

SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND DISCIPLESHIP IN CHILDHOOD

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ABSTRACT

When Christian leaders consider the “harvest field” they tend to see the faces that are over five feet from the ground. Simple demographics show us that one out of three of those faces are younger than 18 years old and they are far more receptive to the good news of Jesus. The majority of people (up to 80% depending on context) who become Christ-followers form that commitment during childhood or adolescence. Despite knowing this, efforts to “go and make disciples” have historically been dominated by adult-focused strategies. This study will explore the idea that the dominance of cognitive models of spiritual formation among Christian leaders may hinder serious focus on the 4/14 window. Perspectives of spiritual formation in childhood will be presented which suggest that when discipleship is viewed as a process of experiencing God and growing in relationship with Him children may in fact have unique capacities which we adults should strive to re-acquire. This study will draw from the 50-year history of Compassion International in providing Christian holistic child development programs in partnership with roughly 5000 Christian churches across the Southern hemisphere. Specific examples of holistic practices implemented by churches and resulting in well-developed disciples will be presented. The kingdom of God is advancing within and through children. The next century of mission will only achieve maximum impact if we fully recognize the significance of childhood and children in experiencing, reflecting and advancing the reign of God.

1. Introduction

Jesus was teaching His apprentices about greatness in the kingdom of heaven when He called a little child into their midst.

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”¹

A staggering statement! One would guess that the disciples must have become immediately fascinated by children, constantly discussing the characteristics of children and wondering what they must strive to “become like”. But, sadly, they seemed to miss the point. Shortly after that lesson Jesus was being tested by some Pharisees on the very adult subject of divorce and people began bringing children to Jesus. But the disciples rebuked them! This moment was one of the few points in scripture where we are told of Jesus getting angry. He was “indignant” and commanded the disciples,

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”²

Can you imagine? Imagine Jesus placing a little child in front of you and telling you that if you don’t “become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”. Now imagine that you were one of those disciples pushing the kids away from Jesus so He could argue with the Pharisees. He sees what you are doing and reacts with indignation and commands you, “Let the little children come to me...” He stares into your guilty eyes and tells you again, “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never

enter it". Not only that, but He says that the kingdom actually "belongs" to them! They are owners of the kingdom?

One would expect that the rare experience of seeing the Son of God angry as He re-emphasized the importance of children would firmly fix the idea in the minds of the disciples. Yet, despite the fact that children were no doubt present throughout the events of the gospels and the early church, they seem to be largely overlooked. Little is written about them and we are not offered much further insight into the importance of Jesus' teaching about our need to become like them.

This study explores "authentic discipleship" and spiritual formation in light of Jesus' teaching in Matthew ch. 18 and Mark ch. 10. We will look at the process of disciple-making as it applies to children. We will also consider what we can learn from children that is necessary for us to "enter the kingdom of heaven". Our hope is that in the next century of holistic/integral mission we, the followers of Jesus, will shake off our disoriented view of who is the greatest. Our hope is that we will see the importance of children. That we will protect them, learn from them and become more effective at introducing them to Jesus, rather than reenacting the blockade of the disciples.

2. Disciple

This study maintains the following understanding of "disciple" and the disciple-making process (discipleship):

A disciple is one whose intentions to follow Jesus are, at least occasionally, proven genuine by his/her actions of Spirit-led obedience. "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."³ The disciple has intentionally surrendered the personal will to the rule of the Divine will and is on a Spirit-lead journey whose ultimate destination is Christ-likeness in identity, character and action.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.⁴

What does "intent" mean when considering the motivations of a child? How truly different are a child's motivations from those of adults? When we speak of "intent" we mean more than mere cognitive decision. We mean an orientation of the will – that executive center of human action. We also do not consider "intent" to be a state of permanency. Rather, in the daily process of putting off the old self, the disciple is continually growing in the strength and consistency of their intentions to follow Jesus. This subject could drag us down into disputes about the moment of first "decision" and childhood salvation. Those controversial subjects are beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes it is enough to establish that the follower must be following out of an intention of the will, unstable and weak though it may be, and that intention may have a degree of cognitive understanding and/or a degree of desire and/or prompting from the Holy Spirit. Whatever its source and composition, the intention of the will expresses itself in followership – some small imitation of Jesus – and grows over time.

"A disciple is a learner, a student, an apprentice – a *practitioner*, even if only a beginner."⁵

What does it mean to say that the process is "Spirit-led"? Our very nature as slaves to sin is to be uprooted and replaced with a life led by the Spirit of God.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship...⁶

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.⁷

...because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.⁸

Is there any limit to when in human development the Spirit is able to begin this process? Does the Spirit require a certain level of cognitive or emotional development in order to begin this work?

