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Theology for Young Children

"Is there knowledge? it will vanish away; for our knowledge and our prophecy alike are partial, and the partial vanishes when wholeness comes. When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things. Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me."
I Corinthians 13:9-12 (NEB)

We have just discussed at length how the foundation for faith is laid in living the faith with young children because our Christian faith has to do with living our lives now. Does this mean that we don't use the Bible with young children? Not exactly.

Young children learn best through their own experiences—experiences with things and with people. They can and do learn facts, though, which they can repeat to us. Many times they can say the words but do not understand their meaning. We want our children to understand the facts they learn about the Christian faith. So we need to begin carefully to introduce them to theology.

We want their experience in the faith to come first. Then we

slowly add more specific concepts and give names to experiences they have had. We know that our children's knowledge is partial. We want wholeness to replace the partial when the time is right for understanding. But children must begin with the partial.

It is important that the facts and ideas presented to children be simple, somehow related to their experiences and able to stand as truth all of their lives. In other words, you won't have to take back later what you have said. Very young children, for instance, learn that Easter is a special time to remember Jesus. Later they will learn about the special meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, but their earlier learning about Easter is still true and does not have to be unlearned.

The Church

The term "church" is an easy concept to teach young children because they can experience it. They can be involved in a church school class. They can attend church fellowship functions such as family dinners. They can become familiar with the sanctuary. They can attend worship—if only occasionally. They may have various child care experiences, go to Parents' Day Out or a day care center at the church. Young children can understand that the church is a group of people who believe in God. They have participated in the church and heard grown-ups teach about God.

One Sunday morning a kindergarten teacher asked the children, "What is the Church?"

Some children answered, "The building," but most said, "We are the church."

"If something happened to our building and we had to meet in the park, would we still be the Church?" the teacher asked.

"Yes!" the children replied. These children were learning through their own experience that the Church is a community of persons who love God and care for one another.

Sometimes children hear adults refer to the church or to the sanctuary as God's house or as the house of the Lord. This idea is understandable to adults, but literal-minded children may expect to see God in person when they go to worship.

Sean frequently asked his mother if God would be at worship on Sunday. He seemed to think that one day there would be a

very special worship service when God himself would be there—almost as if God were something like a bishop or some kind of visiting dignitary.

We want children to know God as the creator who has planned a beautiful and good world and that God loves and cares for them and all persons throughout the world.

Jesus

Jesus is a historical figure that young children can begin to know. Even two's can relate to Jesus as a baby and as a young child. Of course, they cannot really understand when Jesus lived because they cannot conceive of so many years ago. But young children can identify with someone who was born as a baby and lived in a family. They can also understand that Jesus liked little children. The story of Jesus and the children is used repeatedly in the church school material during the preschool years. It communicates that Jesus thought children were important enough that he stopped talking to adults and gave his full attention to them.

As preschoolers grow, they can understand more about Jesus. Additional information can be given. More stories about Jesus can be used. They can understand that Jesus was a man who went about the countryside teaching about God. By five years, children can grasp the idea that Jesus was a man sent by God to show us how God wants us to live. Jesus loved and helped people.

You will notice that the emphasis is on Jesus' humanity. Young children are not ready to grapple with the problem of how Jesus could be "very man of very man and very God of very God" as the Nicene Creed says. Adults have trouble enough with this concept. We begin with Jesus' humanity because that is what young children can understand now. His humanity will not have to be denied because it was real. Later when the children can understand, we can add the idea of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The Bible

Young children can see and hold the Bible. They can hear someone read from it. They may even learn some songs which use short Bible verses, such as "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," or "Jesus went about all the cities and

villages preaching, teaching and healing.” The Bible was written for adults by adults. When we use the Bible with young children, it must be used selectively because it is very symbolic in some places and deals with adult concepts in other places.

One of the learnings about the Bible that is appropriate for young children is that the Bible is a real book that is special. The Bible tells about God and Jesus, and it tells how people can live happily together.

Dorothy Jean Furnish, author of *Exploring the Bible with Children*¹⁷ has used some guidelines for choosing Biblical material for young children. They include four questions.

(1) What is the purpose for using this Bible story or passage? Are you using it because you learned it as a child or because everyone seems to use it?

(2) Will the achievement of this purpose enhance the child’s life now, or is it for future use? Some Bible stories have no meaning for young children or are frightening to them. In a workshop a woman said that she does not like to use the Old Testament. She continued that she was very frightened as a child by the story of Abraham offering to sacrifice his son to God. The idea that a parent would kill their child—even in the name of God was so frightening to her that the feelings have kept her from studying the Old Testament as an adult.

(3) Can the purpose be achieved without using Biblical materials? Perhaps the point you want to make with your children would make more sense to them if you use an example from their own experience. For example, the story in John of the boy sharing his lunch to help feed the multitude could be used to teach children the value of sharing. But young children cannot take a principle from a story and apply it to their lives. Sharing can be better taught by experiencing sharing in their own lives.

(4) Does the story make sense if it is understood literally? Try reading a story you want to use and think how it sounds when understood literally. Does it have a different meaning that would communicate something very different from your understanding of the story? The

¹⁷Dorothy Jean Furnish, *Exploring the Bible With Children*, Abingdon Press, New York, 1975.

point of the story of Jonah, for instance, has been missed for years because we read only a story of a man swallowed by a whale. The story has much more to say to us if we read beyond the whale.

There are three kinds of difficulties children can have with Biblical language and stories.

(1) They cannot understand when these things happen because they do not have a time sense yet. A Bible story could as easily have happened last week as two thousand years ago as far as a three-year-old’s perspective goes.

(2) Our children do not understand the life-style of Biblical times and therefore would not understand the meaning of many objects or practices in stories. How many of our children have seen a well or a sheep? Some have, of course, but most have not.

