions, praying that God will stir them; and challenge the will, praying that God will change its direction."<sup>22</sup> The key element in what Sam says is "God." Notice his total reliance upon God for results. In Sam's words, "God will enlighten, God will stir, and God will change its direction." The task then is to allow God to do His work and will in the life of the child as you faithfully present God's Word and plan to that child.

When altar time comes, put away your arsenal of scary and heart breaking stories and replace them with a kind invitation to accept God's forgiveness and grace.

### **Pressure or Pleasure; Relaxing the Altar Time so that Children can Enjoy the Presence of God**

"Often a child responds to a gospel appeal out of a deep desire to gain approval. It is part of the identity struggle within each of us to desire the approval of a parent or teacher. Winning the child according to this set of psychological principles, may be little more than instilling into the child the mysterious codes and mores of our

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<sup>22</sup> Sam Doherty. *How to Evangelize Children*. Northern Ireland: CEF Specialized Book Ministry, 2003. 22.

society. Thus, willingly obedient, a child may gain his rightful place in the family or other adult institutions.”<sup>23</sup>

Our treatment of altar calls and ethical considerations would not be complete without addressing the pressure that can accompany an appeal for salvation. Perceived pressure, whether valid or not, may drive a child to a response without the wooing of the Spirit. The child may have learned, through regular observance, that those who accept Christ find communal approval. Pressure to “get saved” is translated into acceptance in the church family which is very appealing to children. Well meaning, and perhaps spiritual, workers may inadvertently apply pressure promoting this kind of “approval conversion” experience among the children.

In the midst of this possible atmosphere of underlying community pressure, we must continue to encourage individual children in the faith. Daniel Smith reminds us, “There is no more biblical basis for doubting the genuine, intelligent, and uncoerced confession of faith from a child than there is from an adult.”<sup>24</sup> Kids can be genuinely saved even if there is a presence of pressure.

Smith goes on to say, “No doubt many boys and girls are unwisely urged into a false profession. But spiritually minded adults who know the Word of God and love children can discern genuine confessions by careful communication with children.”<sup>25</sup> We must begin to sort out the sheep in the pen discovering just what kind of conversion experience they have enjoyed. Children should not be left without guidance as they progress from whatever level of faith they have achieved. Pastor Richard Dresselhaus, in his book

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<sup>23</sup> Edward L. Hayes. “Evangelism of Children.” *Bibliotheca sacra*, 132 no 527 JI-S 1975, p 250-264. 257.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel H. Smith. *How to Lead A Child to Christ*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1987. 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

entitled, *Teaching for Decision* writes, “Children, if properly taught, may at an early age enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that will be very meaningful, both in childhood and in later life. The church must never under-emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit to produce saving faith in the heart of a child.”<sup>26</sup>

Our ethical approach demands that we do as Dresselhaus states and “properly teach” the children. Our approach must never be one of compelling commitments, pressuring young children, or demanding through actions and words that the altar be filled. “Make appeals for young children to receive Christ that are prompted by pure motives and are given simply and in a nonpublic manner. The notable success of various child evangelism efforts cannot be denied. But the motive must never be numbers or outward response, nor should appeals be accompanied by offers of gifts, recognition, or special privileges.”<sup>27</sup>

Our challenge is to relax the altar call so that children can enjoy the presence of God. It was Monday night altar time at a camp in Texas. A boy named Mike approached me and declared, “I am not going to pray.” Rather than force his involvement, I was checked by the Spirit and answered, “Well just sit back and watch then. If you have any questions, come see me.” Mike almost seemed confused by my answer and worked his way through the other children back to his seat. This same scenario was repeated the following two nights and finally on Thursday evening, Mike came up to me with tears in his eyes. He blurted out, “I want to pray. I know I need Jesus.” Had I forced Mike’s involvement he may have rejected Christ altogether.

