

Evangelism among Children

a theological reflection

by Nick White



The
United
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Church

Introduction



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This series of articles has arisen from a desire to offer the United Reformed Church some materials to allow greater engagement in theological reflection in all aspects of our ministry with children: as part of our worshipping communities, as part of our families, as part of our communities.

For the purposes of these reflections we are using the definition of a child as a person under the age of 18. In doing so, we recognize the huge variety of experiences that children/young people have in these formative years.

This theological reflection considers evangelism among children. Although the definition of children used in this series of booklets is anybody under the age of eighteen years, many of the issues discussed relate more to younger children and less to teenagers. Children can and do naturally share their faith with one another. However, the issues in this booklet relate mainly to the role of adults in evangelism among children.

Nick White is the Children's & Youth Development Officer for the Southern Synod of the United Reformed Church.

What is evangelism?

Inspired by an analogy with the legend of Robin Hood, Graham Tomlin offers a description of evangelism in a postmodern society as: 'the simple announcement that there is another king, another kingdom that will one day become fully visible, and the invitation to take part in it.'¹ This helpfully emphasises two key elements of evangelism, namely sharing the good news of Jesus and inviting people to join his family, but it is not indicative of a particular method or style of communication.

When thinking about evangelism among children, it is important to bear in mind that:

- The good news of Jesus Christ is more than words, and can be shared as much through children's experience of activities in a faith community, as it does through the hearing of the Christian story
- Evangelism takes its place within a process of child development involving much personal change and any distinction between evangelism and nurture (or discipleship) is necessarily blurred
- In practice, the adult-child relationship is not a relationship of equals and therefore the danger of manipulation is very real
- Faith responses can take a wide variety of forms²

Therefore, I propose this working definition for churches: 'Evangelism among children is offering repeated opportunities for them to encounter, explore, and respond to the good news of Jesus Christ in ways appropriate to their changing ages and stages of development.'

The sharing of bread and wine is at the heart of our faith story. In it we declare our faith in God, proclaim Christ's death and resurrection and explore the nature of redemption. The gospel is offered to all, irrespective of age and we know that children can and do respond to it.

¹ Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*, p.29. For a broader consideration of evangelism in general, see United Reformed Church's 'Vision 4 Life - Exploring Evangelism' booklet and a theological reflection by Francis Brienen on the Vision 4 Life website www.vision4life.org.uk

² Of course, some of these points are also very pertinent to evangelism among adults.

What is the place of children in God's kingdom?

The kingdom of God is a major theme in Jesus' teaching and he talks about people entering into it. But what about children? Put very simply: are young children included until they opt out? Or are they out until they opt in? And how does the answer affect our approach to evangelism?

Theologians over the centuries have grappled with similar questions. Augustine concluded that children are born in sin and in need of salvation from birth. Aquinas developed this thinking to state that babies must be baptised for the remission of both the stain of original sin and actual sin. However, more recently, theologians including Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, have rejected the doctrine of original sin in favour of the view that children are born with a promise of grace in Jesus Christ because of the love of God.

After carefully examining these theological positions, Mark Griffiths concludes that 'the newborn child is untainted before God.'³ That is not to say that they remain unaffected by sin. It is through the children's experiences of a broken world that sin begins to affect and infect their being and their relationships. Perhaps Jesus has this reality in mind when he gives such strong words of warning about causing children to sin?⁴ The vulnerability of young children makes this all the more inevitable,



³ Mark Griffiths, *One Generation From Extinction*, p. 147-153

⁴ Matthew 18:6

though the title of David Jensen's book 'Graced Vulnerability' is a reminder that young children are held within God's grace.⁵

Unfortunately, the doctrine of original sin has led to a widespread belief



that children must be converted before they can join God's people. This is disappointing, given that the gospels present Jesus teaching that it already belongs to little children. Judith Gundry, in a thorough consideration of children in the gospel of Mark, concludes that 'Jesus ministry to children in Mark culminates not only in his declaring them explicitly to be heirs and beneficiaries of God's reign ... but also in ... blessing them with eschatological salvation as well as saving them from sickness and death in this life.'⁶ Pridmore also critiques the form of child evangelism which makes the child's relationship with God dependent on a personal commitment to Jesus as their saviour – which to be meaningful assumes an understanding way beyond that of young children. He highlights the absurdity of such a view because 'it implies a doubt about the standing before God of the very ones about whom Jesus is least equivocal.'⁷

⁵ David Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*

⁶ Judith Gundry, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, in Marcia Bunge (ed) *Children in the Bible*, p. 158 (n.b. eschatological salvation is a reference to being safe for eternity.)