3. Discipleship or Disciple-making

Discipleship, or disciple-making, is a process of leading people toward that state of increasing intentionality and also forward toward Christ-likeness. Christ-followers are commanded to “go” and “make” such people⁹ even while recognizing that the “making” of such people is the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Christians are not only invited to participate in the disciple-making process, they are commanded to do so. In fact, conformity to Christ will result in further disciple-making.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.¹¹

One cannot be a disciple without intentionally surrendering the personal will to the Divine will.¹² The authenticity of that surrender is evidenced in acts of obedience.¹³ A person can, however, be lead toward Christ-likeness even without their intention to follow Him. Again, a *disciple* harbors the “intention” to follow Jesus but *discipleship* is a process of leading people toward Christ-likeness and may begin before that person forms intentions to follow Jesus (becomes a disciple). Before Jesus gave Peter’s fishing business a miraculous economic windfall Peter had no intention of following Jesus. Afterward, Peter left everything to follow Jesus and he increasingly discovered who Jesus was along the way.¹⁴ No doubt the composition of Peter’s initial intentions for following Jesus changed as he came to know Jesus more intimately. Similarly, it was after Jesus healed the two blind men that they chose to follow him.¹⁵ Yet, there were many other cases of healing in which we are given no evidence that the recipient of healing chose to follow Jesus afterward. The process of leading others toward Christ-likeness (disciple-making) may begin before they have any knowledge of who Christ is or hold any intention to follow His Way.

During a personal conversation, Dr. Bambang Budijanto, Compassion International’s Regional Vice President for Asia, described discipleship as:

... a dynamic process/journey of personal holistic growth in, with and through the Kingdom Community (ecclesia) within the context and for the purpose of advancement of God’s reign (the Lordship of Christ) in individual life as well as in the broader community setting.

This description offers a new and critical dynamic to our understanding of disciple-making: community.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.¹⁶

Individual equipping and growth is to take place in the context of Christian community (ecclesia), is to result in “works of service” and is intrinsic to “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”. The path of spiritual formation is one we walk in community and it is a two-way dynamic of receiving and giving. Internal growth, intimacy with Christ, is only

made complete in outward expression of Spirit-lead action and Spirit-led action is the great coaching strategy of true internal growth.

4. Spiritual Formation

The human spirit is not detached from its physical and social realities. Rather, we are created as whole beings. Our spirit indwells a physical body, a mind and engages in social relationships in an integrated and interdependent identity. Because of this whole nature, spiritual formation is influenced by our physical realities, by the substrate offered to our thoughts and imaginations, by our relationships with other immortal beings and by our relationship with the natural world in which God placed us.

The Earth is populated with over six billion spirits. Nearly all of those spirits are in some degree malnourished, stunted in their growth, shriveled and damaged. Each one has the potential of being healed, restored, ignited with energy and resuscitated from the dreary burdens of life apart from God. Again, this does not mean that there are six billion white, fuzzy blurs floating around that happen to co-locate with six billion bodies. Our integrated nature means that the spirit is mysteriously interconnected with physical, social, emotional and cognitive experience of human identity. Yet the spirit, or perhaps “will-center” or heart, is not some irrelevant essence of the human. It is the most central and relevant aspect of human life.

No spirit travels through life “unformed”. The forming and growth of our spirits may be shaped by lies or by truth. Spiritual growth may be nourished by the Holy Spirit or fed through a secularist feeding tube of artificial food-substitutes and appetite suppressants. These are the false ideas about our true identity. The spirit may germinate in the soil of loving relationships or may strain to break through the concrete of anger and jealousies. All spirits are shaped by life’s experiences—by insults or praise, by security or violence, by belonging or rejection, by learning or darkness. In truth those experiences in the earliest years of our lives mark us deeply. Just as being loved helps us to become loving, abuse can infect us with mistrust, suspicion and anger.

