

THE MANY INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

DR. GLENN CUPIT

When Christians consider ministry with children they usually focus primarily on what we teach and how we relate to them. However, spiritual development is the work of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit uses a much wider range of influences. Christian children's workers need to identify these influences and cooperate with the Holy Spirit's use of them.

The Spirit's work is not uncontested. Forces of spiritual evil use the same sources to draw children away from God by marring, distorting or hiding what the Holy Spirit does. It is the rôle of children's ministry to identify those deceits and help children deal with them. To do so, focus on what spirit underlies any influences on children's spirituality rather than what it calls itself. The Holy Spirit uses secular factors and spiritual evil uses factors labelled 'christian'. The label never guarantees what spiritual impact may be involved.

I address five areas of influence from least to most intimate:

- creation or destruction;
- relationship or alienation;
- truth or deceit;
- providence or neglect;
- intervention or temptation.

Creation or destruction

Nature is a powerful force in shaping children's spirituality. It is progressed in positive directions as children experience God's creativity in the natural world, and marred by isolation from it. Unless we consider the importance of exposure to the natural world in fostering spiritual development our work is deficient.

Children need a deep intuitive grasp of the awesomeness of God. The more they are exposed to the wonders of God's creation and allowed to experience directly what he has made, the greater their opportunity to hear the soundless voices and speechless messages (Psalm 19:3-4). Consequently, they are more likely to assume that there are transcendent entities worthy of awe and reverence. Without recognition of God's 'everlasting power and deity' (Romans 1:20), assertion of Divine authority fosters a spirituality of oppression, and children cannot sense God's condescension in sharing his Spirit with rebellious humanity. If children learn to ignore or depreciate the natural world, an important aspect of understanding of God's relationship with them will be missing and their spirituality impoverished. The more they are isolated from his works, the less will be this appreciation. Children need parks and bushland; clean air, clear streams and smog-free skies; sun and stars; clouds, waves and mountains; wind and rain, sun-heat and night-cold; flowers, fur and leaves; fruit, nuts, seeds, herbs and spices; thunder, surf, bird-song; and the silence of solitude.

Teaching about divine creation is substantiated by lived experience through direct encounter. Otherwise, the Creator's glory and transcendence lacks essential experiential meaning. The natural world mediates children's encounters with the Spirit of God whenever it invites awe and wonder, sponsors humility and curiosity, and stimulates appreciation and stewardship.

The biblical record affirms the spiritual potency of human artefacts. They can indicate recognition of an inspiring reality, signpost the nature of that reality, and create delight and gratefulness. They can reflect uplifting values. Children may recognise an 'Other' that demands their attention. The fewer such opportunities to which they are exposed in what people create, the less children develop a desire for the transcendent. Do the environments in which we place children reflect God's perfection, purity, beauty and worthiness for worship?

Ideally children encounter God's Spirit in the artefacts of faith; its symbols, its music, its architecture. Taking children into a church, or giving them a crucifix, will not itself lead to spiritual growth. Nevertheless, these may serve as a focus for the Spirit's work. But artefacts may as well be alienating as edifying. Enhancing the quality of children's settings is directly relevant to their spiritual development. Also germane are arts, crafts, and manufacturing design in the community. Concern for creative quality encompasses the architecture, furnishings, artwork, books, music and activity materials provided for children. We need to encourage the positive expression of creativity around children, actively promoting what enriches children's spirits.

Relationship or alienation

Transactions with people in cultural groups, social environments and interpersonal relationships, are of central importance in developing spirituality in children.

Children adopt the norms of cultural groups within which they are raised. Such enculturation starts early, and is continually reinforced. It contributes radically to how children identify their essential being. Developing mature positive spirituality involves identifying with a culture that expresses the values of God's Kingdom. Ideally, that culture is the church, which embodies the Spirit. However, other cultures that reflect such values also contribute to positively oriented spirituality (Acts 17:26-28).

