

UNIT 5.1

CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH WORK

SETTING A VISION

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE are of huge significance, aren't they? But do you realise just how big the task is of reaching them? More than 60% of the earth's six billion inhabitants are aged under 24.



What about where you live? Try to get a feel for the challenge ahead of you. Do a quick piece of homework...

- 1. Find out how many youngsters attend Lower/Infants, Middle/Junior, Upper/Secondary schools near you.*
- 2. Ask yourself, how many of them hear clear presentations of the gospel?*

It seems that we are not doing very well in our attempts to reach them. A recent survey of more than 700 children found that only two knew that the Millennium had anything to do with Jesus! But the Bible can help us to overcome our sense of inadequacy – it sets us a vision!

THE CHILDREN YOU CAN REACH

To get the help we need, the best place to start is with the Scriptures themselves, and where better than an example of the Apostle Paul bringing a church back to its Christian senses.



Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

PRINCIPLES TO BEAR IN MIND

STRATEGIES TO REACH CHILDREN

Look at verse 22.



What is Paul's goal?



How will that purpose impact upon your church schedules as you plan ahead?

There are differences of opinion and practice between those Christians who see the new covenant relating to believers only, and those who see it as including believers and their children.



Do you think of children as basically 'lost' and needing to be saved, or basically 'found' until they prove otherwise?

IDENTIFYING WITH CHILDREN

Paul bends over backwards to identify with his hearers – see verse 20.



- 1. What does this imply for work with youngsters?*
- 2. What barriers do we have to overcome in reaching them?*

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

Paul does all for the sake of the gospel – his goal is to win people by the gospel (v 23). That gospel must not be compromised, but...



1. In what ways can it be adapted and still passed on faithfully to different people?
2. What lessons do we learn from passages like Acts 13:26-33, 14:15-18 and 17:22-31?
3. What can we do that will help children and young people to understand?

SERVING CHILDREN

To win people, Paul is willing to become a 'slave' – he is at their disposal. Verse 22 also points to the huge energy investment involved in the task.



What do these verses mean for your church's approach to child outreach?

In today's world we need to be very sensitive to a raft of issues raised by the problems of child abuse. Here are two vital questions you need to consider now...



1. Has your fellowship thought this through?
2. Do you have some kind of child protection policy?

PRACTICE TO AIM FOR

Given all this 'principled pragmatism', we have received a mandate which allows great freedom, combined with a great expenditure of energy (God's energy through us – 1 Corinthians 15:10).



Given the necessity of outreach, discuss your own practice...

1. Some Christians feel Sunday schools are a must – do you agree?
2. What are the alternatives?
3. How do you balance opportunity with resources – and with other outreach responsibilities (such as to the elderly)?

As Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 9, he urges us to aim for 'simply the best'. We have freedom to go for...

- the best time for them
- the best place – given what you want to achieve
- the best gifts that you can muster
- the best approach for the age group with which you are working.

Rather than acting as a blueprint for children's and youth work, the Bible fires up our passion for people, encourages us to think of ways of communicating the gospel appropriately and helps us to look to the Lord for his blessing.



What is your church doing to reach youngsters with the gospel? Is it the best? Could you do what you are doing better?

THE CHURCH YOU WANT THEM TO BELONG TO

As you think about introducing children and young people to your church, it is easy immediately to think of the church we belong to, with all its foibles, rather than the church as God wants it to be. So let's start by building up from first principles, and looking at a New Testament passage...



Read Ephesians 6:1-4

Again we will develop some key principles and begin to fill in the picture to see where the newly converted child or young person fits in.

WHAT IS RIGHT?

PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITIES



What lessons do you learn from the following Bible passages?

- Deuteronomy 6:1-7, 20
- Proverbs 1:8ff
- Ephesians 6:4
- Colossians 3:20
- 2 Timothy 3:16

Christian parents have the responsibility and privilege of teaching the Christian faith to their own children. Converted children with Christian parents should receive their main spiritual support from home.