Defining “spirituality” is a bit nebulous. The following perspectives help describe the territory:

“Spiritual formation in Christ is the process whereby the inmost being of the individual (the heart, will or spirit) takes on the quality or character of Jesus himself.”¹⁷

“The Christian path [spirituality] consists of the awakening of the personal center of the human being, by God’s personal grace and Christ’s compassionate, redemptive personal love, within the Christian community, in a journey that leads to personal union with the tri-personal God.”¹⁸

“In its Christian sense, “spirituality” is about the process of renewal and rebirth that comes about through the action of the Holy Spirit, which makes us more like Christ.”¹⁹

“Developing the spiritual... is synonymous with developing mature human beings, who possess such attributes as self-acceptance, a sense of responsibility, concern for others, a sense of wonder and awe, a sensitivity to reality beyond the physical senses of the material.”²⁰

It is God’s intention to rescue and restore every aspect of our human identity. Our transformation into Christ-likeness is to restore our entire being. That is why we are reminded that our “body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God”.²¹ The bodily aspect of our identity is not abandoned at the resurrection, rather we are to be given new bodies.²² We are told that we are “transformed by the renewing of our mind”²³ and that the substance of our thoughts should be that which is “true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...”²⁴ God’s desire for our complete (holistic) transformation is nowhere more clear and powerful than the greatest commandment “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul

and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself”.²⁵ The love of God is to emanate from every aspect of our being—body, mind, emotion and social relationships. We are to participate with God in the construction of Christ-like people; “go make disciples”. When in human development *should* we begin the work? When *can* we begin the work?

5. Breast-feeding as discipleship

If we are to participate with God in the formation of a Christ-like person (one who is loving toward others, secure in their identity in Christ, able to find their life by losing it, firmly rooted in the truths of scripture and so on) then we have a range of strategies to consider. Given the choice of when to begin working in a young person’s life, would we choose to begin with a teenager who is insecure, socially disconnected, angry and suspicious, or would we rather reach them earlier, before much of the damage of our sin-stained world has been inflicted upon their spirit?

Ask any professional in the field of early child development about those events that are most formative for a human and you will hear them describe the importance of breast-feeding. A child’s first relationship is with his or her mother (even if that relationship is severed at birth, the pre-birth experience is a form of relationship). There is perhaps no other experience of such intimacy and trust and dependency and nurture as breast feeding. And perhaps no relationship gives us deeper reflection on the potential of intimacy with God. Breast feeding builds security, belonging, identity and the experience of being loved and nourished. It creates mother-child bonding and from that foundation of safety a child finds courage to explore his or her world. From the security of that relationship the child builds a foundational understanding of what it means to trust others. One could argue that no other event in human development is as powerful and significant in shaping the kind of people who become loving, secure and trusting with God and with others. In other words it represents early Christ-follower development.

Consider the alternative. Babies who are neglected, even when their physical needs are met, suffer detachment, ambivalence, and in serious cases may even die. Obviously babies who are physically abused suffer deeply as well, in identity, security, belonging as well as physically. In other words, the stage is set for insecurity, anger and a re-expression of those hatreds they have experienced. Not to say that Jesus cannot rescue and reshape that soul – of course He has the power to buy us back from whatever evil has captured us no matter how early in life the wounds are inflicted.

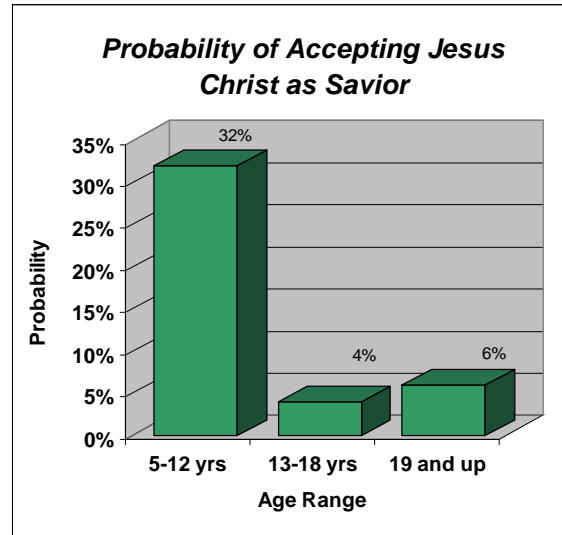
If the process of disciple-making may begin before a person “knows” Jesus or has any intention to follow Him, and if the disciple making process is to be a comprehensive restoration of our entire being toward Christ-likeness (of body, mind, heart and social relationships), then childhood is a critical stage of life in which to join God in building Christ-like people. This is why Compassion International’s Child Survival Program, focused on children age 0-3, aspires to “rescue, nurture and *disciple*” little ones.

Nevertheless, skeptics may ask “but is that stuff (stuff like breast-feeding or holding a baby) truly discipleship?” The answer requires an unfolding of different models of spiritual formation. Reflecting on those models may reveal the bias shaping the skeptic’s question.