The closer the standards of their cultures are to biblical norms, the nearer children's identity to what God requires, and the converse applies. God's Spirit fosters whatever good to which children have been acculturated, and prunes any evil. For 'unchristian' children this can be a long and painful process, and frequently unsuccessful unless they establish a complementary identification with a Christian culture. In a 'christian' group or household that nevertheless enculturates negative attitudes, it is even harder for children.

Participation in aspects of social life that are the outcome and evidence of the Spirit's presence amongst people contributes directly to positive spirituality. It provides lived experience of the qualities of the person Jesus. Ideally that occurs in Christian gatherings where his presence is promised (Matthew 18:20). However, the group has to be living out the presence of God's Spirit. Similarly, the Holy Spirit's work in 'unchristian' groups allows them to have a positive spiritual impact. Without such experiences, the joyful, hopeful and compassionate nature of God remains an abstraction, his essential goodness disembodied, and children find it harder to identify his presence in their lives.

The greater exposure children have to God's Spirit at work in groups to which they belong; in particular, the more they share the Spirit in a group of Christian believers; the more they experience the living activity of Christ. This occurs in families, in congregations or secular equivalents, even in informal occasional groups. The distinctive of the Christian group is the post-Pentecost experience of the Holy Spirit. But that neither exhausts the scope of encounters with God's Spirit nor discounts the operation of spiritual evil in Christian groups. Without immersion in groups that evidence the fruit of God's Spirit (Gal 5:22), the immanence of God has little grounding in children's experience.

Where children's social groups are destructive, as in abusive families, acrimonious fellowships, or bullying peer groups, the effect on their spirituality is gravely negative. Victimisation, exclusion, scapegoating, etc., cannot be tolerated if we are fostering positive spirituality.

Individual relationships are also crucial to spiritual development. The Bible consistently parallels relationship with God to human relationships. To be fully understood, God's Word has to become incarnate. Both goodness and evil are 'given skin' by people. To develop mature positive spirituality, children need individuals to treat them as God would. Human love translates the love of God into lived reality. Paul asks Timothy to remember not only what he was taught but also "who your teachers were" (2 Tim 3:14).

Through Godly aspects of children's relationships to individuals, the Spirit reveals the relationship God desires to forge with them. The more children share relationships that bear the fruit of the Spirit, the better they learn to value such relationships and the more natural will be their relationship with the Spirit. The less children's relationships, particularly those with Christians, have these characteristics, the harder they find personal identification with God's Spirit.

Preferably, children relate to persons of genuine Christian spirituality. However, there are those in churches whose relationships fail to express God's Spirit, especially to children in their care. Similarly, some who live far beyond the Christian community have relationships ornamented with fruit indicative of the Spirit's work.

To flesh out the meaning of divine love, children need human love. To know what God's trustworthiness means, children need trustworthy humans. Human forgiveness creates understanding of divine forgiveness.

Truth or deceit

Language is important in creating and sustaining relationship to God, and in undermining that relationship. Whether words used with children convey truth or falsehood is a matter of great spiritual moment. Key are the words of Scripture. It is important that children have direct access to these, read or heard, and try to understand them, without adults interposing their meanings. Timothy is told:

“You must keep to what you have been taught and know to be true; remember ... how, ever since you were a child, you have known the holy scriptures - from those you can learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

This does not mean children accepting ‘truth’ unquestioningly from Scripture or ecclesiastical authority. Children are expected to question (Exodus 12:21-28; Deuteronomy 6:20-25; Joshua 4:6,21-22). “There can be no faith without freedom, you can truly believe only if you are free to doubt” (Koulomzin, 1975). Children recover better from their own mistaken interpretations, even mild heresies, than from adult enforced compliance.

