

CHILDREN AND THE HEALING MINISTRY

Beginning to heal the current divorce between the two

In Part I, I expose some of the common attitudes to children and the reasons for them, and in Part II give practical guidance (under the headings Family, Sunday School & Church) for making things better.

PART 1 – Common Attitudes to Children

While I am sure there are glorious exceptions, generally speaking there is a *divorce* between children and the healing ministry.

Maybe ‘divorce’ is the wrong word because that implies that earlier the sides were together and are now separated. Usually children and the healing ministry have never met.

This is part of a much wider problem –

Cinderellas

Children are the Cinderellas of the church. Churches do not usually regard children as central members of the church-family, but as appendages to it.

Scripture

Jesus saw childhood as a model for the spiritual life, and childhood qualities as necessary for us all if we are to inherit God’s Kingdom [Matthew 18:3].

Christ acknowledged the *worth* of children; he welcomed them, embraced them, blessed them, prayed for them and healed them. The adults disapproved! ***Let the little children come to me, and forbid them not!*** (Mark 10:14) is not only one of the most frequently broken of our Lord’s commands, but it claims to be done so in obedience to the Spirit’s demand for decency and order [1 Corinthians 14:40]!

Worth-ship

As ‘friend-ship’ is a word to express the condition in which we can enjoy friends, so ‘wor-ship’ expresses the condition in which we enjoy our *worth*. ‘Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven...’ are all experiences of our worth to the Father through the Son by the Spirit.

Sadly it is when adults are experiencing their individual ‘worth’ in wor(th)ship that they find it most difficult to affirm the worth of children present. Even worse, children are often viewed wholly negatively as a ‘nuisance’, ‘disturbance’, ‘distraction’, etc. It is as if adults feel: “I need a quiet and ‘religious’ atmosphere when I am conversing in prayer with my heavenly Father please keep his younger children away!”

Children & Worship

Here are just a few thoughts.

- **Pandering** to children does not affirm their worth. To give them their own five-minute slot while ignoring them for the rest of the time may set adult consciences at rest, but does not affirm a child's worth if a host of other factors deny it.
- **Worth-less.** Children experience worth-lessness if they find themselves *inappropriately* catered-for.

Children often find themselves on unsuitable seats; with no view whatever of what is going on; supplied with nothing, or with inappropriate reading material; with no guidance about what is happening or will happen next. They are expected to be attentive far in excess of their abilities, and are accepted only in so far as they manage to behave like miniature adults. If they receive God's blessing at the hands of a minister, it is often in the most casual and discourteous fashion possible.

No notices, pictures, bookracks, exhibitions or stalls are geared to them as they leave. (Even if a Children's Corner exists, it is probably much admired by grown-ups but totally irrelevant both to worship and the spiritual and/or social needs of real children. Many Children's Corners are monuments to adult sentimentality!)

- Sometimes children *are* given a place in worship, and then an opposite error may creep in. The children temporarily replace God as the centre of worship, as they are themselves worshipped by doting relatives who appear especially for the occasion. Such events rightly conducted contribute greatly to worship by enriching, enlarging, enlivening and/or enlightening it; they mean a great deal to the children themselves. Great care should be taken to ensure that as far as possible the children contribute to the worship of God, and do not themselves become *idolised*. Idolatry of anyone – of any age! – has no place in Christian worship.

Their picture of God

Children's pictures of God will be built on their picture of us. Proclamations that God loves and accepts them are contradicted if the Christian community demonstrates that it does neither.

If children do not experience their worth at our hands, they will find it hard to believe that God's attitude is totally different.

If they are second-rate to us, they will not readily believe that they are first-rate to God.

Sunday School

This club for the Cinderellas is, often, the Cinderella organisation of the church.

The 'real' church meets in the 'real' building for the 'real' thing led by the 'real' leaders! The Sunday School is, by comparison, in the hands of the faithful few who have this 'thing' about

kids, and are left to get on with it with third-rate equipment in third-rate rooms at times dictated to by the programme of the ‘real’ church. Lessons and the choice of activities can be geared more to not disturbing the adults than to the children’s needs.

If the Sunday School leadership is under-staffed and under-trained then too often the aim is merely to ‘keep them occupied’; an aim shared by most parents in sending them.

