CHILDREN, SALVATION, AND DROP OUT

Donald M. Joy*

If the population trends in evangelical churches were viewed by their governing boards in the same way that growth and decline trends are studied by corporation stockholders and executives, many churchmen would be spending some sleepless nights. A recent random probe into crib-nursery through senior-high populations involving a sample of almost six thousand persons produced the following disturbing profile and data\(^1\). (See graph on page 32.)

Few data of this kind seem to be available for either conference or denominational groups. In addition, local churches evidently rarely, if ever, inquire how well they are managing their most important resource—a phenomenon as incredible as learning that the local bank directors have not been studying what is happening to money.

Although the sample illustrated above was studied chiefly to derive data on the varying patterns in the male and female populations at different stages,\(^2\) the total picture dramatizes issues which we must confront in this study. We can only conclude from this a pattern of success with children of grades one through three and from the population peak which begins to flatten in grades four through six, that the churches must be missing their way in attracting, holding, and meeting the needs of the emerging adolescent and young adult. No doubt there are multiple causes for these substantial losses, some of them perhaps beyond our control. Nevertheless we are obligated to ask whether our handling of childhood and adolescent needs in the church may be producing excessive losses for irrelevant reasons.

To begin the questioning into those possible causes, students associated with me in research projects during the last two years have taped and transcribed several hundred interviews with children and young people up to age twenty-five. Among the many areas we have explored are two that seem particularly promising: (1) the kinds of religious experiences one has as a young child and the way those early experiences are viewed as the person moves into adulthood; and (2) the cognitive
powers of the growing child and his ability or inability to handle basic concepts of Christian faith and moral judgment.

The adolescents and young adults we questioned were, obviously, part of that rapidly diminishing population remaining with the church. We have not yet found ways of asking questions of the dropouts. In the typical church their names are quickly forgotten (boys more quickly than girls, evidently) and records rarely exist to identify them. In no case have we found a systematic effort by a congregation to identify its pattern of decline and act to gather clues for reversing the losses.

**Adolescents and Young Adults Remember**

One way to examine childhood religion is to ask teen-agers and older young people how they look back on their experiences of God. This method is to look through the telescope from the larger lens, perhaps, but it provides interesting clues. It may further suggest what may have happened to the dropouts who are not available for our questioning.

We are interested in a special kind of early childhood experiences. These are those which occur in congregations where a high premium is placed on (a) personal experience of God as in conversion, (b) evangelistic concern expressed through public invitations to salvation, and (c) public testimonies or statements of faith.

A recurring theme among adolescents is their repudiation of childhood religious faith and experiences. Such statements abound in the moments immediately following decision experiences in rallies, revivals, and youth camps. They are often intense: "I thought I was a Christian before," announced one twelve-year-old girl to a congregation of four hundred, "but now I know I wasn't; I was a fake and a hypocrite!" The ambivalence shows up even in living-room interviews, though rarely with the same feeling as that of the young girl above.

Paul (25:4):³ "Were you converted as a child? Yes, I think I was. Could you describe what it meant to you then? Certainly not what it means to me now anyway. I think I had a clear idea of the basics. Not as much as I do now. I knew Jesus took my sins away, and he came into my heart. That's what I was told. Do you date your salvation by that experience? No, I guess there was another point. It was when I was about eighteen . . ." (Lee Gangaware).³

Lynn (22:9): "Were you converted as a child? Yes. I think I was nine years old. It was at a camp, Wesley Grove, I guess
it was. Could you describe what it meant to you then? Well, it’s kind of hard to say because I felt I was sort of forced into the situation. This girl asked me time after time, night after night if I knew that Jesus had saved me, you know. I went to the altar several times and she told me that I had to cry in order to be saved. So, one night after that I cried, then she told me that I was saved. I think I knew that God loved me, but the main thing I think my childhood (religion) was based on was a legalism; you know, dos and don’ts. You can’t do this and you can’t do that stuff. Do you date your salvation to that childhood experience? No, there was another time. It was my freshman or sophomore year in college. It was basically a different kind of thing” (Lee Gangaware).