It is difficult for children to recognise truth when they live in a society based on lies. On any screen words undermine truth; in politics, advertising, industrial relations, commercial encounters and relationships. Evil need not directly contradict truth; it just tells a different story. Hill, arguing against restricting children to ‘approved’ Christian doctrine, emphasises the ambiguity of their situation:

“[Some earnest Christians]’ desire is to see their children grow smoothly into the faith they themselves hold dear, even if it means shielding them as much as possible from exposure to the other persuasive belief systems which are contending in the middle ground of our pluralistic society. But there is a strong likelihood that such a policy of protectionism will prove counterproductive. When you live in a pluralistic society, free trade is the order of the day. Truth claims compete for customers.”

That truth is not labelled ‘Christian’ will not prevent the Spirit using it in our competitive marketplace. That falsehood is labelled ‘Christian’ (as it sometimes is) will not prevent its use to undermine the Spirit of truth.

Providence or neglect

God’s grace is expressed in everyday grace. Children share his goodness in receiving what he gives (Matthew 6:11,25-34; Luke 11:3), both directly, and through the mediation of loving caregivers. Children encounter God in commonplace experiences that reflect his caring: nourishment and comfort, shelter and security, surprises and delights.

The better children’s situations meet their needs, and the kinder the world proves to be; the better they are placed to recognise the goodness and grace of God. Children find it hard to believe the Creator is benevolent if his creation has not been. The Spirit uses loving care and provision to prepare children to trust God to meet their needs; and such nurturance can be offered by people who do not profess to be Christian. There are many parents without Christian conviction whose devotion to their children’s needs is wholesome and attractive; just as some church parents fail their children in this.

Positive nurture of children is a powerful spiritual force wherever found and however motivated; as are neglect and abuse in all forms from all sources. Without providential care, life is devoid of joy and testimonies to God’s love for them ring hollow. That children go to bed hungry is not just a welfare issue, but a spiritual issue. That children come to school without having breakfast is not just a social or political matter, but a spiritual matter. Child abuse is not just a personal or legal offence, but a spiritual offence. Behind each, and many similar, are attitudes that devalue and deny children their rightful respect. Whether such attitudes are personal, social or systemic, they are a consequence and source of spiritual evil.

This is particularly damaging when those who hold such attitudes, and allow or commit the offences that flow from them, embody God’s intent that children receive loving care (e.g., parents) or are associated with God (e.g., clergy). If your parents do not love you enough to cherish and protect you, how can you believe that God does, especially if you are informed that He placed you in their charge. Some children develop such anger towards parents that calling God ‘Father’ repulses rather than attracts. Similarly, Christian workers’ relational failings make it hard for children to relate to the God they represent.

Intervention or temptation

There is substantial biblical precedent for direct encounters with God's Spirit. Many people, including children, sincerely report God intervening directly in their lives. Not all are part of faith communities, nor sympathetic to God's work. Once assured they will be treated sensitively, some without religious belief describe a supportive presence in times of stress; a 'voice' approving, disapproving or instructing; or a sequence of events they interpret as guidance from 'someone'. Occasionally, it leads to religious faith. That further step is far from automatic. Contemporary research indicates that interventions are not rare, even in children. It is hard to say why it occurs in some circumstances and not others.

Scripture also acknowledges the reality of spiritual evil's direct intervention in people's lives, though such intrusions are seldom separate from promptings of the person's own will. However, human explanations do not suffice for some temptation events. While the danger of 'satanising' all evil is pertinent, people are susceptible to direct external impulses. Children report such experiences:

"At the age of nine, at boarding school, I knelt one evening as usual to say my prayers, as I have always done, when suddenly, like a flash, came the question, as if asked from outside myself: "Is there anyone to pray to?" and the answer seemed to come: "No!" there was no God. This was followed by a great sense of relief, thankfulness, pleasure. I need never pray again. Why pray to nothing and no-one? I never did pray again" (Hardy, 1979).

We cannot ignore children's reports of such encounters, for good or ill, if we take their spirituality as seriously as many of them do.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit's ministry to children is wholistic; it acts through every aspect of life. To be effective, our own ministry must reflect that. Ministry is not just teaching, or relating. It is working to make every aspect of children's lives open to the Spirit's presence, and resisting the inroads of spiritual evil, whatever the source.

References

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