Probably your church situation is nothing like so glum as the one I have depicted. Good!

What I have written so far is not meant to depress or condemn, but to expose some of the factors **that divorce children from the Gospel. For only if the children are fully integrated into the Christian community can there be any introduction to the healing ministry.**

There are other things that need to be highlighted before we can usefully turn to healing.
‘Now colour it in!’

It is by no means impossible for children to spend a great deal of time drawing and colouring-in pictures of the healing ministry of Jesus while being totally unaware that the adults are singing ‘Thy touch has still its ancient power’, and that it happens to be true!

Good Sunday School teachers are busy folk. They probably do not get to evening services with the prayer and the laying-on-of-hands or to midweek or residential conferences on healing.

As for the children, if there is any ministry to the sick in the parish then sometimes great care is taken to make sure they *don’t* see it!

Sickness

Unless we are medically trained, most of us are uneasy when it comes to sickness. If there is a member of the family ill, we are not usually familiar enough with sickness to accept it, and to press-on appropriately and naturally. We feel unsettled and unsure of ourselves – at least I do! We lack the science and art of knowing that everything we are doing is right. In many families our own uncertainties make us avoid the topic of ‘sickness’ much as we tend to avoid the topic of ‘death’.

When sickness strikes, it is enough of a strain to cope with ourselves and the patient, without the addition of inquisitive children! Often, therefore, *when all is well sickness is hidden from children; when all is not, children are hidden from sickness!*

Child: **Can I see Grandad?**

Parent: **Er.. NO.. you’ll... um.... disturb him!**

Child [very hurt, feeling sure it would not]: **No I won’t!**

Parent: **Don’t argue. Do as I say. Go n’watch the telly!**

Thus while apparently shielding the child from suffering, the parent is merely trying to hide his/her own unease. Ironically instead of a sleepy or pasty-faced Grandad, the child is instead confronted with ‘battle, murder and sudden death’ all in glorious Technicolor!

As well as the ‘Cinderella’ syndrome in local churches touching both the children themselves and those who pastor them, there is also what I will term the –

Leprosy Syndrome

Churches vary, of course, but many church families contrive to have their constituent groups operate in total isolation from each other. It is as if every group was ‘untouchable’.

When this is the case, groups have little idea of the aims, activities or results in other ‘units’ within the family.

It also means that few people have any idea of the depth and extent of God’s work within and through his local church ‘family’.

Leaders

Consider the minister/vicar/leader. Whatever our views of leadership we would be likely to agree that in *some respects* this person, or team, is the spearhead or focus of God’s work.

But *how many adult members of the congregation know* –

- What their minister aims to do, and why.
- What, therefore, he spends time doing.
- What are the results he hopes for.
- Whether such results are apparent.

Confidentiality

I have frequently stated my horror at the lack of confidentiality within the renewal movement. But confidentiality is neither an adequate reason nor excuse for the leader’s ministry to be cut-off from the people he represents.

Neither does the fact that leaders are ultimately answerable to God mean that their work should be largely unknown to the fellowship that they are called to serve.

As far as our subject here is concerned, it means that the majority of Sunday School teachers, - like the majority of the congregation – has no real idea what their minister does, or (if he does *anything!*) its results. (I am not locating God’s work *exclusively* among the acknowledged leadership of a church, but if folk are unaware of what God is doing through *them* it is not very likely that they will be much aware of what God is doing in less public aspects of church life.)

In the mist?

Where two or three are gathering in Christ’s Name, he is there, in the midst. Was ‘mist’ a misprint in this paragraph heading? No. For so many church members he is there only ‘in the mist’, cut-off from them by the ‘Leprosy Syndrome’, and surrounded by foggy intentions and a professionally-made smokescreen!

Policies and Attitudes

Division between the ‘real’ church and its children arises from both policy and attitude.

Many church ‘policies’ are not really policies at all, but habits which have grown up – for good and ill – and which continue unchanged because they go unquestioned. Change is costly and uncomfortable, so even when real policies exist they are often not revised as understanding broadens, insights deepen and priorities alter.

