



Kids are hungry for reality church and Christianity. They want to REALLY feel His presence. They want to REALLY hear His voice. They want to REALLY experience His Power.

# Kids Need to Experience God

## “I Hate Sunday School—It’s So Boring!”

I was quietly sitting in my front yard one evening reading a book when I heard a slight commotion at the end of the block. My house was the middle of three on our street, and I looked up just in time to see a blonde-headed girl about eleven years old giggling, cutting across the neighbor’s lawn, and heading straight for me. I had no idea who she was. Without warning, she ran behind my chair, dropped to her knees, and crouched down so she couldn’t be seen. She continued to giggle while telling me, “We’re playing cops and robbers and I’m a robber. If my friends catch me, they’ll put me in jail.”

I cheerfully played along with her, acting as her lookout while her friends, one by one, appeared at the corner, gazing all around in search of their ‘thief.’ They disappeared momentarily as I gave her a play-by-play report of what they were doing. She hadn’t been next to me for more than three or four minutes when, suddenly, after a brief pause in conversation, she blurted out, “I went to Sunday School today, and I hate it! It is so boring!”

I was a little stunned by this total stranger, wondering where such a comment came from in the midst of our game of cops and robbers. Yet it was painfully honest and obviously on her mind. I felt like the Holy Spirit had set me up for the encounter confirming something I had believed for quite awhile. It was that a significant number of kids feel exactly the same way she did about the Sunday school programs they attend.

Cautiously, I asked her which church she went to, and she named one of the larger Charismatic fellowships in our town. I knew the place; however, I was only somewhat familiar with its children's program. But the truth was, she could have named just about any of the churches in our city, and, with very few exceptions, her statement could have been made about any one of them. Why? Because Sunday School and children's ministry, as they are typically presented today, really are spiritually "boring," even though we have better programs, better curriculums, better technology, bigger budgets, and are more entertaining than we've ever been before in the church world. Something is still missing.

**Why are we not able to significantly impact our own children and keep them as active members of the body of Christ after having the opportunity to influence them throughout their most impressionable years? We obviously are not doing much "impressing."**

## **Sunday School Emphasis Day**

Not long after the incident with my young neighbor girl, I received a phone call from a pastor's wife in another part of the state. She began by saying a gentleman in charge of their children's program had asked her to invite me to be the guest speaker for a "Sunday School Emphasis Day." They wanted to impress upon the children of their church how important attending Sunday School was.

"Don't tell me—let me guess," I interrupted. "You're having a hard time getting your kids to come to Sunday School on a regular basis."

"Right!" she admitted, and told me about how discouraged their worker was. "We're hoping if we have a special day to let the

kids know how important it is, it will motivate them to come more regularly.”

“I can certainly come and help you,” I responded. “However, I’m not sure it will do any good. I can bring in all my exciting sermons and object lessons, and we can have a great move of God. I can tell them how important it is for them to go to church. But what happens after I leave? Your workers will go right back to their same old ways the kids consider boring.”

I wasn’t trying to be rude. This was simply an effort to make a serious point. The truth is a large number of churches often find themselves in similar situations. Why is this? I truly believe churches are doing their best to provide what they feel it is the children need and want in the way of ministry. Many Bible schools now have courses in children’s ministry and some even offer degrees in this area to train people for working with children. Across the nation there are a number of superb conferences whereby children’s ministers can get on-going equipping and training, resulting in having some of the best qualified children’s ministers the world has ever known.

In decades past, too often, Christian products of any kind were inferior to what the world produced, but that has dramatically changed. We now have some of the highest quality videos, music tapes, CDs, DVDs, books, and some of the most creative curricula and vacation Bible school programs we’ve ever had in the history of Christianity. But no matter how much better our programs are by virtue of all our improvements, most churches are still missing the point. It’s not about building a “better mousetrap,” of facilities, curriculums, equipment, better teachers, paid full-time staff, or holding Sunday School Emphasis Days. These are wonderful, and we’re grateful to have them, but we must search deeper for a solution in order to reverse these problems.