The skeptic may also point to Matthew 28 where the English translation describes the making of disciples as involving “teaching them”. “Surely breast-feeding isn’t teaching!”, they might say. In fact the Greek word used in Matthew 28 says to make disciples by means of *didasko* (did-as'-ko)¹, which implies a broad approach to learning, apprenticeship, involving the attitude of heart with “obedience” as the outcome; which is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, in the person. The intended outcome of making disciples was not the “knowledge” of all the commandments of Jesus, in which case

¹ A prolonged (causative) form of a primary verb *dao* (to learn); to teach (in the same broad application). Strong Greek Dictionary

the word *katecheo* (to inform; to be informed, to instruct orally, 1 Corinthians 14:19)² might have been used instead of *didasko*. The intended outcome of discipleship is the evidence of the Lordship of Christ, Christ-likeness, demonstrated by the whole person, spiritually, mentally, physically and socially.



6. Childhood

It is on this point that the present study hopes to offer unique perspective that will shape the future of integral/holistic missions as it relates to children. In 1995, Compassion International leaders, Wess Stafford, Dan Brewster, Don Miller, and Jeff Wood were discussing the 10/40 Window and wrestling with how to communicate the importance of children in mission. They coined the term “the 4/14 Window”, which was first introduced at a conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado and published by Compassion Program Director Dan Brewster in 1996. The 4/14 Window concept was ignited by data from Bryant Myers, now at Fuller Seminary, whose research demonstrated that “85% of people who make a decision for Christ, do so between the ages of 4 and 14”.²⁶ These findings were confirmed for US children by George Barna in 2003. He reported that “the probability of someone embracing Jesus as his or her savior was 32 percent for those between the ages of five and 12; four percent for those in the 13-18 range; and six percent for people 19 and older. In other words, if people do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim.”²⁷ Although this insight was reported thirteen years ago (1996), we are only beginning to see its implications impacting mission strategies. Those implications are well articulated in “Child, Church and Mission” by Dan Brewster.²⁸

Discussions of this nature often move from this point to questions about a child’s “readiness” to make such a commitment or to theological issues such as the “age of accountability”. Here we would like to avoid the old pattern and look again at the foundation we have established for the disciple-making process and spiritual formation.

We have said that the disciple-making process can begin before a person “knows” Jesus or has intention to follow Him. In fact, John the Baptist met Jesus *in utero*! He leapt in his mother’s womb when he “met” Jesus which demonstrates some form of pre-cognitive communing with the Holy Spirit. We have said that human identity is an integrated whole, encompassing body, mind, social connectedness and the spirit/will/heart. We have said that God desires to restore every aspect of our being, our whole identity. As we are transformed into the likeness of Christ and as our sinful nature is increasingly replaced with the Spirit-led

² Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright (c)1985

identity, the love of God radiates through us in the muscles of what we do—in our listening skills, in our interest in the well-being of others and, of course, in our words. All of that radiant love directs others toward the God “in whom we abide and have our being”. Therefore all of it is disciple-making. No part in isolation is sufficient nor is one aspect “more important” than another.

7. Models of Spiritual Formation in Children

There are at least four prominent models of spiritual formation in children. Each are given a very brief review below as summaries taken from *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation*.²⁹

7.1 Instructional-Analytic Model

“This is defined as God working through the instruction of His Word and human agency whereby He creates an environment where the young person comes to know Jesus at an appropriate age and then grows in that relationship. This environment features four dimensions: Scripture memory, biblical instruction, a graduated award system, and a systematic structure for training.”³⁰ This model is typified by AWANA ministries.

Proponents argue that “The most significant step in spiritual formation is receiving Jesus Christ as Savior. There is no specific age at which this step is accomplished. Cognitive development, one’s view of sinfulness, the clarity of the presentation of the plan of salvation, and the working of the Holy Spirit all contribute to an intelligent and life-changing acceptance of Christ as Savior.”³¹

This model is rooted in a cognitive basis for “knowing” Jesus. Although no specific age is set, it is clear that a certain level of cognitive development is prerequisite to spiritual formation. In this model “knowing Jesus” is informational and propositional.

