

Conversations for Change

Article #7

A Vision and Philosophy for Ministering to the Children of LBC

When thinking through the part children play in the church of God, it is helpful to establish a framework within which we will minister to our children. That framework needs to include the following:

1. A clear understanding regarding the nature of children.

- The Bible is crystal clear when it speaks of the nature of children. All humans come into the world born in sin (Ps.51:5). That is, we all come into the world bearing the sinful nature of Adam (Rom 5:12-19). We are all by nature “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). A child’s biggest problem is God. They are condemned (John 3:18). From our perspective, our children have entered the world as enemies of God who stand as objects of God’s wrath unless a work of grace is done in their lives.
- As children born in sin and in Adam, they come into the world spiritually depraved. That is, they are incapable of coming to Christ on their own (John 6:44). The Bible describes all people who are without Christ as being dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1), blind to their sinfulness (2 Cor. 4:3-4), hardened in heart (Rom 2:5), and lost (Luke 15 and the parables of a lost coin, lost sheep and lost son). Unbelieving humanity’s primary need is the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- The Bible also appeals to the nature of children when it wants to symbolize and illustrate a gullibility factor (Eph. 4:14). Children are gullible by nature. That is, they are trusting by nature. They enter the world as helpless beings completely dependent on the resources and strengths of others. This breeds a kind of innocent trust. This innocent trust is a ripe and fertile field for breeding false professions in Christ.
- Children are fearful. And while having urgency for fleeing the city of destruction and the reality of hell is a true gospel motivation in Scripture, simply scaring a child out of hell does not necessarily land him heaven as a God-lover. Many people make false professions of faith simply out of an intense desire for self-preservation: who would want to go to hell? A heart that is ultimately motivated by self-preservation is still a heart that serves self. In coming to Christ, one must die to self and treasure Christ above all things (Matt. 16:24).
- Children are advancing in maturity and independence. As a part of the stewardship entrusted to us by God, we are bringing up our children for the day when they will leave our homes and establish families of their own. As they increase in their independence, they increase their sense of ownership as to what matters to them. We must be cautious in establishing an environment that presumes upon childhood conversion. True faith must be tested before it can be declared genuine. “Like gold tested in the fire” is the way Peter speaks of genuine faith (1 Pet. 1:7). Faith must come under fire to discover if it is real. Therefore, we need to remember that our children are growing up in a Christian subculture where Daddy’s faith can too easily become the child’s faith. We dare

not declare anyone's faith as "genuine" until their faith has been tested in the fire. We are longing for that day when God is the God of our children and not just the God of their fathers. While childhood conversion is possible, we must urge caution before affirming the faith of an untested child.

2. A clear understanding regarding the nature of gospel ministry.

- The gospel ministry is a ministry of presentation and offering. That is, the gospel must be clearly presented if it is to be clearly understood. The gospel ministry is primarily content driven. There are certain plain facts that must be known and understood about the gospel (for example, cf. 1 Cor 15:1-11). This requires proclamation of clear propositional truth. Preach the gospel (Acts 14:21).
- But the gospel is more than teaching; it is an offering. That is, the gospel ministry is one of invitation and offering. As heralds of the gospel, we hold out the offer of free grace. The offer itself is a gracious gift to a sinful world (Matt. 22:14; Acts 17:30; Rom. 2:4).
- When it comes to ministering to children in our modern evangelical world, irreparable harm is often done when we come to see our role as "closers." That is, the gospel ministry is not the same as the work of a salesman who wants to close a deal. As ministers of the gospel we do not and dare not push for decisions in our children. That is not our role. False professions are the result of human coercion and manipulation (John 1:12-13). True conversion is the result of a work of God by the Holy Spirit in the heart of a sinner. We can sow and water seeds, but only God can give life and cause growth (1 Cor. 3:6).
- The role of gospel ministers (whether as parents or teachers of children) is to recognize when a work is being done by the Holy Spirit in the life of a child. Our role is that of observers and affirmers. The work of the Holy Spirit that we are carefully and eagerly watching for includes the following five things: conviction of sin, hunger for truth and righteousness, repentance, obedience from the heart, and perseverance. The Bible calls this work of the Holy Spirit the work of regeneration: the giving of life to a spiritually dead soul.
- Children are capable of being sorry for their sin at one human level. And children can be dazzled by the feats of one man named Jesus of Nazareth the same way they marvel at the miraculous feats of one man named Spiderman! Children can feign an "obedience of expedience." That is, any one can obey when it is made expedient. Watch a child who has been told to do something by his mother. He hears her words but does not intend to obey. That is, he does not intend to obey until he hears her say, "I'm getting the paddle..." Once those words hit his ears, up he runs with an "obedience of expedience." The same is true of an unbeliever who honestly files his taxes with the IRS. He fears the consequences of cheating. It is expedient to obey. This means that it is inherently difficult for parents and teachers to discern what is the true work of the Spirit in the life of a child.
- In review, these are the five elements in the life of a person being regenerated by the Spirit.
 - i. Conviction of sin

- ii. Hunger for truth and righteousness
- iii. Repentance
- iv. Obedience from the heart
- v. Perseverance

3. A clear understanding regarding the primacy of the home.

- The bulk of the NT's teaching on ministering to children is laid at the feet of fathers (cf. Eph. 6:4 with mothers implied). The primary role of a father is to minister the gospel to his children. The church, as a family of believers, comes alongside the father for the equipping and establishing of the gospel in his own life so that it may overflow into his home-life.
- A father who relegates the bulk of his child's interaction with the gospel to the church is a negligent or immature believer. This fact is borne out by the qualifications for eldership in the church. A man must father well (1 Tim 3:4-5). He must rule and lead his house well (Titus 1:6). If he does not, it is manifest that he is either negligent in character or immature in his faith. Both are disqualifiers for eldership (1 Tim. 3:6, a recent convert).