Over a period of about five years every aspect of local church life should be re-examined to see that it adequately reflects the *present* level of the church’s understanding. Those who invite or claim to be ***led by the Spirit*** are committed to movement, change and growth.

Attitudes of individuals are probably the major factor in whether policies are frozen to death or living. Policies are not abstract things. When the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts then frozen policies begin to melt in the warmth of God’s love. Any real integration of children into church life would mean in many congregations radical changes, not merely in welcoming the presence of children when appropriate, but **welcoming the adaptations necessary to affirm their worth to God**. Financial priorities would change as well. I suspect that to function *appropriately*, work among young people in most parishes would require a tenfold increase in budget.

PART II - Practical Advice and Guidance

ONLY when the items mentioned in Part I have been tackled, and the necessary changes – gentle or radical – have taken place can any local church turn itself to the question of the introduction and integration of children to its healing ministry.

To introduce children to the Healing Ministry of the Church while ignoring the issues of Part I would lead to untold confusion. But untold blessing would follow a real integration of children into the life and work of the church.

I want to consider three areas in turn – the family, the Sunday School, and the church worship, and suggest ways in which the Church’s Ministry of Healing is rightly promoted. I shall not write in vague generalities but in personal terms, and leave you to adjust and apply them to your situation.

Who will teach whom?

It is easy for adults who spend so much time and effort imparting information to children, to forget that spiritually children’s eyes are often less blinded by the god of this world than ours [2 Corinthians 4:4]. Except we ***become as little children...***

The story is told that during a severe drought, a group of American Christians planned to assemble on a local hilltop and pray for rain. They did this, and were disturbed by the late arrival of a little child. He had been slower than usual, because, unlike them, he had not left until he had first located an umbrella, and had dragged it up the hill behind him!

FAMILY

1. Bring the children into Family Prayers (even if the adults have an additional time of devotions). Bring them in before the age when they are self-conscious. Pray matter-of-factly; avoid going all twee because they are present. Use ordinary English (i.e. avoid ‘Lord we do just pray that thou wilt vouchsafe’, etc), and be *real*. Avoid the fashionable jargon of ‘*just praying*’. If I’m ‘*just living*’ I’m nearly dead. If you’re only ‘*just praying*’ don’t admit it!!

‘O God, we’re so worried about Auntie Ethel, please show us what we should do to help...’

The simple mention of prayer *topics* rather than expanded intercession may be useful, as may the ‘phrase by phrase after me’ style.

[See also the article on this website **Healing Prayers based on Scripture** for more introductory teaching on prayer.]

2. Once children find themselves in a real and meaningful prayer-event (which should not be assessed by its number of minutes or words!) then the subject of suffering and healing are not far away.

‘We pray for the specialist who will visit Auntie today,
Help him to find out what is wrong,
Guide him in what to do about it...’

‘We pray too for the Vicar who will visit her tomorrow.
May he bring her your strength and peace: when he prays;
when he reads the Bible; when he anoints her with oil...’

‘May our flowers cheer her up...
Thank you for the nurses....’

Children will naturally pick-up the relation of the Church’s Ministry to Medicine and our theology of healing by our style and approach.

3. If Family Prayer-time is a relaxed and fluid affair, then when a member of the family is ill it will be natural to have some prayers together in his/her company.

‘We thank you Jesus for being here.
Touch Mummy and make her well and strong again ...’

A loving *touch* will be quite natural in such circumstances, and will go a long way towards introducing the ‘Touch of Christ’ as used in prayer with the Laying-on-of-Hands.

4. Experience very quickly teaches children the realities of estrangement and harmony. Family Prayers are the family together *before* God, not disguised parent-led lessons in religious education. Few things demonstrate the reality of God more than saying sorry to him.

Sorrow by adults to God for their failures ought not automatically to be kept from children.

Father (praying): Dear Father, I am sorry I allowed myself to get overtired yesterday and irritable.

Apologies and forgiveness, reconciliation and joy; to shield children from all such things is a dis-service. In these transformations the reality and the reconciling power of Jesus Christ is at its most visible. They are at the very *heart* of healing.

To experience tension but then reconciliation, disunity but then harmony equips the child with a deep insight into how the hurts and knocks of life can be redeemed and overcome. There are few greater gifts we can offer them.