⁷ John Pridmore, *Salvation*, in Anne Rochards & Peter Privett (eds) *Through the Eyes of a Child* p. 194 Griffiths, *One Generation From Extinction*, p. 147-153

Why evangelism among children?

So, if young children already belong within God's kingdom, in what sense should the church engage in evangelism? Young children still grow up in a broken world and their experience will not always be nurturing. As they grow and develop, they need to know the good news that Jesus is loving and can be trusted, that they have a place in God's family, that God is making all things better, and that they have a part to play. This will be communicated more through their experience of the Christian community than it will be through words. For young children, faith tends to be 'more caught than taught'. This could be regarded as evangelism and nurture rolled into one.

Jesus' own example and teaching offer some pointers for the church's response to children with family who encourage them to be part of the faith community:⁸

- Welcome parents with young children, and make their children as welcome as any adult and as welcome as Jesus himself.
- Affirm children as members of God's family and as equal partners in the life of the church.⁹
- Give opportunities for children to encounter and explore the many facets of the good news of Jesus Christ as they grow up, especially through the use of story and activity.¹⁰
- Expect and enable children to actively participate in the life, worship and mission of the church. Their offering may seem small, but in God's eyes small things are valued and in God's hands they can grow beyond our expectations.¹¹
- Be open to learning from children.
- Take steps to protect children from harm.

⁸ See Matthew 18:1-14 and 19:13-15

⁹ This is the central theme in the the United Reformed Church's Charter for Children

¹⁰ Children were evidently present in the gospel accounts of Jesus teaching.

¹¹ For example: a boy offered his packed lunch and Jesus and his disciples fed a crowd of people (John 6:1-14). Compare this with the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:30-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19) and the widow offering her 'mite' (Luke 21:3-5 & Mark 12:43-44)

However, while Jesus teaches that little children belong to God's kingdom, he also implies that there is a danger that they will be lost from it. Indeed, though 'God is not willing that any of these little ones are lost',¹² God's respect for freewill must allow people to opt out as they become responsible for their own actions.¹³ Reflecting on his experience with children in the UK today, Griffiths suggests that 'although children born into a non-Christian home may be born in Christ, it is unlikely that they will be nurtured into the Christian faith without some outside intervention [and] therefore, whether in thought or action, they will reject Christ ...'¹⁴ For example:

- Mark's new step-dad was openly hostile about the Christian faith and his mum stopped taking him to church to church. Mark's openness to the Christian faith has declined and his involvement in a Christian children's club soon ended aged 10.
- On the other hand Danny's mum takes him to church regularly and he receives encouragement from many church members. He also goes to a church camp each year. Though the same age as Mark, his faith appears to be thriving.



¹² See Matthew 18:12-14.

¹³ Consider the account of the rich young ruler who seems to reject the way to eternal life which Jesus offers to him (see Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18). Interestingly, this account immediately follows on from Jesus' blessing of little children and his affirmation that 'the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'.

¹⁴ Mark Griffiths, *One Generation from Extinction*, p.188

As children enter adolescence, other influences become stronger – especially peer pressure and the media. There also seems to be a natural tendency to question inherited beliefs at this stage of life in the search for one's own identity.¹⁵

In the UK today, the vast majority of children are unlikely to be nurtured in the Christian faith. There are relatively few children involved in local churches in the UK. For example, in the year 2000 only 4% of children in England attended Sunday school or an equivalent group. Moreover, in 2005 39% of churches in the UK had no-one attending aged under 11; 49% of churches had no-one attending aged 11-14; and 59% churches had no-one attending aged 15-19 years.¹⁶ While the statistics do not include children who are involved only in mid-week church groups, there is clearly still an urgent need for the church to re-engage with the majority of children in the UK if they are to have the opportunity to discover the good news of Jesus Christ for themselves.¹⁷



¹⁵ This is evident from research and reflection on the subject of faith development. For a discussion see Francis Bridger, *Children Finding Faith*.

¹⁶ Mark Griffiths, *One Generation from Extinction*, p.220-221

¹⁷ Some argue that most children leave the church and then return later in life, thus it is better to focus the church's mission on adults. However, even in the 1990's the number of adults who even had a childhood church experience to return to was only 40% and this figure is inextricably linked to the declining percentage of children in church.

What approach to evangelism among children?