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<sup>26</sup> Richard L. Dresselhaus. *Teaching For Decision*. Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1973. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Edward L. Hayes. “Evangelism of Children.” *Bibliotheca sacra*, 132 no 527 JI-S 1975, p 250-264. 259.

An invitation to come to Christ need not be forced or pressure-filled. Children can be encouraged to act upon what they have learned in a service without adults and other children applying undue pressure to respond.

Sam Doherty instructs us in the importance and style of the gospel invitation given to children. He exhorts, “The invitation is a call from Jesus Christ to come to him, in repentance and faith, to receive forgiveness and a new nature.”<sup>28</sup> This is a loving invitation to come to Christ. It is a gentle encouraging word instructing the unregenerate child to admit his sin and trust Jesus for forgiveness and new life. There are no clamps of guilt pressing down on the child. There are no words or actions which make the child feel less than accepted if he does not respond.

As Sam teaches children’s workers using examples from the book of Acts, he explains, “Like the apostles, you should trust God the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the children – and not put pressure of any kind on them to respond to Christ’s invitation.”<sup>29</sup> So our task in approaching altar calls in an ethically responsible manner is to relieves the pressure. Evaluate methodology used to gain a response and develop a process which allows children to come to Jesus without social or emotional screws being tightened.

This brings us to our final consideration.

### **Let or Limit; Allowing Children to Come to Jesus Rather than Engaging in Psycho-spiritual Coercion.**

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<sup>28</sup> Sam Doherty. *How to Evangelize Children*. Northern Ireland: CEF Specialized Book Ministry, 2003. 55.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

The key question here is, “How are you, as a leader of children, going to follow the words of Jesus?” Is it possible to “let” the children come without engaging in forms of coercion? I believe it is. I come full circle back to the original quote that inspired my study of the approach to altar calls and children. Sam Doherty wrote, “I never ask children to raise their hands, or look at me, or stand up, or come to the front if they want to be saved – or if they want to help them. This can easily result in a quick and emotional response which has not been thought through, or there might even be the possibility of following the leader, when children do what they see others doing.”<sup>30</sup> This generates the question, “can an altar call be given without application of psychological, social, or spiritual coercion?”

Sam proposes that rather than altar calls, the children’s worker give invitations. He suggests that the leader invite the child to come and seek counsel after the meeting is over. “This allows them time to think about what they are doing and to come on their own initiative – rather than being influenced by others.”<sup>31</sup>

I am not suggesting that the children’s leader give up the tradition of the altar call. What I am suggesting is that we utilize this important juncture in any service to impart an invitation to children. This invitation may or may not include the children coming forward in response. Whether this invitation includes an immediate public response or not is the leader’s prerogative. It must carry with it authority without pushiness and spirituality without overzealousness.

The altar call or invitation must not water down the basic gospel message. Tony Kummer, Baptist Children’s Pastor blogs, “Being overzealous to give a child assurance

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 94.

of heaven can result in a false assurance. Repentance is a biblical component of conversion.”<sup>32</sup> Sound teaching on basic salvation doctrine is demonstrated through the life of the teacher then acted upon by the child. This suggests more of an ongoing process rather than a onetime instant occurrence. Lawrence Richards expound upon this saying, “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 growing trust and love. It would be wrong to deny the possibility of childhood conversion.”<sup>33</sup> He writes further, “The real challenge in ministry with boys and girls is to provide that context in which the first step can be taken...and then a whole lifetime of growth be supported.”<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the coercion related to altar time would cease if leaders began to look at salvation in the lives of children as more of a process than a singular decision. This process will be marked by various decision points as a child grows in his cognitive ability to grasp the abstracts like love and eternity. Lois Lebar writes,

“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. We shall never be guilty of going to either extreme if we give our groups of children numerous occasions to confess their love of Christ, and then deal individually with those who seek salvation, a miracle which happens once for all time and eternity.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Tony Kummer. “Childhood Conversion and Age of Accountability.” Word Press.com <http://tonykummer.wordpress.com/2005/11/25/childhood-conversion-and-age-of-accountability-part-1-introduction/> (accessed June 2, 2008)

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence Richards. *Children’s Ministry (formerly A Theology Of CM)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1983. 375.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>35</sup> Lois E. Lebar. *Children in the Bible School*. New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company 1952. 171.

