

Ministering the Gospel to Children

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper

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Children have a special place in our hearts. We rejoice at their receptiveness to spiritual truth and Jesus taught us to learn from the example of their ability to trust. This aptitude to trust others can be a wonderful thing in relation to God or a hurtful thing in relation to evil men. In Christian ministry, this tendency of children to seek to please adults brings about additional factors that must be taken into consideration. This paper will examine how to best serve children in the context of our local church. For this sake, we are addressing specifically school age children who have not yet entered the sixth grade.

What our children's ministry must include

While ministries have a lot of flexibility in judgment, some issues are so critical in ministry that we can say they are necessary to our children's ministry.

1. An explanation of the gospel

The gospel is fundamental to ministry and we must explain it clearly, completely and consistently. Because of their lack of maturity, children require thought in how to communicate to them clearly. We must not assume they understand and should seek to diversify our effort to increase understanding of the elements of the gospel.

In our attempt to communicate with children, we must resist the temptation to oversimplify God's truth so as to leave out aspects of the gospel. Simple terminology is helpful but we must not downplay Christ's lordship and our need for repentance and faith.

2. An encouragement toward faith

The necessity of belief in Christ is central to all Christian ministry. Faith, or the lack of faith, is pivotal to success in the Christian life. Children too must learn the importance of faith in life and we must serve them toward this end.

Perhaps the most effective way we can encourage faith in the children of our church is to live by faith ourselves. Our example as parents and children's workers is essential to validate our words and have them received by children.

3. An exhortation toward continued participation

As with any ministry, we can rejoice when our fruitfulness remains. Children that move from our children's ministry into our youth ministry are in a far better position to continue to seek and serve the Lord than those children who end their involvement with their age group in the church. See our paper on "ten reasons why youth should be involved in youth ministry."

What our children's ministry should not include

Some of what is common in churches today has no biblical support but has become “the thing to do” simply because so many others use certain methods. Some methods may have unintended consequences that are under appreciated by those in the church.

Also, the systems of eliciting responses seem to overlook the role that man can play in salvation. “With men it is impossible, but not with God,” Jesus said in Mark 10:27 in answer to the question “who can be saved?” We must recognize that there is nothing that we can do to create belief in a person.

1. We should avoid issuing group invitations to receive Christ

When we communicate the gospel message to groups of children, we should refrain from calling them to a specific response that we have chosen for them. We have found such techniques as altar calls or certain music playing while people contemplate whether to raise their hand or not as problematic even for adults. If we do not practice an invitation to receive Christ with our adults or youth, we should be even less inclined to do so with children, considering their susceptibility to wanting to please adults and do what others are doing.

While certainly a person who is truly converting to Christ will manifest this repentance in their life, there are good reasons why we avoid asking for one specific response to an invitation. Since the apostles did not employ an altar call or invitation, we see no precedent do so. We believe a non-Christian can respond to Christ as their Savior and Lord right in their seat from their heart. Another reason is that we do not want to manipulate people into making a profession of faith in Christ. Also, it opens up the real possibility that people, particularly children, will think that a specific act makes a person a Christian. We believe the best external response to this internal heart decision is to begin following Christ in baptism.

It is interesting to note that the biblical examples of saving faith show no invitation to an act of response leading to faith. What we find are people who take the initiative in a response to say “what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). In the book of Acts, we find no altar calls, invitation, or pressing for a decision. God, through the instrumentality of His Word, causes people to believe. Subsequent to belief, we find instructions to live out that faith.

2. We should avoid identifying those children who have professed faith in Christ

It is true that sincere belief in Christ will manifest itself in confession of Him with our mouth (Romans 10:9) and an unwillingness to confess Christ is an indication of unbelief (Matthew 10:32-33). However, we should be careful about making this identification with Christ according to our timing or way.

When a person professes belief in Christ, it remains to be seen if that claim is from a sincere heart. This is even more the case with children. To single out a person as a believer presumes something that we cannot be sure of. Even if we make it clear the person has made a “profession of faith,” there is no doubt that the implication for those hearing this that the person has become a Christian.

We must ask the question, “what is the reason to point out a child that has indicated a desire to believe in Christ?” Indeed, there are several reasons to avoid this practice, beyond the fact that we cannot know about the sincerity of the profession:

- It may well cause a person to gain a false sense of security. Because they have made a public response to an invitation to receive Christ does not mean they have necessarily become a Christian. It can lead a person to put their trust in their act of response to the invitation. True faith is required.
- Singling people out may encourage a response for the wrong reason. For example, it may set up younger children to want the attention.
- Public attention thrust upon someone can feed their flesh. Even more, it can become fleshly for the ministry, even tempting people to count how many conversions supposedly occurred as a result of their ministry.

Conclusion

In summary, it is better to allow the power of God through His word to minister a response to the gospel message rather than to create a response through our abilities. Particularly with younger children we should be careful to avoid bringing public identification of their faith, but rather allow them to express their faith naturally through their relationships. Ultimately, the specifically commanded public profession of faith is baptism, which our church has chosen to encourage beginning with our junior high ministry.

We must trust the sovereign grace of God to accomplish what only He can accomplish in the lives of our children. Faith and repentance do not come by human means, regardless of how moving our appeals may be. Godly parenting is mandated, but it does not produce godly children. Faithful Christians who serve with diligence in a Bible believing church can be greatly used by the Lord, but salvation is His work. As we recognize the truth of Mark 10:27, we will be freed from the temptation to pressure children to belief and free to prayerfully speak the truth with love, trusting God to work in their hearts.