5. Parents feel secure when they know all the answers (hence the insecurity of much parenthood!). Some parents will fear to expose a child to the Church’s Healing Ministry because they do not know all the answers. Cheer up: nobody does! Parental authority does not rest on infallibility, but on being consistent, authentic, caring and trustworthy.

Life is crammed full of mysteries and paradoxes – *except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die...* The healing ministry is not radically different from anything else.

Honesty is the best policy: children spot pretence a mile-off, and quickly reject it. They are not too bothered about ignorance. To admit that we do not know is acceptable – even helpful – to children; to pretend we do know when we do not, is what undermines such authority and authenticity that we have.

6. Children are sometimes patients. Ministering to them (with younger/older brothers/sisters present) would be a natural development of the sort of Family Prayers mentioned above. “The first requirement for the supernatural is to be natural” [Bishop Michael Marshall]. Prayer is only a strain or embarrassment when it is allowed to become *ab-normal*.

7. Young children can be prayed-over when sleeping. It is a good idea to pray in the room in which a child sleeps anyway. The young are much more sensitive to invisible pressures and presences than most of us are (or would wish to be). Not infrequently such things are the cause of crying, and it will stop immediately the Presence of Jesus is evoked to the exclusion of all that does not serve him.

8. It is better not to think too narrowly or formally about healing. Sacramental healing-actions probably begin naturally on mother’s lap! The loving touch and the ‘kissing-it-better’ are probably the roots of prayer with the Laying-on-of-Hands and the Kiss of Peace. [See also the *Laying on of Hands* article on this website].

9. It is important to begin where children are. What is important to them will be important to the Lord Jesus for their sake. Real love draws alongside, it does not draw back because of superior knowledge or understanding.

A child with a pet that is ill or that has just died is experiencing the full weight of suffering or bereavement (often to be etched on their minds sixty years later). Prayers for pets, and Christian funerals for them together with the blessing of Teddy Bears ought not to be denied; these are invitations to God.

Adults bring their loved ones to Jesus in prayer, why should not children do the same with the people they love, for a Teddy is personal to them. Adults who say grace regularly ask God to bless what are (by that time!) inanimate objects – ‘Bless O Lord this food to our use...’.

It is surely a healthier spirituality that asks God to bless one of his much enjoyed creations, like a tortoise or goldfish, than is the Christian spirituality that publicly asks God’s blessing on an instrument designed to destroy his creation, e.g. a nuclear submarine.

SUNDAY SCHOOL

10. The Sunday School must be integrated as much into the life of the church as possible. Unless children experience their worth to us as Christian adults, they will not readily believe their worth to Christ.

The problem is not that children are ‘anti’ the healing ministry and enlightened adults are ‘for’ it. Rather the problem is that children fairly naturally accept both suffering, God and healing, yet are ‘protected’ by adults, due to their own adult fears and insecurities in relation

1. to children,
2. to sickness and
3. to healing.

11. Children should be encouraged actively to care and support those in need and those who help them. Support of local medical and other caring centres, and of relief agencies should be fostered. This saves the Church’s Healing Ministry from seeming to be an odd detached super-spiritual activity of some in-group. The theology of healing will be taught by attitudes demonstrated to medicine, to the sick and to those in need.

12. If the Sunday School operates in some measure apart from the congregation, it should have its own Sick List (or, better, Needs List) for prayer and care. Such care will involve visiting, flowers, presents, Get Well cards, letters, pictures, etc. according to age.

13. Intercession for children (and adults too for that matter) can quickly go dead. To be real and relevant and not merely a verbal chore, there should be constant feedback and encouragement to those who pray.

‘We prayed for Mary last week. Harry, Betty and I visited her on Sunday afternoon and took her the big card we made from all of us and the jigsaw we had saved to buy her. We left the card we designed last week for the surgeon (but didn’t actually see him) thanking him for all he had done to help make Mary better. We prayed for her before we left, and by that time her mother had popped in, which was nice...’

‘The vicar visited her on Friday, and he’ll be coming out of the adult service early to tell us about that, and about Mrs. Smith who used to teach in the Sunday School whom he will be anointing with oil next week prior to her operation.’