Incarnation

God did not wait for humanity to make the first move towards reconciliation. He took the initiative, in the person of Jesus Christ, living among us, as one of us, embodying the love of God. This is known as the incarnation. Jesus commissioned his disciples to do the same: to go and to humbly enter somebody else's world, to know and to be known, to care and to serve, to live Christ-like lives. Rather than simply praying "Lord, help more children to come to church", churches need first to pray, "Lord, help us to spend time with children where they live, work and play." For example:

- Taking time to become familiar with elements of 'kid's culture'¹⁸ - children's television, books, music, films, games.
- Partnering with others to help with community events & activities.
- Serving in local schools as classroom helpers, leading collective worship, or running activities such as after school clubs.
- Visiting the homes of children, getting to know them and their parents on their own territory.¹⁹

An incarnational approach will mean interacting with a post-modern culture, characterised by complexity, choice, and relativism. Faith in institutions has been eroded, though interest in spirituality is very evident.²⁰ This is the cultural air that children breathe in the UK today and unsurprisingly their values and beliefs are often 'the result of a cut-and-paste mosaic of feelings, facts, principles, experiences and lessons.'²¹

¹⁸ For more on this, see John Harding's book, *Kid's Culture*.

¹⁹ Nick White, *Home Visiting* p.7

²⁰ This was one of the key findings of research which formed the basis a book by Steven Croft et al, 'Evangelism in a Spiritual Age', p.128-129

²¹ Mark Griffiths, *One Generation from Extinction*, p.214

Some of the implications for evangelism among children include:²²

Firstly, evangelism among children should build on children's existing spirituality.²³ They are not simply 'cups to be filled'. They are more like 'flames to be fanned'. Amongst other things, this will mean: genuinely listening to children's experiences and encouraging exploration, imagination, and wondering about life and faith.²⁴

Secondly, caring relationships and the opportunity to be part of a caring community need to be central to any outreach activity.²⁵ This of course takes time.

Thirdly, evangelism needs to focus less on telling children that Christianity is true and more on sharing the Christian story and giving them the opportunity to explore it and respond to it as it touches their lives.

Fourthly, evangelism needs to show how Christianity is concerned with the whole of life, making connections with issues such as: family relationships, bullying, environmental issues, the latest children's book or film.

²² *These implications for evangelism among children are developed from Van Gelder, C. 'Postmodernism and Evangelicals: A unique missiological challenge at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century', in Missiology: An International Review Vol. XXX, No. 4, October 2002. He advocates an incarnational approach which demonstrates the truthfulness of Christianity through the stories and the life of the Christian community. Such an approach is also advocated by Lesley Newbiggin, in The Gospel in A Pluralist Society.*

²³ *The accounts of children in the Bible include numerous examples of spiritual experience, awareness, insight, and responses. See for example, Esther M. Menn, Child Characters in Biblical Narratives, in in Marcia Bunge (ed) Children in the Bible, pp.324-352. A survey of contemporary children's spirituality can be found in David Hay & Rebecca Nye, The Spirit of the Child.*

²⁴ *For more on this, see Rebecca Nye, Children's Spirituality.*

²⁵ *John Westerhoff, in Will Our Children Have Faith?, argues that 'experienced faith' and 'affiliative faith' are the primary modes of faith for most children. For a summary of his model of faith development, see Francis Bridger, Children Finding Faith.*

Communication

Although the presence and actions of Christians are important to help children perceive the Christian faith as good news, it will need to be put into words at some point. Graham Tomlin puts it like this: 'Without actions no-one listens. Without words no-one understands.'²⁶ Effective evangelism among children will connect the Christian story to their life story in a way which makes sense. Here are some pointers:

- speak out of an understanding of the children's context (family circumstances, friendship groups, faith community, school, local community and physical environment).
- find common ground between the child's world and the Christian faith.
- use language which the children will understand. For example, with younger children care can be taken not to use metaphorical language; abstract concepts can be turned into concrete realities using stories and examples from the children's own experience; when leading prayers, avoid using 'thees' and 'thous'.
- make it a two-way conversation.
- major on stories. They can create an imaginary world in which to wonder and play. They can engage the listener or reader at many levels. They can be emotional, encouraging, inspiring, and challenging. They can act like a mirror in which to recognise something about ourselves of which we were unaware. They are not prescriptive, but allow for a multiplicity of insights and impacts depending on the experience and needs of the listener. Stories are an ideal mode of communication in a pluralistic society and postmodern culture. They provide a means to offer the good news of God to any one who will listen. Stories are a powerful, yet subtle form of communication—no wonder Jesus told so many stories!