Sometime in a childhood blessed by consistent exposure to the Christian message, the child will experience this once and for all miracle. It may be at an altar or on a playground. It may happen with adult supervision or not. My son Aaron announced one morning at breakfast that he had asked Jesus to come into his heart. It was his first “public” confession of faith and I understood that at age four, he didn’t comprehend the implications of his announcement. But my wife and I encouraged him anyway. We continued to nurture his faith at home and through the church. He prayed at altars on many occasions through the childhood years. Each experience only served to solidify his spiritual commitment that began before that breakfast table pronouncement. Barna states, “Anyone who wishes to have significant influence on the development of a person’s moral and spiritual foundations had better exert that influence while the person is still open-minded and impressionable – in other words, while the person is still young.”<sup>36</sup>

What Barna and I are explaining here is a process of letting children come to Jesus. Many times the methods used in formal children’s ministry settings can limit a child’s true response to the gospel. This occurs any time the child is put in a position of feeling that he must respond in order to please teacher. Hayes writes, “All of this discussion is meant to demonstrate the fact that when we seek to integrate a doctrine of salvation with a behavioral concept of evangelistic methodology, we encounter difficulty.”<sup>37</sup> Our particular behavioral concept of evangelistic methodology may then be responsible for causing difficulty in producing clearly authentic faith response in young children.

Our ethical response to the possibility that this is true must be to step back and assess the dynamics of what we are doing. We cannot continue with business as usual if that

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<sup>36</sup> George Barna. *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions*. Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2003.47.

<sup>37</sup> Edward L. Hayes. “Evangelism of Children.” *Bibliotheca sacra*, 132 no 527 JI-S 1975, p 250-264. 257.

form of business is offending little ones. Jesus said, “And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”<sup>38</sup> Our ethical response is to adjust what we are doing so that children will be welcomed to Jesus without offense.

### **Conclusion**

Edward Hayes wrote, “Giving an invitation is a natural and normal part of the gospel presentation. How it is done is quite another thing. Teachers are wise not to force or push for decisions. The gospel, rightly presented, has its own appeal. The Savior has His own drawing power. This is the divine work of the Holy Spirit in wedding human need and response to the winsomeness of Christ.”<sup>39</sup> The children’s worker in today’s evangelistic setting must be willing to accept this “divine work of the Holy Spirit.” Altar times cannot be forced, pressure-filled, events in the lives of children.

In this paper we began by looking at an ethical response to the age of accountability. This was followed by three segments addressing: (1) Faith or Fear; Setting aside scare tactics and letting God be God, (2) Pressure or Pleasure; Relaxing the altar time so that children can enjoy the presence of God, and (3) Let or Limit; Allowing children to come to Jesus rather than engaging in psycho-spiritual coercion.

Considering the length and depth of this work, all aspects of each segment allow for further study. Questions will continue to arise each time an altar call is given. Our “Christian” ethics based in part on Christ’s character, demand that we question, evaluate,

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<sup>38</sup> Matthew 18:5-6. *New International Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Edward L. Hayes. “Evangelism of Children.” *Bibliotheca sacra*, 132 no 527 JI-S 1975, p 250-264. 260.

and, if need be, adjust our approach when giving altar calls to children. In this world of confusion, ethical foundations such as compassion, integrity, and faith continue to stand rock solid. While the storms of ego, impatience, and unbelief assail us, our godly ethics will stand. With the Lord's help, I believe that anyone involved in leading children to Christ can consider the arguments stated in this paper and better serve the children and Jesus when altar time comes.

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