‘Edward is home now, but dropped us a note which I have had photocopied, enlarged and displayed at the back for you to read before you go. He’s much better, and was cheered-up by a cheeky card that Bill sent him!’

‘Let’s now pray for Mary and Edward...’

Intercession is one facet of involved caring. Taken out of that context it becomes a verbal ritual and quite joyless instead of an exciting participation in what God is doing, and in the corporate nature of the healing ministry.

14. Sunday School leaders ought to be brought right into the healing ministry of the parish. They should know it and understand it. They should either have experienced it themselves or been present when folk have been prayed over and/or anointed. This cannot come about unless the Leprosy Syndrome (see in Part I above) has first been healed. Ideally they will visit and pray with Sunday School members who are ill at home.

15. Once the Sunday School leaders are familiar with the different facets and expressions of the healing ministry, then selected younger members who are not so familiar with it should share with them in visits and in praying with people. This should be done in an easy and relaxed style –

‘If you don’t mind leaving early, I’ll drop you at the youth club and we’ll pop in to see Margaret on the way there.’

Because we have allowed the normal to become abnormal, the first thing we have to do is to restore its normality. It is not odd for Christians to pray with the sick. Scripture, tradition and reason all suggest that Christians who do not pray for the sick are the oddies!

16. The minister/priest acts not only on behalf of God but also on behalf of the Christian community. His prayers with the Laying-on-of-Hands, and his Anointings with oil are the healing acts of the community. They are deprived of much meaning if the community concerned either does not know or does not care. It is appropriate that a few representatives of the local Christian family are present at times when the sick are ministered-to; a younger church member should sometimes attend.

(Denominations bemoan the lack of vocations to their ordained ministries. The main cause is that folk rarely know what such ministry *is* outside of the Sunday appearances. Opportunities to share-in and witness God’s work through such ministering would do much to foster vocations among the young.)

17. Teaching should include balanced and accurate information – together with some experience – of the Church’s present-day Ministry of Healing.

18. Where teaching is done by *themes* then taking the theme of OIL through the Scriptures can be very profitable [some material is in the *Understanding Anointing* article on this website]. The material is almost endless! The words beginning in capital letters below are all major themes in their own right :

Oil reflected the Good Life; it was used for Light, for Cooking, for Cosmetics, for Medicine, for Healing, and for international Trading. As God was the real source of the Good Life so it became a symbol of Joy, of Life, and of God himself. Thus God’s Prophets, God’s Priests, and God’s Kings had oil poured over them (‘anointed’). (So too did things set-aside for God’s use.) The utterly-Godly Saviour, God’s Prophet, Priest and King, that the Jews longed-for was therefore ***The Anointed One*** (Gk.=’Christ’) *par excellence*.

When this ‘Christ’ came he was specially ‘anointed’ by God’s Spirit for his task (Luke 4:18ff), and since his followers could share and partake in his Risen Life, so they too were ‘Christs’, God’s anointed ones [2 Corinthians 1:21], or *Christ-ians*, as they were nicknamed.

When a *Christ-ian*’s Good Life was disrupted because of sickness, then he was symbolically re-united with the God-Life by oiling him [James 5:13ff].

Today *Christian* monarchs are anointed, and the only hymn in the Book of Common Prayer is one for God’s ‘Anointing Spirit’ to be poured out on Bishops and Priests. (Confirmation asks for a similar outpouring to be a strong adult Christian.)

Some children might experiment by cooking Biblical cakes made with oil [1 Kings 17:12] while others could experiment with oil lamps – replicas of early Christian lamps are not difficult to find.

With over 200 references in Scripture to oil, no imaginative Sunday School teacher need be short of material!

19. Probably the greatest difficulty which Sunday School teachers will encounter will be the children’s awareness that Auntie Ethel goes to, or is, a ‘healer’. Most self-styled ‘healers’ are Spiritualists. Great care must be taken to distinguish Christian ministry from such things. See my ***Healers, Gifts, & Healing*** for guidance over this.

20. The relationship between ***Church & Medicine*** is covered in another article. The Old Testament use of food, wine, water, salt, soda, soap, oil, balm, fruit, leaves and bandages for healing is not stopped by Christ, the Great Physician, or his followers. The New Testament refers to the healing use of food, wine, water, oil and bandages (plus spittle, mud and leaves). St. Luke’s tide is an obvious time to raise this theme. Any anti-medical stance is quite contrary both to Christ and to Scripture.