## **What is the Real Problem?**

It’s disturbing enough to learn many children view Sunday School as boring after all our hard work. But the real tragedy is

what happens to our children as a result of this. Recent surveys from The Barna Group reveal once children reach thirteen to seventeen years of age, the numbers who continue attending church dwindle dramatically, and an alarmingly small number of young people “take Jesus with them” after high school. One survey estimates that less than one out of three teenagers plans on continuing to attend church after they leave home.<sup>1</sup> That means almost 70% of the children we have raised plan to stay home from church as young adults. This has frightening implications for the future of our churches, as well as the state of Christianity as a viable influence on our culture. Moreover, what will happen in the lives of these young people without an ongoing Christian influence? Those of us who have been a part of the church world for a good length of time didn't need the surveys to tell us this. We've watched it happen for years. The survey simply put some hard data into what we already knew and experienced—that of watching a mass exodus of teenagers from the church.

**We must ask which is more important—for our kids to know how many stones David picked up to kill Goliath, or to know the voice of the Master in their everyday lives?**

## **They're Not Impressed**

While church growth by new converts seems to be expanding rapidly in other continents, such as Africa, South America, and Asia, just the opposite is true in the West, particularly America. If this is true, the least we should be able to do is hang on to our own offspring and keep them in the “fold.” We have to ask ourselves why we are not able to significantly impact our own children and keep them as active members of the body of Christ after having

the opportunity to influence them throughout their most impressionable years. We obviously are not doing much “impressing.” I distinctly remember the days when Catholics proudly proclaimed, “Give us a child until he is seven years old and we will have him for life!”<sup>2</sup> What did they know that we don’t know?

Other results from The Barna Group has shown two out of three children still do not know Jesus as Savior by age thirteen, that most of them do not know what worship is, and only three out of ten are absolutely committed to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> I can add to these thoughts my own experiences as I travel around the world and the United States and ask for a show of hands in churches almost everywhere I go. Only a fraction of our children are filled with the Holy Spirit, speak in tongues, have ever heard the voice of God, know what it is to be led by His Spirit, or are aware of feeling His presence in a church service or otherwise. In other words, regardless of denominational affiliation, they have no legitimate, working, intimate relationship the Living God on any level after twelve years of being under our tutelage. What’s wrong with this picture? We must ask which is more important—for our kids to know how many stones David picked up to kill Goliath with, or to know the voice of the Master in their everyday lives?

## **Changes Needed in Youth Ministry**

An article about teens in *Ministries Today Magazine* by Barry St. Clair, founder and president of Reach Out Youth Solutions, stated, “Youth ministry as an experiment has failed. Much of our effort is like plowing concrete. We plow with the latest techniques and technology. We create a lot of sparks and noise along the way. Then we look back with bewilderment at the lack of harvest. If we want the church to survive, we need to rethink youth ministry. As the late youth ministry expert, Mike Yaconelli suggested, “For young people to have a faith that will last, we have to completely change the way we do youth ministry in America.”<sup>5</sup>

Though these comments were made specifically about teen ministry, follow them through to their logical conclusion. The fail-

ure did not begin when these churchians became teenagers. Consider the fact that in the first five years of life the foundations of a child's belief system are established and everything he learns from then on is filtered through this belief system.<sup>6</sup> Author Esther Ilnisky says, "Whatever attitudes and associations our children develop early on regarding church, church leaders, and, ultimately, God, will stay with them for a lifetime."<sup>7</sup>

## **Children Are Not Seriously Discipled**

One of the most grievous errors we believers have made is assuming children are not capable of understanding or acting on the deep things of God's Word. Consequently, they are never seriously educated or discipled in Christianity, but are merely pacified for twelve years with entertaining little Bible stories via the latest technology. We have mistakenly assumed this was the only way we could

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hold their attention. The very earliest we have felt they are able to function intelligently and deeply as believers or begin making a difference in the world as Christians is in their teens.

The church as a whole has highly underestimated the spiritual potential of its children because they have primarily seen them after the flesh and not after the Spirit. It's been most difficult to visualize squirmy, wiggly, smelly, sticky-fingered children as prophets and prayer warriors while they are still children. Certainly we can see potential of what they will be "when they grow up." But as children? That's a different matter. We need to get a revelation

that if we wait until they are adults to take them seriously as disciples of Christ, it's too late.