It is worth reminding ourselves that children can share their faith very naturally with other children. Obviously, they will gain confidence if they first have the opportunity to think and talk about their faith in a friendly environment.²⁷

²⁶ Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*, p.63

²⁷ An excellent resource about evangelism as connecting stories, aimed at young people, is Roy Crowne & Bill Muir, *The Art of Connecting*.

Invitation without Manipulation

The good news of Jesus Christ by its very nature invites a response from people.

However, when adults share the good news with children they need to be acutely aware that it is not a meeting of equals in terms of power, authority, and intellectual ability. Young children tend to believe and trust significant adults without any serious questioning and are in their moral choices are often most concerned with avoiding punishment, gaining rewards, and winning approval. Yet they are often more emotionally and spiritually open and therefore more vulnerable to manipulation – even when it is unintended. Therefore, care must be taken when inviting children to respond, especially in a group setting.

I suggest the following principles:

- Avoid deliberately stirring up emotions – especially that of fear. Highlight the unconditional love of God and allow that to shape a child's response.
- Avoid offering to give children something if they respond in a certain way and reassure children that they will not be treated differently by the leaders according to their response.
- Don't put words into their mouth. Allow them to respond in their own way and in their own words rather than expecting them to recite a set prayer (which they might neither understand nor mean). For example, offer a range of creative prayer options for children to use as they wish.
- Make time for the children to talk about what their response means for them. It may not be what you expected.
- Expect child faith responses rather than adult faith response. These will be more about the here and now than about the future; more about wanting to join in with a Christian community, than about a personal conversion experience; more about taking another step in their journey of faith, than a once and for all commitment to follow Jesus.

Interestingly, the interactions of Jesus with children recorded in the Bible all seem to be in the context of adult carers.²⁸ On this basis, some might argue that evangelism among children should only take place with their family. Children in the UK today have a more individual identity than their counterparts in first-century Jewish society, so this argument does not hold. However, I would suggest that an ethical approach to evangelism among children must still respect the parental role. This is all the more important with younger children. In practice this could mean informing parents and getting consent for their child's involvement in a church activity, talking with parents about their child, getting to know them and their values, organising activities for parents and children together, encouraging children to respect their parents, and asking oneself 'Would I happily say or do this if the child's parent was present?' Visiting children at home is one way to keep in touch and deepen relationships with their parents / carers.²⁹

Conclusion

Though the place of young children in God's kingdom is sure, the lack of children in many churches bears witness to a pressing need to engage in evangelism among children. Without people to nurture their faith children are being lost as they grow into adolescence and adulthood. Without evangelism many children will never experience that nurture. For the people who are the church, this will mean spending more time in the world of the child; living in such a way that children get a taste of God's love; demonstrating and communicating the good news of Jesus Christ for children in ways to which they can relate. It will mean humbly inviting children to join the church. It will mean being Christian communities which children want to be part of because they feel genuinely welcome, valued, and nurtured. It will mean investing time and resources to these ends.

²⁸ Paul Butler, *Reaching Children* pp.30-35

²⁹ Nick White, *Home Visiting* p.7

Discussion Questions

For individuals:

- What could you do to spend more time in the world of a child and to offer a taste of God's kingdom to children?
- What Christian faith responses have you observed in children of different ages?

For children/youth workers:

- To what extent does your ministry among children connect with their world? What could you do to make more connections?
- How could you help children to share their faith with other children?

For churches:

- Reflecting on Mark 10:13-16, John Pridmore argues that 'The children are invited to Jesus, not so that they may be brought within the realm of God's kingship, but because that is where they already are. Much of the commentary and discussion on these words reveals a reluctance to accept that Jesus' pronouncement was really so simple and all-embracing and unconditional.' To what extent do people in your church agree with this statement? What are their reasons?
- What level of priority does your church give to the evangelism and nurture of children? How is this reflected in the time and resources allocated?



Further Reading

Anne Richards & Peter Privett (eds) *Through the Eyes of a Child – New insights in theology from a child's perspective*, Church House Publishing, 2009

Charter for Children, The United Reformed Church, 2004

David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability – A theology of childhood*, The Pilgrim Press, 2005

David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Harper Collins, 1998

Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley (ed) *Understanding God's Heart for Children – toward a biblical framework*, Authentic, 2007

Francis Bridger, *Children Finding Faith*, Scripture Union / CPAS, 2000

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