4. A clear understanding regarding the nature of ministry.

- The church is charged with "the ministry of the saints" (Eph.4:11). We exist to serve the needs of one another. In fact, we are commanded some thirty times throughout the NT to serve the various needs of one another. The nature of ministry is *service*. The church ministers when it seeks to fulfill the needs of others. You and I minister when we seek to meet the needs of another.
- Ministry, then, is NOT programs but people. We serve each other's needs when we serve individuals, not when we institute programs.
- There are two levels: the elders equip the saints *for* ministry and the saints *do* ministry. The equipping is not the ministry. It simply makes ministry possible. Saints of God do ministry.
- Therefore, when it comes to ministering to children, all the needs fall into one of two categories:
 - i. You can serve the needs of parents by caring for their children while they get equipped. This is the primary vision that must drive the nursery and toddler ministries. Fathers and mothers need to be equipped for gospel ministry at home. This makes the primary role of the nursery a ministry to the parents, not the children. Beyond that, nursery and toddler ministry is babysitting / childcare for the glory of God.
 - ii. You can serve the needs of both parents and children by reinforcing what is being ministered at home as you interact with the children. This is the primary vision that must drive the children's education ministries.

Summary:

Let it be established, then, that our children shall be regarded as our first and primary evangelistic realm. They represent the largest number of lost individuals gathered in one place on Sunday morning. When we meet as believers and bring our unbelieving children with us, we will devote ourselves to a unified frame of mind that regards our children as lost and in need of the gospel.

Furthermore, when we gather as a family of believers, we will come together with a unified frame of mind that seeks to graciously serve the needs of parents and children. We will gladly enroll in the ministry of childcare and prayerfully consider how we might reinforce, through preaching and teaching roles, what is being taught in our homes.

Practical Considerations for Speaking To and Teaching Our Children

1. We will devote ourselves to the following grand themes of the Bible:
 - ***The grandeur and glory of God*** – this will be the bulk of all the content taught to all our children; and it will be the sum total taught to our youngest children (Ages 1-3): “God is big and God is beautiful!”
 - ***The enslaving power of sin*** – this will be a welcome addition to those pre-school-aged children who start to wrestle with the presence of sin in their life (Ages 3-5).
 - ***The penalty of sin*** – this will introduce our children to the reality that they are at odds with the big and beautiful God who made them. This is where we will begin to appeal to the conscience of our school-aged children and invite them with the free offer of the gospel (Ages 5-9).
 - ***The wonderful provision of Christ*** – this is our children’s only hope. We want to call them to repentance and begin to observe a work of the Spirit in their life

Note:

Please remember we are not putting God in a box. Childhood conversion is possible. We do not want to squelch any real work of the Spirit; and we are equally terrified of crediting to the Spirit what is entirely of the flesh.

Also, these grand themes are not hard and fast. They are intricately involved at all times along the way. Pedagogically, however, certain points must be stressed in a logical and chronological way. It is given here for the sake of a core commitment in our curriculum.

2. We will not encourage our children toward false professions of faith.
 - We will not push our children to “make a decision for Christ,” or to “ask Jesus into their hearts.”
 - We will not offer any sense of assurance to our children when it comes to salvation or security.
 - We will simply proclaim the gospel, fervently pray, and watch for a work of God.
 - We will never speak with a child regarding their eternal state without including the parents in the conversation.

- We will not encourage our children to sing of their salvation: “If you’re saved and you know it...Clap your hands!...”
3. We will not seek to categorically advance our children in Christian worship.
 - We will not speak collectively to our children as though they were believers worshipping God, because many of them are not. (It may be necessary, however, to single out individual children who are evidencing a work of the Spirit in their life. The advancement of their Christian worship is best done individually in the home or one-on-one outside the home.)
 - We will not encourage our unbelieving children to sing or pray to God as their Father, because He is not. (While we will not encourage them to do so, neither should we discourage them when they are.)
 - We will not encourage Bible study for the sake of devotional life, because this assumes a relationship with God that may not exist.
 4. We will, instead, promote the widespread memorizing of the Bible, believing that it is through Scripture that the Holy Spirit begins his drawing and convicting ministry.
 5. We will encourage a widespread and thorough knowledge of the Bible as God’s story.
 6. We will view our ministry as the painting of an adequate and sufficient portrait of the character and reliability of a God who is to be loved, trusted, and obeyed.
 7. We will unify our hearts and minds to fervently pray for the salvation of all our children.