7.2 Pragmatic-Participatory Model

This approach emphasizes a coaching/modeling approach to spiritual formation. Proponents claim, “Most educators and theologians agree that the most effective way for children to begin to know and understand the truths recorded in the Bible is to live with adults whose lives express these truths. When they do, children catch the spirit of Christ long before they can read or understand it.”³²

This model places a strong emphasis on the sociocultural influence on spiritual formation. The centrality of learning is by example and modeling. “First and foremost, more than the words that Jesus spoke, He modeled His character to the disciples and those He encountered... The disciples learned important lessons about the type of person Jesus was and how they should treat others by watching him and interacting with him.”³³

“The pragmatic-participatory approach to children’s spiritual formation uses the social elements of learning to help children process and make use of biblical truths being taught.”³⁴ This model is strongly rooted in Bible-based education and, as such, does seek age appropriate instruction as it might align with Piaget’s stages of cognitive development. However, the model also incorporates emotional development and peer relationships as children discuss Bible stories, vocalize their understanding and participate in drama and similar activities which locate understanding in social/interactive terms as well as cognitive terms.

The pragmatic-participatory tends to locate Christ-likeness in behavior and learning in a patterning or modeling method. Even two-year-old children can imitate complex behavior, which means this process can begin at very young ages. In this model “knowing Jesus” is both informational and demonstrational as reflected in the behaviors of others and through interpretation of the behaviors illustrated in Bible stories.

7.3 Media-Driven Active Engagement Model

Certain cultures have become so dominated by the media that Christian educators have begun to believe that the only way to “capture a child’s attention” or make instruction “relevant” is by competing with the media juggernauts. This camp sees the frightening number of hours that children spend plugged into television or other media-based experiences and attempts to co-opt those methodologies for the instruction and shaping of children’s spiritual development. Mottos like “church shouldn’t be boring” and “make learning about Christ fun” are characteristic of this model. KIDMO ministries typify this philosophy.

Fortunately, many of the world’s cultures are not as fully saturated by media and the consumerist engine which drives brand recognition into American two-year-old brains. The philosophy behind this model is similar to pragmatic-participatory but its methodology tends to substitute media-driven activities for live interpersonal experiences.

7.4 Contemplative-Reflective Model

Scottie May describes the aim of the Contemplative-Reflective model to, “help children encounter God in ways that fuel their innate sense of awe and wonder, to help them consider things of God with continued attention.”³⁵ She goes on to describe methods which are intended to create quiet space in the child’s life and allow them to listen for the voice of God. This stream of spiritual formation finds parallels in the internal spiritual disciplines of meditation, solitude and prayer.

One attractive aspect of this model is that, rather than locating the basis of spiritual formation in the child’s abilities for cognition or for behavioral modeling, it locates the power of spiritual formation in the capacities of the Holy Spirit.

The separation of language from spiritual experience highlights an important distinction between *connatural knowing* and *speculative knowing*. Connatural knowing is an *encounter* with what is to be known. In a way it is the desire to know because of interest, longing, even love of the object. Initially infants learn language and sounds in this manner. Speculative knowing is detached, rational, theoretical, propositional—the more traditional ‘schooling’ approach). A study showed that children disengage from the learning process if speculative knowing is used extensively in teaching them things of faith. The study suggests purposefully altering traditional religious education by introducing connatural knowing to young children so that they may *encounter* God rather than initially being taught about Him. Consistent early experiences *with* God may allow the desire to know *about* God to grow. This proposed sequence of knowing seems to parallel a child’s knowing about her parents: connatural knowing comes first, with the desire for speculative knowing gradually coming later. Thus, a relationship with God, certainly the chief goal of children’s ministry, might be established with positive emotional grounding.³⁶

The emphasis on encountering God, recognizing Him at work in their midst, is believed to increase a child’s desire to “know” about God. In this model “knowing Jesus” is relational. Truth is a personal being to be encountered in quiet spaces and in Divine appointments. This model also values Bible instruction and social experience as modes of learning about God.

7.5 Compassion’s Integrated Perspective of Spiritual Formation in Children

The *programs* derived from these models may be mutually exclusive because it is assumed that the program must be delivered in a few hours per week within a particular church’s ministries for children. That is a false assumption. These models are not mutually exclusive philosophically or in the complete plan for a child’s spiritual development. Each model offers unique value.

It is interesting to see the alignment of these models with the description of our holistic nature. If one sees disciple-making as primarily cognitive, then one teaches and instructs. If one sees disciple-making as primarily concerned with developing Christ-like behavior, then

one models and coaches such behavior. But if one sees disciple-making as forming a relationship, then one seeks to make an introduction—to create an encounter. If Truth is a person, then relationship is the center of disciple-making. The first order of business becomes learning to recognize the Other and begin communicating with Him (prayer).

