

## **What does the Word teach us about children's and youth ministry?**

### **1. What shall we do with the children?**

What do we do with the children? Parents all around the world ask this question and perhaps churches do too. I guess that is what we are asking in one way or another through this day today...what we will do with the children and the youth on our doorstep. We have heard many positives and also some challenges about ministry to children in our opening sessions.

It was interesting in talking to a few people when I told them about this conference their reactions...one colleague mentioned a couple of conferences he was attending that were dealing with the issues of strategic thinking about ministry into the future...there were sessions on men's ministry and women's ministry, multicultural ministry but no sessions on youth or children's ministry. I don't think that this was a deliberate oversight (maybe it was but rather a case of simply not being on the radar...maybe it happens for many reasons...not grown up ministry, not perceived as productive and so on...I don't know...anyway we have heard an interesting story this morning

Brief survey of a number of responses: they are a distraction; they are the church of tomorrow; they are an evangelistic hook; they should be seen and not heard; they are a problem to be dealt with; we keep them in a holding pattern until we can really disciple them; they are covenant children; they are a real and integral part of all that we are and do as a church

### **2. What do we know...**

What struck you from this morning...this is what struck me...

That figure suggesting so many people come to the Lord before the age of 18...I recall a missionary speaking of the 10/40 window and reminding us of the 5/18 window when so many people come to faith and challenging the audience that day about missional thinking to this age group...growth in churches and so on...

We heard the research...If there is such a thing as a statistical imperative I think I started hearing one this morning...We heard a good story that we want to make a great story

We heard a hopeful story with work to do and attention to be paid

### **3. What do we need to consider?**

We should consider the opportunities : 300000 babies born per year for the last 4 years or so...big baby boom

So evangelistic opportunities; opportunities to nurture our own children in the faith mindful of that drop off at the age of 18-20 or so that was picked up in the statistics...there are simply lots of children around.

The NSW government has to build more classrooms every year for the next ten years or so to accommodate these children; thousands of children in Anglican and other denominational

schools, lots of opportunities with children and youth et alone looking around at the need for quality youth and children's work to reach outsiders

#### **4. What does the Bible say? Children everywhere...**

In the midst of all this we seek to minister to children and youth...my job is to take us briefly to the scriptures and see what we can see...some see a theological imperative for ministry to youth, especially coming off the back of Jesus' treatment of children...let the little children come to me; others don't see much attention paid to children at all...the Bible is a book written by adults to adults, what do you think?

I want to suggest we see a surprising amount of material... some of it very suggestive in terms of programme; much of it incidental; I want to suggest that we see a number of patterns and that these may help us frame some broad principles as we think about ministry to children and youth.

I want to say that there is no privileging of children as some suggest but there is plenty of food for thought as we consider the importance and shape of children's and youth ministry and there is certainly no mandate for neglect or not for not bringing our best thinking and practice to bear

So, what does the Scripture say? It is a blunt instrument to be sure but a quick search of an English Bible on child and related words reveals over 700 occurrences and that is without going into words like son, daughter and so on, add these in and the references easily clear 1000.

We can perhaps recall references to the conception, birth, and naming of children; there are accounts of childhood, sibling relationships, and monkeying around with birth order.

Adult-child relationships are portrayed in all their complexity...some carry children with joy, some yearn for children, others reject children, abandon them and even plot their destruction.

Children are blessed, touched, healed, threatened, cursed, victims of injustice, abandoned, adopted and murdered. Children are gifts and treasured; the reward and booty of war.

Adults are given specific responsibilities with respect to children and children in turn have a variety of responses and responsibilities with respect to adults.

Children sing, rejoice and praise God; they rebel, commit sin and turn from God. They learn from adults and are object lessons to adults.

And as I have run through these descriptors your mind has doubtless turned from one biblical narrative to another.

#### **5. Children Then... (source: Dictionary of New Testament Background)**

As a backdrop to the Bible's teaching it is worth briefly considering what we know about the status, the place of children in the ancient world...

As far as the Greco-Roman context goes we have very little direct writing, the times are described as patriarchal and much writing was done by richer men so perhaps it is

understandable that there is little by way of direct comment...would it have been different if more writing by women or poor social groups?