Brent (24:11): “Were you converted as a child? Yes, I went forward as a child of about ten at a revival meeting. With the knowledge that I had, I felt I accepted Christ. But as time went on this became less meaningful to me; I kind of got away from it. Do you feel that this encounter dates your present salvation? No, but I feel it had something to do with leading up to the point of salvation. Then, would you describe your salvation experience? It was when I was seventeen and in my senior year of high school... I went down to the front of the church without any emotional experience whatsoever. I accepted the claims of Christ. Would you consider the childhood experience not to be enough? I wouldn’t say that it was not enough at the time that I was a child; I think to my understanding it met my need at that moment, but as I grew older I began to have a lot of other needs and began to understand the gospel a lot better. I think it was just needing a new experience” (Nelson Brandymore).

This disjunction between childhood and adult religion is by no means universal in our interviews:

John (17:2): “It was when I was almost four that I first accepted Christ. But then later on at different ages I made more commitments. Is this experience just before you were four the one to which you date your salvation? Yes, because that was when I first understood that I was a sinner and
needed Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour. I think if I hadn't accepted Christ, and I had been killed, I would have gone to hell” (Jay Comstock).

One student, upon observing the possible difference between childhood and adult Christian faith, reported that he had recently participated in a weekend retreat in which virtually every one of the college and seminary students present had shared a “two-stage” spiritual history, in the second of which the first was repudiated as false or at least inadequate. Can we identify the nature of this shift in thinking, perceiving, and believing? If so, would it throw light on the distressingly high dropout rate that occurs in the typical congregation among children of ten years of age and upward?

**Children’s Moral and Religious Perceptions**

Jean Piaget, the remarkable Swiss wizard who has studied children for most of a very long life, brought attention to the ways in which children make entirely different moral judgments from those of adults. Most of us assume that the child who comprehends adult words, and indeed uses them, thinks as the adult thinks.

We used adaptations of a pair of Piaget stories to see what kinds of moral decisions children make. The stories are about two boys (or girls, if the subjects are females). The first boy comes quickly when his mother calls him to dinner. He pushes through the kitchen door only to knock over a tray of cups his mother has placed there. All fifteen cups break. The second boy comes in after school and finds his mother gone. Although Mother has forbidden him to have cookies after school, he climbs up on a chair and while getting a cookie, slips and knocks one cup to the floor. It breaks. Which boy, in the child’s mind, does the worse thing?

Naomi (8:3): *"If you were the Mother, which one would you punish most? The one that broke the fifteen cups. Why would you punish Sue the most? Because fifteen is more than one. So Sue is the naughtiest then? Yes"* (Nelson Brandymore).

Tommy (10:4): *If you were the Daddy, which one would you punish most? The one who broke the fifteen cups”* (Lee Gangaware).
These are fairly typical of children under eleven or twelve years of age. Something is right or wrong in terms of the size of the event. At the level of words, at any rate, such children are unable to deal with intention; they can only reckon with tangible results. In some cases, anything is defined as bad if you are likely to get punished for it. Piaget speaks of “adult constraint” as the source of this “moral realism” in children—a morality defined in terms of external events exclusively. It would appear that a child growing up in the finest of Christian environments must inevitably pass through his early childhood with the conscience of a Pharisee. A thoroughgoing legalist, he makes judgments on himself and the whole world in quantitative and tangible terms, with no perception of intentionality and inward dimensions of faith.

Intentionality does show up as a factor in moral judgment, usually within a year or so of the age of ten.

Bob (9:9): “Which of the two boys do you think is the naughtiest? The second one. How come? Because he did something he was not supposed to do. So, then it doesn’t make any difference how many cups he broke? No, it’s just whether he did it on purpose or by accident” (Jon Honda).

If the young child actually judges moral events with a set of tools which bring him to opposite conclusions from ours, we may immediately ask what kinds of responses he is capable of in evangelism settings. What kinds of guilt, for example, are triggered by this up-side-down moral thinking?

Children surprise us in another way, too. They have problems with anything requiring abstract thinking. Just as they use external tools to define morality and have problems with the unseen, the intangibleness of intentionality, so also they must use concrete tools to think theologically:

Taylor (3:10): “Can you tell me about God? He lives in heaven. What else can you tell me about Him? He used to be small at Christmas. Can you see God? No. Why not? Because. How do we know that God is alive? He died a long time ago” (Terry Dunn).