An integrated program for spiritual formation of children would surround a child with experiences of Christ's love. As the child grows they should experience the love and nurture of others, and be protected from the hates and exploitations of others. They should be encouraged to recognize God in their midst through wonder and awe at His work. They should be taught about the truths of scripture, learning its stories, memorizing God's promises and relating those to their experience of life. They should be well nourished physically, protected from disease and allowed to play, that they might grow in "stature" as Jesus did. A child who is too hungry to focus her mind will not only fail to be interested in cognitive instruction about God's provision, she will harbor a profound skepticism about such "teaching" as it contrasts to her own experience.

Much more could be said about the importance of holistic strategies in developing children and its great advantages in "making disciples". Let us turn our attention to Jesus' amazing statements about children as "owners" of the kingdom of God and as persons whom we must "become like" in order to qualify for entry into that kingdom.

8. Become like what?

What attributes do children possess that might enable them to "enter the Kingdom" (belong within the reign of God) or be described as owners of the Kingdom?

8.1 Faith

"Nothing can stagger a child's faith; he accepts the clumsiest substitutes and can swallow the most glaring incongruities."³⁷

8.2 Play and Worship

If you have ever seen a child playing with a bundle of rags tied up as a ball, or a game with rocks in the midst of war, devastation and poverty, then you will understand something of the child's power for delight. Does our capacity to delight in God reflect the capacity of a child to find delight in spite of the sometimes horrific context of our lives?

Where is worship more pure than the absolute enjoyment of His goodness amidst the hardship of our broken world?

From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength Because of Your adversaries, To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.³⁸

8.3 Trust

If you have ever had a child reach out their arms to you, hoping for you to pick them up, and if you have held them then you understand something of the completeness of their trust. Have you ever reached out your arms in such a way toward God and allowed Him to simply pick you up and carry you through any danger without harboring some anxiety that He might drop you?

8.4 Imaginary power and theological mystery

Theologians are driven mad by the concept of trinity, confounded by omnipotency and free will, and strained by the infinite and eternal. Children embrace these concepts with an unmatched power of imagination. Some people might argue that children simply don't

“understand” these concepts. Do adults? Children go forward untroubled in areas where adults stumble around and grow frustrated.

8.5 Communicative

An adult can be in the midst of writing a substantive paper on theological issues when a child will interrupt saying, “Dad! Dad! There’s a bug crawling on the window!” He will repeat it emphatically and insist that you join him in looking at the bug. And he will continue to gaze at the bug and study it for an amazing length of time. He desires to share and communicate his experience. Do you constantly interrupt God to share and communicate your life’s experiences with Him? Do you realize that He delights in that no matter how “trivial” the experience may seem from a certain perspective?

8.6 Dependency

We have mentioned breast-feeding as a rarely considered attribute of children. Certainly, if the disciples gave any thought to what they must “become like”, this was unlikely to have entered their imagination. Yet, it is a demonstration of absolute dependency and of incredible intimacy. Any of us who are mature in Christ would be challenged to view our own level of dependency and intimacy with God in such a form.

The Psalm says “From the mouths of infants and *nursing* babies you have established strength” (italics added). One wonders how God establishes strength (or in NIV, “ordains praise”) from the mouths of nursing babies.

8.7 Humility

The specific reference to the child’s characteristics in Matthew ch. 18 was to his humbleness. Jesus said “Whoever humbles himself like this child”. The child didn’t think himself important in the midst of these “big people”. Do we?

The above list of characteristics is not meant to be comprehensive. They are meant to trigger the imagination. What must we “become like” in order to enter the Kingdom?

9. Case study – LDP testimony

Israel Candia grew up watching those in his community, Las Cuadras, Bolivia, crumble under injustice. He saw children denied an education because their parents could not afford school fees. He saw the government ignore the plight of those living in poverty. He watched adults driven to sell drugs to feed their children. He saw his own parents work 12-hour days yet make such meager wages they couldn’t afford clothes for Israel and his eight siblings.

It would be years before Israel could link those moments in his life to the term “injustice.” But when he began to recognize the lasting effects of despair and indignity wrought by injustice and poverty, he made a promise. “I said to myself, ‘One day, I will help these people. There’s got to be a way that I can help these people.’”

Unlike most of his peers, Israel grew up experiencing long-term Christian holistic child development. As a registered child at the Compassion Project, he saw there could be a different life for the people of Bolivia. He came to understand that injustice and poverty didn’t have to be the norm. Israel was able to attend school, and he became active in the local church. Education and his faith in God became tools in his arsenal against injustice.