## **Making Christ Relevant to Kids**

It's apparent that church as we know it, Christianity as we live it, and God as we have portrayed Him seem to be quite irrelevant to many in this generation as they mature into their teens and beyond. Jesus, in many ways, is in the same category as Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the tooth fairy to them because He's seldom made real in their lives. Their opinions are largely formed by what we have presented to them on a weekly basis in our Sunday Schools. In many instances, Jesus is just the man in the stories, and not someone they relate to in every day life. Why? Because they've never felt His presence, heard His voice, or seen a real miracle or healing. In too many cases they've seen too few answered prayers, and what is Christianity all about anyway—good Bible stories or a personal relationship with the living God?

If we have not totally captured the hearts of our children by the time they are ten, eleven, and twelve years of age, it's possible we will completely lose them when they become teenagers. We cannot blame the tumultuous teen years. The problem begins way back in children's ministries that have no life and no sustaining power to undergird these kids as they grow up, no matter how professional and entertaining they are.

## **What Goes Wrong?**

These youngsters may continue to attend church for awhile because a parent forces them, but they make a decision as early as the ten or eleven years old that church is not for them. Use my neighbor girl playing cops and robbers in my yard as an example. I've since watched her go into her early teen years, and she wants very little to do with church. She didn't make that decision after she reached middle school or junior high. Her decision was made long ago when she was the most reachable and found Sunday School

boring. What is it in our children's programs that goes wrong? Every publisher of church curricula has gone to great lengths to upgrade and improve their materials and bring them current with present day teaching styles.

Perhaps this will give us a clue. One of the big reasons people have for not wanting to commit to children's ministry of any type is, "I'd help, but I don't want to miss out on the move of God going on in the adult services!" Or how about the one that normally comes from the head pastor to his children's pastor: "Make sure you organize your schedule so you can sit in the adult service at least once a month. After all, you need to be fed."

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## **Revealing Statements**

These are fascinating and very revealing statements about the state of our Sunday School and children's church programs. We are admitting first, there is no presence or move of God in them, and secondly, there's no spiritual feeding taking place. Creating a type of spiritual environment where the children are actually able to experience God rather than just learn about Him is imperative to changing children's attitudes towards church. If we as adults crave the presence of the Holy Spirit, doesn't it make sense our children hunger for Him as well?

## **Reality TV vs. Reality Christianity**

Adults don't like attending spiritually dry, dull services. Once they discover there's an alternative, in most cases, you can never

get them back to their old churches. Children are no different. They want to experience the reality of God as well. Kids hunger for an encounter with the Holy Spirit, although they don't necessarily know how to verbalize it in this way to us.

“Dry and dull” actually have very little to do with whether one has the trappings of the latest technology and the newest and greatest teaching materials. It has to do with “no presence of Jesus Christ in the classroom.” We can have a bare room and not a stitch of equipment or materials and have profound services if we will learn to take children into the throne room of God. Too often, we as church leaders have confused using the latest and greatest technological tools in our services, thinking this is what a child would consider spiritually stimulating. There is nothing wrong with using every tool available to us to make our services the best they can be. I use many of these in my own ministry. But there is no substitute for the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We hear a lot about “reality TV” these days. Reality TV is a type of television programming filmed live and unrehearsed with real people as opposed to paid actors. They are willing to compete with others doing bizarre, daring, risky, and many times obnoxious things in order to win a significant prize. The prize may be a huge sum of money, a potential mate, a high paying, prestigious job, etc. Because the prize is so attractive, they are willing to try anything to win. In reality TV you see every step of their journey as it actually happens. It can be very thrilling and captivating because the viewers know it's real versus actors who have been paid to put on a good make-believe performance. The audience can relate to what's happening because it is real.

## **Kids Hunger for a Real God**

Kids are hungry for reality church and Christianity. They want the real thing. They want to *really* feel His presence. They want to *really* hear His voice. They want to *really* experience His power. If we're honest, these things very seldom occur in the average weekly children's service in churches today. If they don't experience Him

inside our children's ministries, where will they go to find it, and how can they ever be spiritually satisfied without it? Occasionally our church camps are places where children can truly experience a move of God. But a once a year experience is not going to sustain them in their Christian walks any more than it can sustain adults.