Role of children in GR culture was defined by social and economic system. Children carried on the family name and business and provided for their care of elderly parents.

In religious contexts children were regarded as innocent, chaste, naïve; unformed adults who lacked reason and therefore needed training, which included beating

Plato: 'of all the wild beasts the child is the most intractable; for insofar as it, above all others, possesses a fount of reason that is as yet uncurbed, it is a treacherous, sly and most insolent creature. Wherefore the child must be strapped as it were, with many bridles'.

Children were born into household. Boys were trained to take over the household and girls were trained for domestic responsibilities. Households included parents, extended family members, adopted children, slaves, paid servants. They were presided over by paterfamilias, who exercised absolute rule, even over the life and death of a family member, especially the children, though this was curbed by law in the late first century.

Apparently the Roman custom was to place newborn on the ground for the father to inspect. When he lifted the child this signalled acceptance into the family but weak, handicapped, unwanted girls or other unwanted mouths to feed would be left with the implication of exposure. Exposure was apparently never sanctioned but it also never condemned by Roman Law

On the other hand we also have evidence of children valued as individuals as many poignant grave inscriptions testify, with many of these due to the high infant mortality rate.

Around 14-16 the transition to adulthood occurred by being registered as a citizen. This involved the exchange of a toga with purple hem for a white toga as sign of adulthood. Marriage was the primary transition; for girls 12; boys 14. However, amongst wealthy marriage tended to be later with girls in their late teens and boys in their twenties.

Jewish society:

Jewish identity is paramount in the discussion: the Jewish identity was that of a covenant people, the people of the law. Children seen as a blessing and insurance of the nation's future. The woman whom was barren or childless was shamed.

This expectation of maintaining the race through procreation was enshrined in the law with infanticide, abortion, and birth control condemned.

Home and family were the primary structure through which children gained their identity. Sons, especially the firstborn were guarantee of lineage and promise of maintaining family holdings.

The key role for children is enshrined in the Jewish law: where the commandment to children (presumably of all ages) says: honour mother and father.

Education was also based in the home: girls for home duties and boys in the law.

The transition to adulthood occurred at 13 by becoming a son of the law. Marriage was generally arranged and occurred around mid teens for girls and late teens for boys.

The vast gulf in understanding in our modern notion of children as a special class of society with distinctive cultural worth and values stems from renaissance onwards.

With those few remarks let's move to thinking about the child in biblical culture and look at a few key passages. This is not exhaustive but covers the main themes of interest to our discussion today.

## **6. What does Bible say: Genesis 1.26-27**

We begin with mankind created in the image of God and note the obvious: that this includes children and youth. Our first step is to note the importance of viewing children and youth through the lens of biblical anthropology; male and female he made them; of course the command to be fruitful and multiply points to the necessity and blessing of children and also reminds us of the struggle for descendants that drives much of the narrative of Genesis especially

## **7. What does the Bible say: Gen 1.27**

The command to be fruitful and multiply comes on the back of this...this is simply to emphasise that children share in the image of God by virtue of their creation as male and female and that even as we think of children and youth we think of them as part of humanity and sharing therefore in the general anthropological understanding of the Scriptures...created, precious, imaging God, fallen, liable therefore to judgement and in need of salvation.

## **8. What does the Bible say: Rom 5.18-19**

This is reinforced by the inclusive 'all' in this familiar passage from Romans 5. All that we know and understand concerning sin, righteousness and its lack thereof; the necessity of salvation through the atoning, sacrificial and substitutionary work of Christ; as a work of God's grace and mercy alone applies to the child.

## **9. What does the Bible say: Deut 1.39**

This said there are a few hints through Scripture that also suggest a developmental understanding of sorts. One of these occurs in this passage from Deuteronomy 1.39 where the children are described as those who do not know right from wrong. This suggests an awareness of a growing sense of this as a child develops.

We need to read this in conjunction with the statements that the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation and the further development that the child is responsible for their own sin.

So there is at several points an acknowledgement of not an innocence so much as an age of moral responsibility perhaps; the fact also that children will suffer for the sins of others, caught up in a web of sin and also an acknowledgement that they will also suffer for the consequences of their own sin.