Israel and his friends were told that they could do anything — even right the wrongs they were faced with daily. And Israel believed every word.

Israel was particularly inspired by his own sponsors, who made sacrifices in order to support him.

“It was interesting for me to see that my own sponsors sometimes struggled,” says Israel. “To know that they were making sacrifices for me was life-changing. They weren’t wealthy, yet

they saved their money to help me. That gave me the strength to make sacrifices to do well in school and prepared me to make other sacrifices later in my life.”

Israel excelled in school, and in 1997 he graduated from high school. For the next year he worked odd jobs. With an unemployment rate of 40 percent, full-time work was nearly impossible to find. Israel was frustrated but not ready to give up. Moving to another community wasn't an option, as his ailing father depended on Israel's care. So he prayed, waiting for God's direction.

The answer to Israel's prayers came in 1998, when Compassion launched the Leadership Development Program (LDP) in Bolivia. The Leadership Development Program offers student leaders who have graduated from the Child Sponsorship Program the opportunity to attend college through a sponsor's support. Israel applied for the program. He still remembers the day he learned he had been accepted.

“It seemed like such an ordinary day,” Israel says with a smile. “We got this phone call, and it was Compassion telling me I was in LDP. I began to jump up and down! My family didn't know what was going on. When I told them, everybody started screaming and laughing! It was just so much joy for all of us, for the whole family. I felt that finally all of my dreams could come true.”

After much prayer, Israel decided to enroll in the law school at a local university. He says the decision was difficult. Corruption is rampant in the Bolivian government, with millions exchanged in bribes every year. Lawyers are often in the midst of that bribery, and many of Israel's friends tried to convince him to pursue another career. But Israel knew this was his chance to right much of the injustice he had experienced growing up.

“I decided to become a lawyer to help those who do not have enough money to afford the right to be defended properly,” Israel explains. “I entered this profession and I understood the difficulties that I might face. Even some people at my own church, they said it can't be done. ‘You can't become a lawyer. It's much too political. You're going to become corrupt.’ But I saw that not as an obstacle but as a challenge.”

Israel has now been practicing law for five years. He and his wife, Benedicta, are active in their church, where Israel is also a pastor. His life has come full circle, he says. He still faces injustice every day, but now, instead of falling victim to it, he seeks ways to destroy it.

“When I was little, I grew up seeing corruption and injustice — I saw the poor stripped of their dignity,” Israel says. “I am here to change that.”

Success, he says, is not about money or power. “What really matters is the people that we help. My Compassion sponsors helped to teach me that. That taught me that success is measured by how we serve others. I hope to help as many people as I can. I hope to make the Lord and my sponsors proud.”

Israel is a living testimony to long-term comprehensive discipleship. Christian holistic child development raises up men and women who resemble Jesus. Compassion is working with over 5000 local Christian churches in 25 developing countries to provide holistic child development programs. There are thousands of testimonies like Israel's as Compassion now serves over a million children.

10. The Adversary

To discuss disciple-making or spiritual formation in childhood without considering the forces opposed to Jesus would leave us vulnerable and naïve. We might operate on the assumption that there is little urgency. We might act as if the next generation of Christ-followers simply awaits our instruction while peacefully eating their cereal or rice. Nothing could be further from the truth. They are already “under instruction”.

The forces of darkness are not hesitating to act in childhood. The enemy seems to recognize childhood as a critical and vulnerable stage during which he might destroy what God loves. And so that enemy who seeks to “steal, kill and destroy” mounts a full assault on children as early as possible, as ferociously as possible and as deceptively as possible.

The host of human sin, with greed and ambition leading the way, has constructed societies and systems which neglect, marginalize and exploit our youngest, most vulnerable citizens. Nearly 30,000 children die every day from preventable causes. Preventable. Nearly 100 million children are not in school because of poverty. An estimated one million children enter the sex trade every year. The assault on children is ruthless and pleases our enemy greatly.

Yet poverty is only one strategy of our enemy. While millions of children are robbed of opportunity to realize their God-given potential due to the threat of poverty, there are millions more who are hammered into a false identity through the strategies of consumerism. The average American child spends three hours/day watching TV and will see 20,000 30 second TV ads per year. They witness 8000 murders on TV before finishing primary school. Sixty one percent of babies, one year and under, spend an average of 80 minutes per day in front of the TV.