How might this happen in practice?

CHURCH RESPONSIBILITIES



What lessons do you learn from the following Bible passages?

- Nehemiah 8:2-3 and 8
- 2 Chronicles 20:13
- Ephesians 6:1

The Bible assumes that where parents are learning and worshipping, children will be present too. Paul addresses the children in Ephesians 6:1 assuming that they will be there.



What about us? Do we tend to assume that children are generally incapable of listening to 'sermons' and thus remove them? Here are some tricky subjects to discuss...

- Are our reasons for this always for the young person's benefit, or is it more to do

with the convenience of the parents?

- *What benefits may come from keeping most of them in for the whole meeting?*
- *What problems may arise if you do this?*
- *And if you don't?*



Read Matthew 18:5-6

Christian children should be encouraged to be full and active members of the church, and should be encouraged to see the church as the primary organisation to which they are spiritually committed.



1. *How can we develop this in ways appropriate to their age?*
2. *Discuss the role young Christians currently play in the life of your church.*

We have seen that Paul does address them as a particular group needing a certain kind of teaching and advice. There is real scope for helping the young, and the growing adult. But we must make sure that we do not do this at the expense of the principles outlined above, thereby threatening the unity of the whole church. Depending on the size of the group and church, the work could well require specialist personnel (a mature woman acting as a counsellor for teenage girls, for example). There are also lots of opportunities for young people to bring the gospel to their peers in ways appropriate to their own culture.

WHAT IS WISE?

HELPING PARENTS



1. *How can the church encourage Christian parents to carry out their responsibilities? Think of at least three ways.*
2. *Has your fellowship got anything like this in place?*

HELPING CHILDREN

We need to help them by being sensitive to their different 'growth' phases. When they are very young, or are active toddlers and cannot really take part, we may spend much of our time trying slowly to train them to take part at their own level. A good crèche and other facilities will be needed for them, and for visitors' children (especially non-Christian visitors). But as they learn to sit (often by school age they are having to sit quietly) our emphasis can become one of encouraging their presence, and active participation. They will need help, but most people who take part in this phase of a child's life are amazed just how much a child can learn with even a little bit of encouragement.

We also need to be aware of the crucial importance of building good

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relationships. Children may relate to a few Sunday School teachers or club leaders, but the practice of quickly removing them from the meeting means that many of them rarely build relationships outside a relatively small peer group. No wonder that many don't identify with the 'adult church' as they grow and always seem to want the security of their own small circle. If that 'circle' happens to stop wanting to go to church, then the whole group can be lost to the gospel.



Discuss ways...

- of trying to overcome this problem
- in which your church can support Christian children from non-Christian homes.

Finally, we need to recall that in its care for the young, the church needs to set a standard of confidence and security for those who entrust their youngsters to its care.

HELPING THE CHURCH

The church should welcome children and help to develop lasting relationships. Some adults regularly miss the main meetings because they are caring for even quite old children. In a culture where many adults attend Sunday worship only once, this can have a detrimental effect on the life of the church. Others grow used to the absence of the children, and when they are in attendance on special occasions, there can develop a '***we suffer the little children – but only just***' mentality.

We need to encourage a loving acceptance by older members of the young, so that when they are converted they will feel part of the church, and ***even if they do not become believers*** they will know that the church is made up of people who really care for them – people to whom they may turn in times of crisis in later life. All this is part of the outworking of the principle of welcoming all who come.



How can you help children feel that they belong in your church?



THINK IT THROUGH

1. Can you think of action which you and your church could take to translate your 'dream' or 'vision' into practice?
2. Which do you think you are – strong on principles but weak on application? Or great on activity but not always informed by biblical principles? What steps can you take to get the balance right?



FOLLOW IT UP

1. *Either formulate a 'quality review' process so that you and other leaders can sit down and ask honest questions about what you are doing with the aim of improving the overall life of the church, under the grace of God.*
2. *Or formulate ways in which you can help children, parents and church members to reach and integrate children and young people.*