### **10. What does the Bible say: 1 Cor 13, 14**

The acknowledgement of a developmental perspective is also hinted at in several passages in the NT; here we see a sample from 1 Corinthians but we could also add in here Hebrews 6; 1 Peter 2.2

### **11. What does the Bible say: Deut 1.1**

Deuteronomy is an important text for our thinking and we will examine several passages though there are more besides: who are children? What is to be learned? What is the aim of instruction? How is it to take place? Context of teaching and learning is the family first and then community.

Deuteronomy 1.1: Moses teaches everyone the law...ie children are included in the phrase 'all Israel'

### **12. What does the Bible say: Deut 31.10-12**

Children are specifically mentioned in 31.12-13: the context is the command to read the law aloud to 'all Israel' during the Festival of Booth...children are specifically mentioned as being the object of instruction; 31: children do not know the Law will listen and learn...concern for children; this is to happen every 7 years...gather and hear...emphasis on remembering and acknowledgement of forgetting...children included in the learning.

### **13. What does the Bible say: Deut 4.9**

Again the emphasis on teaching the future generations...

### **14. What does the Bible say: Deut 4.10**

The goal is that the children may learn to fear the Lord and show this by keeping his statutes and commands so that they may have a long life.

### **15. What does the Bible say: Deut 6.4-6**

Deuteronomy 6.4-9: core commands...read out...

### **16. What does the Bible say: Deut 4.7-9**

They are to be repeated and talked about in all the warp and woof of life;

The family context is crucial. There is a general community context implied as well but here the wider family context is primary.

There is room for both regular casual and systematic instruction. It is important to remember the casual nature of the experience and the example given of making biblical teaching a 'natural part of life'. Theological instruction was not limited to the ritual aspects of life though; in the day to day conversations of life, families were to talk together about the commandments of God – at home and away, in the morning and at night (Deut 6:1-9).

Education of the child can be formal and programmatic but we must also be alert to the 'teachable moment' when circumstances lead the discussion.

### **17. What does the Bible say: Deut 6.20-21**

There are a couple of points to be noted here. First the responsive nature of the teaching...when your son asks you...this acknowledges the natural curiosity of the child and points again to the importance of taking advantage of, perhaps even creating the teachable moment; this time in response to questions...in this instance about the laws and statutes of Israel [in other instances the various rituals of life in Israel (Passover, Offering of the first born, the Sinai law, the stone markers by the Jordan) were occasions for questions and answers between children and their parents (Exod 12:24-27, 13:11-16; Deut 6:20-21; Josh 4:21-24)].

These moments, events and 'rituals' raise the opportunity for the 'why' question and the opportunity to recount the story...ie again our teaching is not to be restricted to 'teaching time' but arises as a part of our natural family and church family life.

I guess the challenge is whether there is anything to be curious about in either the practices of the church community or the Christian lifestyle of the family. Instruction in the faith will go on in many and various ways but the 'response to curiosity' angle is an interesting one and suggests (and we know this) that children are naturally curious but we need to be ready and help one another to be ready for the curious moment

Perhaps we need to encourage one role of the parents to make life strange in some way that would prompt questions from their children – 'what's the meaning of this?', which gives opportunity for parents to rehearse the story of God's dealings with his people, of whom this family is a part.

The other point to notice is the extensive answer given in Deuteronomy 6. This pattern is repeated a couple of times and we see that the answer locates the issue/monument/occasion and the child in the wider story of God's dealing with his people...the answer is not simply information but an invitation to see oneself as part of the wider narrative context, the story of one's people and the story of God himself.

### **18. What does the Bible say: Psalm 78.5-6**

Psalm 78:1-8 – picks up the familiar refrain of teaching children and the children of children...but the address here is to the nation as a kind of national responsibility; a whole community responsibility, that presumably parents take specific responsibility for.

### **19. What does the Bible say: Psalm 78.7-9**

There is a posterity argument here as well as a correctional element...that the future generation might do better than this current one...reversal of thinking I hear that thinks the contemporary generation is giving the game away.