(3) Much Biblical language is symbolic, but young children are very literal in their understanding. While young children enjoy listening to Bible stories, they may not understand their meaning.

Use the Bible selectively with your children. Choose passages whose meaning can be understood literally. Use passages that relate to the children’s experience, if possible. The story of Abraham’s move in Genesis 12:1-7, for instance, could have meaning to a child who has moved. Use short passages that keep the meaning of the whole passage.

In Ephesians 4:32 the whole verse says, “Be loving to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.” (adapted) Young children would not understand the part about God in Christ forgiving you, but they would understand, “Be loving to one another.”

Be aware of what verses are in the church school material your children bring home. Look up those verses and read them directly from the Bible. In the elementary and youth years, your children will be able to understand more of the biblical concepts. Let’s save much of the Bible for later study.

God

The concept of God is the most difficult concept that we attempt with young children. Maybe it is the most difficult concept for adults also. God is so great and so mysterious and yet

so personal that when we talk about God, we are limited. So we do not try to define God, but talk about God in terms of what we can see God doing.

We tell our children that God loves them and then surround them with a climate of love and acceptance. We tell children God created the universe and then we give them lots of experiences discovering the creation. We and our children participate in God's creation as we use the abilities God has given us. We come to understand God's creation as we use these abilities. We come to understand God's greatness and dependability as we live in the world and see the cycle of day and night and of the seasons.

Young children will tend to think of God as a person. As one kindergartner said, "God is a giant with his arms and legs wrapped around the world." She was combining the scientific knowledge of stars and space learned from her older brother with her limited idea of God.

Adults need to recognize that young children will think of God in physical terms. As the children mature we hope their understanding of God will mature and continue to grow through adulthood. Parents can create an environment for their children's continued growth when we are also growing and maturing in our knowledge of God.

When Children Ask Questions

Young children do ask hard questions about almost everything. Answering their questions about religion is particularly hard. We realize that their understanding is limited, and their questions may cause us to stretch our religious ideas beyond where they are. But asking questions is a normal way for children to try to clarify their ideas. Questions let us know that children are thinking.

If children did not ask questions, they would either be getting no new information or they would be accepting everything they heard without evaluating it. Questions help us know where children have misconceptions. Sean's question about whether God would be at worship helped his mother know that he thought God was a physical being.

Sometimes children ask religious questions that we must answer "I don't know." That is always a valid answer. We don't have all the answers and children need to know that we don't. An

"I don't know answer" can mean that you need to find more information or that it is a question we humans can't answer.

Your children's questions may cause you to do more study or questioning on your own. That's all right. Adults are still growing in the faith. I hope we can even share questions with our children. Our knowledge is also partial.

Our children need true answers to their questions. We also need to tell them in the simplest possible words. If a child asked, "Who was Jesus?" I would answer that he was a man sent by God to tell us how God wants us to live.

"But," someone objected, "you are only telling the child that Jesus was a prophet. He was more than that. He was the Son of God."

"Yes," I agreed. "But I don't think young children are ready for that idea. Their information about Jesus will grow as they do."

"Well, I disagree," she replied.

"That is your privilege." I answered.

Our answers to children's questions may not include everything *we* know but can include everything *they* can understand.

Children may ask you about some theological idea they have heard that contradicts what you believe. Religion is hard enough for young children to understand without their coming in contact with opposing ideas. But it does happen. When it does, you can only be honest. You can say for instance, "That's what some people believe about the Bible, but I don't believe that."

Children can become very confused about the differences in beliefs that adults have. I would rather see children confused, however, than to grow up thinking that there is not a variety of approaches to our Christian faith.

Some apparently religious questions that young children ask may really express other concerns.

Melanie, the youngest child in her family, asked her mother one day, "Where is God? Why can't I see Him?"

"God is everywhere," her mother began.

"But I want to see God! Why can't I see God?" demanded Melanie.

Suddenly Melanie's mother realized that Melanie's question

was another of her expressions of her feeling left out as the youngest member of the family. She realized that Melanie was really asking whether other members of the family had seen God and she had not been allowed to see God. "No one has ever seen God," Melanie's mother assured her. "We can see what God does, but we can't see God."

Melanie thought about what her mother said and replied, "Oh." She seemed satisfied. She was not being kept from seeing this very important being called God. God was just as mysterious to others in her family as God was to her.

Kelly is a boy who has trouble adjusting to new groups. During his first week in a new class, he was reluctant to join the group in together time. Finally he did come one day when pudding was being served. He felt so uncomfortable in the group that he hit the boy next to him. During the story about Joseph in the carpenter shop, he asked with a laugh, "Did Joseph make the devil?"

The teacher replied, "I don't think so."

Later the teaching team talked about Kelly's question. Was he really asking a question about the devil or was he so uncomfortable in the group that he asked the question just to be seen and heard? The teachers decided that one of them should try to discover what his question really was.

Early childhood is a time of introduction to the Christian faith. Since experience and emotional development are so important in these early years, we should save many facts and specific information about the faith until our children are older.

We should give them the beginnings of theology they can understand now. We should also help them to have the biblical experiences we have talked about. When they are older and can understand symbolism, then our children will see through a glass more clearly. Hopefully, we and our children will see religious growth as a process that continues through life. We can understand the scripture better as we have had more experience in living. Our living has more meaning as we continuously seek to use the revelation found in the scriptures and in theological writings.

Things to Think About

1. What are my beliefs about the church, Jesus, the Bible and God?
2. Am I ready to answer my children's questions? Even the hard ones about the resurrection?
3. What kind of study can I do to clarify my beliefs?
4. Refer to church school books and see what concepts are presented about Jesus. God? Bible? Church?