IN CHURCH

21. The out-working of what I criticised in Part I should do much to heal the divorce between children and church.

There is one topic that needs to be dealt with in some detail – **ministering to children in church by prayer and the Laying-on-of-Hands**. Please note this carefully –

WHEN A MINISTER EXPRESSES GOD’S BLESSING OF A *GROUP* HE USUALLY RAISES HIS HANDS IN BLESSING OVER THEM.

IF HE EXPRESSES GOD’S BLESSING OF AN *INDIVIDUAL* HE PLACES HIS HANDS ON THE PERSON’S HEAD. [See e.g. Luke 24:50ff. And Matthew 19:13]

THE ONLY REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN INDIVIDUAL BLESSING AND PRAYER WITH THE LAYING-ON-OF-HANDS FOR *HEALING* IS THAT THE PERSON CONCERNED IS ILL.

Once this basic truth has been grasped it will be seen that there is no gulf whatever between blessing and healing ministry. If it is all right to bless those who are fit, it cannot be argued that it is wrong to bless those who are sick! ‘Healing’ is how the sick are most ‘blessed’!

[See the *Laying on of Hands* article on this website for all the relevant biblical material.]

Corporate blessing (practiced by most Christian traditions) is simply a short and convenient way of blessing a number of *individuals*, (much as we might leave an individual by shaking hands, but leave a group by waving). There can be no theological grounds for accepting corporate blessing while rejecting individual blessing.

22. **The blessing of children within adult worship will be the natural way in which they are introduced to healing ministries.** Wrongly done it will confirm their ‘second-rate’ classification by the adults of the church. Properly done it will be the means of healing the scars of the ‘Cinderella Syndrome’, and opening their lives to God and his love.

23. In churches that restrict the reception of Holy Communion to older children or adults, a blessing should be given individually to all non-Communicants.

24. As far as blessing children is concerned clergy tend to value it in theory but make it trivial in practice. A dab on the head with a spare finger and a muttered ‘G’bless you’ confirms not God’s love but a child’s second- or third- class status in the mind of the minister.

The difference between adults and children is important. A child will assess the value of his encounter with God by the **quality of his experience at the time**. An adult, while still prone

to do this, has a theology that tells him of the value of the encounter whether his experience was positive or not. (In some situations, adults help themselves to the Bread and Wine, but a blessing has to be *given*.)

25. Read again what I said about ‘Worth’ in Part I.

‘If children are second-rate to us they will not readily believe they are first-rate to God.’

The aim in praying over them is to reflect to them God’s love. How is this best done? There can be no blueprint, for our personal styles vary, but here are some suggestions.

- Really small children are better standing than kneeling. Kneeling, they tend to curl-up and be quite out of personal range of the minister.
- Younger children might well be greeted. ‘Hello Mary’ and a brief reminder given to them ‘We’re going to ask God/Jesus to bless you.’
- A child will often assent with a ‘Yes’ or a nod if asked ‘Would you like that?’ (This is parallel to the words of communicant administration and the required ‘Amen’.)
- The question of ‘level’ is important. Standing straight a minister is usually too far away to relate to a small child. Many ministers stoop or crouch, so that they are able to make positive eye-to-eye contact. This is not over-doing it. The *face* of the minister will be the chief means of communicating ‘worth’, care, welcome, and love. This is of quite profound religious significance, hence the Aaronic Blessing’s description of **the Lord causing his face to shine upon us and being gracious to us, and lifting up the light of his countenance upon us and giving us peace.** (Numbers 6:24ff). These are *profound* words of blessing; actions of blessing cannot do better than mirror them.
- A full Trinitarian blessing should be given. Such ‘generous’ attention can be given a child in less than 20 seconds! Dare we minister less? We *have* time: the question is how we choose to spend it.
- Occasionally such prayer will include mention of specific needs, e.g. starting new school, going to hospital, etc.

If a child experiences something such as this, and knows increasingly such expressions of God’s love and care, he/she will know exactly what is being done when we pray over the sick. No introduction will be necessary.