I just want to briefly add in here some material from Proverbs...Proverbs has numerous verses pertaining to children...covering much of the ground we have already traversed...Prov 1:8 responsibility of Father and *Mother*...and the nation

The main context for many of the more than 33 explicit references to children is the family. Children can be a bane or blessing; productive children are a blessing and much of the success of productivity was dependent upon proper rearing. The child is educable and needs discipline and instruction. This is obviously somewhat controversial to our ears texts concerning discipline and particularly the use of the rod and at the risk of sidestepping the specifics of the debate...no risk really, that is exactly what I want to do...the point I want to draw out again is the developmental one...the tacit acknowledgement in this book of the need for the child to grow and mature, that instruction, discipline is necessary and that this is towards the fear of the Lord and the appropriate life lived in that fear...integrity, honesty, truthfulness and so on...a bringing to maturity

In this book, drawing as it does on a creational theology as well as acknowledging the redemption of Israel we see the necessity of raising children in the fear of the Lord acknowledging their state as children within the covenant community.

## **20. What does the Bible say: Isa 11.6**

Visions of the hoped for future feature children...Isa 11.6; Zech 8.5.

Nice to see the children get a run in the new creation but the point here is really the tip of the iceberg of the Bible's use of the child as a symbol/metaphor...culminating I guess in our own status as the children of God

Quite a gamut, and no doubt more besides.

## **21. What does the Bible say: Mk 9.36**

As we turn to the Gospels our mind turns to Jesus and a couple of his statements concerning children. Jesus' words are often seen as justifying children's ministry as a significant pursuit so they deserve some attention here as we work our way through the Biblical material.

There are two moments in Mark's gospel...9.36 and 10.13-15.

In Mark 9.36 Jesus takes a child into his arms as an object lesson for the disciples. This is accompanied by Jesus' words stating that welcoming a child is welcoming Jesus and welcoming Jesus is welcoming the Father who sent him.

Inn Mk 9.36 the two actions of taking the child and setting the child in their midst are separated.

The context is certainly a dispute about greatness. Jesus responds with a statement concerning kingdom reversal, 'the first shall be last, the last shall be first' and illustrates this by placing a child amongst them.

He then takes the child into his arms and identifies himself with the child as the object of people's welcome

Commentary usually runs too how the child is an example of discipleship...humility, multivalent?

There is then a shift from giving service to receiving ministry...the little ones set out in Jesus' name are equated with the disciples who are sent out by Jesus in ministry.

## **22. What does the Bible say: Mk 9.33-35**

The context suggests that the interactions with children are as much about discipleship as they are about children...even more so.

The children are held up as the opposite of greatness and hence are appropriate models of discipleship

## **23. What does the Bible say: Mk 10.13-14**

In Mk 10.13 people bring little children to Jesus to seek his blessing upon them; when the disciples seek to prevent the children from coming (or their parents from bringing them), Jesus rebukes them and takes the opportunity to make two statements regarding children: first that the kingdom belongs to such as them and second that the children are models for receiving the kingdom of God...he then takes them in his arms and blesses them.

The disciples try and prevent the people bringing children to Jesus...they have not learned the lesson of 9.36...they are still concerned for their own greatness

Again Jesus takes the child as an example of Christian discipleship...the point is not primarily to declare children to be sharers in the kingdom of God...the main concern is to teach adults about discipleship...children share in the kingdom...this is a clear implication but the passage does not focus on children as children.

In both passages the concern of the disciples for their importance is the context...children are held up as the opposite of greatness and hence are appropriate models of discipleship...twice Jesus refers too disciples in child terms

Jesus is not offering direct teaching on children but using children as metaphors in order to prepare his disciples for the kingdom that is coming...the theme of eschatological reversal is also in the context...the first shall be last and last first...children are being used to illustrate discipleship and particularly the exercise of power and understanding of importance among those who would follow Jesus.

The message is that there is an eschatological reversal of values...supremely demonstrated in Jesus' own humiliation and death...weakness that ends in glory and not shame...it was children of the first century social world who epitomised weakness and therefore served as ready illustrations.



## **24. What does the Bible say: Mk 10.14-16**

Lest we simply treat the incident in metaphorical terms only and forget the fact that a real child was taken into the arms of our Lord let me also emphasise that I think there is a point here made about the welcoming of children...no priority perhaps but a welcome nonetheless.