As church leaders, we find it very difficult many times to recruit and maintain a good team of children's teachers and ministers. Could this be one of the reasons? If we are not feeling the presence of God in our children's services, we don't want to be there. We consider it a waste of our time. So why do we think the children will feel any different?

**Spiritual hunger and awareness are on the rise in our culture, and children are as affected as everyone else. We must bring them authentic experiences in God's presence.**

## **Being Culturally Relevant**

As someone has so aptly said, "Our message never changes, but our methods must be culturally relevant." It's wonderful to now have such quality Christian resource materials at our disposal that are in every way competitive with what the world produces. But just being able to use flashy DVD music videos and PowerPoint presentations isn't all there is to being culturally relevant. This is a generation that thinks differently than the generations before them. Contrasted with our high tech environment, we now live in a society that is chasing down every type of spiritual and mystic experience they can find from New Age to eastern religions to Satanism.

Because of the loosening of the immigration laws, our nation is the most religiously diverse on the planet. This is no longer an environment where we can assume every child has the same

Judeo-Christian background and frame of reference we were raised with in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To them truth is relative. It has resulted in a generation that thinks nothing of mixing a little Christianity with a tish of Buddhism, a tad of Islam, and a dash of Wicca. They see no conflict in this because to this generation, power and faith are based on what one experiences, not necessarily correct doctrine. In other words, if someone has a profound spiritual experience through an eastern religion, it's the experience that validates the religion, regardless of whether or not there's any underlying truth in its doctrine.

## **Harry Potter More Real Than Jesus?**

To put it even more bluntly, if a child messes around with Harry Potter and experiences something spiritual, whether good or bad, it becomes much more real and valid to him than a Sunday School class in which no power of any kind is ever felt. Kids are hungry for the supernatural, and unless they are taught, they have no discernment of which type supernatural is good and safe and which is not. Anything supernatural is real to them. They simply chase the supernatural like a moth attracted to light. One look in our school libraries, the comic book section of the local grocery stores, and the kids section at Barnes & Nobles will shout about their hunger for ghosts, goblins, witchcraft, and other strains of the occult, which is all a part of the dark side of the supernatural. Spiritual hunger and awareness are on the rise in our culture, and children are as affected as everyone else. We must bring them authentic experiences in God's presence. The logical place for this to happen is in the local church.

## **Kids Need Their Own Experiences With God**

Not long ago I received a newsletter from a very well-known Christian leader who is also a bestselling author. He's been a significant figure in the body of Christ for many years and you no doubt would recognize him if I named him. He is now a grandfa-

ther. His entire newsletter was lamenting his concern over his grandchildren, most of whom were born again and, in some cases, Spirit-filled. His concern was over the lack of spiritual interest and hunger he saw in those children as they were growing up in the church. Though their parents were serving the Lord, and their churches were strong, the children seemed to be unaffected by it all. After a lengthy analysis, he finally concluded the reason was that they had never had their own significant, personal experiences with our supernatural God for themselves.

This is so typical. Why aren't our children experiencing something significant in the Holy Spirit on a regular basis? They come to our churches every Sunday for years. We adults are having our own encounters, and hungrily seek after more. It's possible the church this man pastors could be lifeless, but I doubt it. I would speculate the adults of his church would tell you they feel the presence of the Lord on a regular basis.

My first question would be, "What is their children's ministry like?" Is the presence of God tangible on a regular basis? Or are twelve-year-olds still being fed a steady diet of Moses crossing the Red Sea, Jonah and the whale, and the fruits of the Spirit in much the same way they were when they were four years old? Have they ever been taught about the Glory of God, been taken into the Holy of Holies through worship, learned about the power of the blood of Jesus, and been taught how to hear the voice of the Shepherd? Do they know by personal experience that He's real and not just for people over twenty-one?

## **In Conclusion**

Churchianity has some strange ideas of what our kids can handle and enjoy spiritually. Our children are victims of being trapped in an old wineskin of our preconceived ideas of what they are capable of experiencing as spiritual beings. Being loaded with the latest technological trappings is only one part of being culturally relevant. Regardless of the format of our children's services, Sunday school, children's church, or any other, we must