Corporations are spending billions of dollars on “youth marketing” strategies to build brand loyalty among children as young as two years old. That money saturates children with lies. “You must buy this product in order to be happy. You must buy this product in order to be accepted by your friends. You must buy this in order to be secure and safe. You must buy in order to be important.” And thus whole societies of “good” consumers are grown from the soil of these lies. If corporations can recognize the strategic importance of children then we, as the people of God, the leaders of the Church, must not be naïve. We must fight for the hearts of the next generation of Christ-followers. We beg Christian leaders to recognize the importance of children.

11. Conclusion

Recently a small band of Christian thinkers and theologians are beginning to take Jesus’ teaching about children seriously and have formed a “Child Theology Movement”.³⁹ Additionally, there are strengthening child advocacy networks (e.g., the VIVA Network) and seminaries such as Fuller Theological Seminary taking the lead in equipping tomorrow’s Christian leaders with a better understanding of the importance of children and childhood. Compassion International is a quiet engine behind these movements and organizations as Compassion champions the importance of children in the Kingdom. The reader is encouraged to read “Child, Church and Mission” by Dan Brewster⁴⁰ for a much fuller perspective of the content presented in this study.

If the next century of holistic/integral mission is to be as effective as possible in “making disciples”, in shaping those who will reflect the nature of Christ and “bear his image”, then serious attention must be given to the importance of children and childhood. Jesus loved children. If the fruit of His Spirit is evident in our character then so will we. In that love we will discover much about our own nature as disciples, gain insight into the Kingdom and we will be compelled to protect and nurture little ones. If we do so we may discover that we have not only participated with God in “making disciples” we have equipped the most powerful agents for mission.

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version (Zondervan: International Bible Society, 1973, 1978, 1984) Matt. 18:3.

² Mark 10:14.

³ 1John 2:6.

⁴ Eph. 4:22-24.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (provenance: HarperOne, 2006), xi.

⁶ Rom. 8:12-15.

⁷ 2Cor. 3:17-18.

⁸ Rom. 8:14.

⁹ Matt. 28:19.

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- ¹⁰ John 16:13; Acts 1:8.
- ¹¹ Rom. 8:29.
- ¹² Luke 14:25-33.
- ¹³ 1 John 2:3-6.
- ¹⁴ Luke 5:1-11.
- ¹⁵ Matt. 20:32-34.
- ¹⁶ Eph. 4:11-13.
- ¹⁷ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 53.
- ¹⁸ Ewert H. Cousins, *What is Spirituality?* (provenance, publisher, date), insert page #
- ¹⁹ Alister McGrath, *Beyond the Quiet Time: Practical Evangelical Spirituality* (provenance: Regent College Publishing, 2003), insert page #
- ²⁰ Insert initial Meehan, "insert title of article", *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 7:3 (insert month, year of publication), insert page number or range of numbers
- ²¹ 1Cor. 6:19.
- ²² 1Cor. 15:35-44.
- ²³ Rom. 12:2
- ²⁴ Phil. 4:8.
- ²⁵ Luke 10:27.
- ²⁶ B. Myers, "The State of the Word's Children: A Cultural Challenge to the Christian Mission in the 1990's" (presentation delivered at an EFMA Executive Retreat).
- ²⁷ George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (provenance: Regal Books, 2003), 34.
- ²⁸ Dan Brewster, *Child, Church and Mission* (Compassion International, 2005)
- ²⁹ Greg C. Carlson, Tim Ellis, Trisha Graves and Scottie May, *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007).
- ³⁰ Carlson, Ellis, Graves and May, *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation*, 4.
- ³¹ Robert Clark, *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation* (ed. Kenneth O. Gangel and James C. Wilhoit: Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 242.
- ³² Martha B. Aycock, ed., *Understand* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1972), 155, referenced by Robert E. Clark, Joanne Brubaker, and Roy B. Zuck, *Childhood Education in the Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 381-82.
- ³³ Carlson, Ellis, Graves and May, *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation*, 192.
- ³⁴ Carlson, Ellis, Graves and May, *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation*, 187.
- ³⁵ Carlson, Ellis, Graves and May, *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation*, 45.
- ³⁶ Carlson, Ellis, Graves and May, *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation*, 59.
- ³⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, "Child's Play" (1878) insert more detail on this essay
- ³⁸ *The Holy Bible*, New American Standard Bible, (The Lockman Foundation: 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995) Psalm 8:2.
- ³⁹ Child Theology Movement, <http://childtheology.org> (accessed February 13, 2009).
- ⁴⁰ Dan Brewster, *Child, Church and Mission* (Compassion International, 2005)

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