If the Lord Jesus receives children and his kingdom is composed of those like children then high value is in order by their parents, by their churches and by their community...the act of taking children into his arm and blessing demonstrates this

Children are special objects of care and protection because they are numbered amongst the weak and oppressed...maybe not quite the case today...children much more powerful in our world...the ultimate compliment to their power is that they consumer targets but the point still stands I think.

No theological privileging of the child by Jesus' teaching...this does not suggest ministry to children is invalid, to be marginalised or suppressed

The point is simple: children have a place in the kingdom of God; the kingdom of Jesus; the kingdom for which Jesus died. Jesus died so that children as well as men and women could find a place in it.

This basic truth is confirmed for us elsewhere in Scripture...

We read Acts 2 and hear Peter's first great speech at Pentecost that the Gospel he has outlined, the fulfilment of God's promises, concerns his listeners and their children as well.

In Paul's letters to the Colossians and Ephesians children are addressed as believers and instructed as to how to behave 'in the Lord'.

Children have a very real place in God's plans and purposes; in the plan of Jesus.

Why were the disciples hindering them?

When babies were brought to Jesus, to be blessed, it seemed like an unnecessary and an unprofitable bother to the Master, and so the disciples took it upon themselves to send the parents and children away, giving them the impression that they should not "bother" Jesus in this way. They hindered the children from coming to Jesus because they were not significant enough, because they had nothing to offer. They were "takers," but not "givers." They were a liability, not an asset, to the cause of the kingdom, or so the disciples thought.

Jesus' response shows the poverty of this kind of thinking and is a spur to us today to keep welcoming the little children, to keep searching for the lost little children; to keep letting the little children come to Jesus.

There is more to consider as we consider children's ministry. Not only does Jesus declare that the children ought to come to him but he suggests that his disciples, and I think we can include ourselves here ought to go to the children and learn from them.

Verse 15 – Whoever does not receive the kingdom like a little child...Jesus is a bit more expansive in Matt 18.3 – unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven and in Luke he says that whoever will not receive the kingdom of child will never enter it.

There is great blessing in being involved in children's ministry because we are constantly seeing the Gospel unfold before our eyes. We learn more about the nature of God and the grace of his being towards us as we minister to children and see them come into the kingdom...we can even learn from our children by extension...the broader issue here is that everyone can learn from one another in the Kingdom of God; children can 'teach' as well as learn.

## **25. What does the Bible say: Eph 6.1**

When it comes to the place of children in the life of the early church there is scant evidence. However, having said this we can note several points from the passages in the New Testament.

There is a general positive regard of children when they are mentioned or intimated as present: children of believing parents are holy; assumed participation in the faith: Acts 2.39; households come in to the faith...Acts 11.14; 16.15, 31, 34; 18.8. Children mentioned Acts 20.9, 12; 21.5.

Nothing is specifically undone from the OT picture and the little we have suggests the importance again of the family.

We also have a couple of moments in Colossians and Ephesians where children are addressed as members of the gathering. Children are disciples/church and hear Paul's instruction to parents/fathers in Ephesians 6 to raise their children 'in the fear and instruction of the Lord'. This is attached to an explicit reference to the old covenant 10 commandments in the instruction to children to honour their parents (the addition, 'which is the first commandment with a promise' is clearly a reference to the promise of long life to obedient children (Exo 20:12, Deut 5:16); the promise is recast in new covenant terms in promising long life 'on the earth' rather than 'in the land').

How does this happen...the small piece of evidence we have is 2 Tim 3.15 where Timothy is reminded of the what he has learned and from whom he has learned it...and that from childhood he has known the sacred scriptures which were able and did indeed instruct him for salvation as well as equip him for every good work.

We see a neat recognition of the place of both the church/congregation and the family in these casual references.

This accords with the conclusions of Claire Smith's exhaustive account of the language of teaching and teaching and learning in Paul where she affirms that the early Christian communities would have been seen and understood by those who saw them in the first century as scholastic or learning communities. The model of education that emerged was a 'community' model rather than a schooling model. The goal of the latter, in the modern era, is standardised outcomes of attainment, where students do their own work, and there is a clear distinction between teachers and students. The goal of the former is a common life where each member is involved in teaching and learning, the less experienced use the more experienced as resources

and guides, and the community is formed as the members learn shared beliefs and values and these individuals from the community...Claire does not especially dwell on the place of children in this context but I take it they are thoroughly included by the passages under consideration.

## **26. What does the Bible say: bringing things together**

We have seen a lot to be mulled over I think.

Not a biblical theology? No classical development through the various strata of biblical revelation; though mentions at every step of the way Is there a biblical theology of children? Perhaps too ambitious today but a quick tour of the Bible will give us resources...for at least a systematic approach

A theology? Of youth and children specifically...not really but certainly a pointer to include youth and children in our purview when thinking through the lens of biblical anthropology

Ministry generally...perhaps we need to revisit our thinking about the nature of ministry generally and see that youth and children have their place in that context... What can we glean from the scriptures...discipleship and Christian growth more generally?

Bible based, disciple forming ministry that is not restricted to 'adults'/'grown ups but as part of the learning community that is the Christian congregation we see children and youth being gathered to Christ, disciple to follow him and in turn make disciples

There is also a theological imperative/perspective: our task to explore this briefly and then Jon Thorpe will talk more explicitly about practices based on this understanding.

## **27. What does the Bible say: bringing things together**

Scriptures provide mix of principles, patterns and practices...doesn't say everything but does say a lot...let's isolate a couple of key points:

1. Family responsibility: the family is the first church and however we conceive of children's and youth ministry we do well to respect that primary context and responsibility...equip families for their ministry to their children and help families to resist the temptation to 'out-source' their responsibility to the church or to the school
2. Church as a learning community with all participating; church is the second family...all taking responsibility for all; visible children's and youth ministry and not just shunted off to the margins of Sunday life and Friday nights...integrated, not disaggregated, segregated

The church as surf club...multi/inter-generational with older helping the younger, side by side in activity and not segregated: a helpful image; impossible dream?

3. The importance of questions: minor but I was struck by this note through some of the research and also the Scriptures...a number of points the comment was made by some that left the faith that they did not feel they were allowed to ask questions, dangerous

questions and explore...children and youth have questions; relative freedom to explore dangerous ideas and questions...gentle leading to the truth not a slamming down and shutting down of dialogue etc...

## **28. Into effect: Heart**

As we think about outing this into practice we need to think heart, head and hands...heart involves our attitudes: our attitudes to children and youth work...expressed in our attitudes to training and employment of youth and children's ministry; our attention to the profile and processes in congregations; support of SRE etc...

## **29. Into effect: Head**

Need to think theologically:

anthropology and ecclesiology at least...these seem to me two of the key areas of theological thinking that effect how we conceive of c&Y ministry and how we will conduct in the context of the local congregation

Need to think about cultural context...

Barely mentioned this but there in the research again and arguably our children are more immersed and vulnerable to the surrounding culture...Context of shrinking childhood and broadening adolescence...hard to be a youth; great to be a kid?

### **Children's Greatest Fears**

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University reported that 30 years ago, the greatest fears of grade school children were: 1) Animals, 2) Being in a dark room, 3) High places, 4) Strangers, 5) Loud noises.

Today, kids are afraid of the following: 1) Divorce, 2) Nuclear war, 3) Cancer, 4) Pollution, 5) Being mugged.

It's tough being a kid...divorce and family breakdown, deteriorating health, rising mental health issues, eating disorders and poor self image...male and female; Increased sexualisation through access to porn; teens and screens; adults not interested in them

We know the answer to every question is God, Jesus and the Bible but what are the questions for our young people...a whole can of worms I know but I thought I would mention this

Need to remember they are still children?

We need to think about developmental factors; giving thanks that under the Lord's common grace we know a lot about childhood and adolescent growth and development; but also that under the auspices of the Spirit we know the power of God to raise children of God at any stage of the life cycle.

### 30. Into effect: Hand

I've talked enough; I hope that has been a helpful reminder of some familiar texts and concepts as think through this important ministry...John and Emma and the rest to pick this up and show us how to how to put our hands effectively to work...

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