Joy (6:0): “Have you seen a picture of God? Yes. What does He look like? I will go and get it for you. (Subject goes to her room and returns with a picture of Jesus.) Oh, that’s a beautiful picture. That is God is it? Yes. Where does He
live? In heaven. Who is His mother? Mary. And His father? Joseph. Yes. Have you heard about Jesus? Yes. Who is His Mother? Mary. That was God’s mother? Yes. Who was Jesus’ mother, then? Mary . . . um, I don’t know. Who was Jesus’ father? Joseph. Whose picture is this? God. Have you seen a picture of Jesus? Yes. What does He look like? Same thing. (She laughs with embarrassment.) That is Jesus. And God is Jesus. Oh, I see. Um, I think that’s God (with emphasis) and Jesus is His Son. Oh, yes, What does He look like; Um, that’s Jesus (pointing to the picture). That is Jesus is it? That’s God . . . I don’t know” (Kingston Kajese).

Kim (8:0): “Have you heard of God? Yes. Tell me what you know about God. Well, He died on the cross. He rose from the grave and came up to heaven. And a whole lot of other things happened. What does He look like? I have no idea” (David Cheyne).

Rodney (6:6) “Do you know what a Christian is? Yes, someone who does good things and is not grouchy. A Christian is a Do Bee. He’s cheerful, he always comes in when he’s told. But a Don’t Bee is never happy. Do you know anything else about a Christian? No, all I know is about a Do Bee” (William White).

David (8:7): “What is a Wesleyan? I couldn’t describe it. It’s like any other church, like a Baptist, but it’s more religious. It’s really sharp on religion. What is a Christian? A Christian is when you know God as your personal Saviour and you love Him. What is a non-Christian? I think it’s a person who is not a Christian, like a backslider. Can you tell me the difference between a Wesleyan and a Christian? If you’re a real good Christian, then they’re the same” (Nelson Brandymore).

These probes into childhood theological thinking are no final proof of anything, of course, but they allow us to glimpse religious thought as it is forming. By our standards their thinking is wrong—even terrifying. But abstract concepts such as God, Christian, and the important denominational label obviously form slowly, painfully, and chiefly by testing hypotheses in one’s mind to build one’s very own
original model for the concept. A pattern does seem to run through the scores of responses we have collected: God is a man, usually Jesus. A Christian is defined by what he does. And the denominational name refers to a church building. (The eight-year-old above had developed a slightly more advanced and interesting hypothesis about "Wesleyan.")

Whether the child’s immature thought patterns make him a candidate for evangelism is a question we must continue to ponder. Abundant testimony suggests that early religious experience is possible, and a great many people see it as desirable.

**Religion, Salvation, and the Young Child**

In the theological environment surrounding this probe, it is widely held that the child is “saved until he is lost.” Some ambiguity hangs around the term “age of accountability,” but presumably the child must be able to deal with intentionality (which also appears in Wesleyan discussions of sin) if he is to be held responsible before God for life and faith. It would seem fairly urgent that the child also should have a grasp of basic concepts in order to move the furniture of his mind toward God and saving faith.

A third factor emerges, as well, which may be a criterion for salvation in any discipleship sense, namely the awareness of oneself as a person separate from parents, peers, and clan.

The “identity crisis” years coincide with those of early and middle adolescence and tend to mark the point at which values and beliefs either are internalized or are rejected. If they are internalized, they go to the heart and provide motivation from within. In this awareness of self and of destiny, the typical youngster is actively cutting himself loose from parents. He is testing the worth of their beliefs and is casting about for models and ideals worth making his own. So if one wishes to call people to discipleship and to bring them to Christ, the most likely candidates are those who have (a) a clear ability to identify intentionality in moral judgments, (b) abstract thinking tools for dealing with salvation ideas, and (c) an emerging sense of their own responsibility for themselves as they discover who they are and for what purpose they are here. All of these credentials are in hand by mid-adolescence; none of them seems to be present consistently in the young child.

But what is going on with the young child who is openly religious and who “goes to the altar” or makes other visible and very real expressions of apparent faith? If “internalization” of Christian beliefs, taking “Jesus into one’s heart” in a profound way, is our goal for the growing child in our midst, can we inquire what best precedes such internali-
zation? The psychological insights from which we derive the concept of internalization form a larger model called "identification," of which internalization is a culminating stage®.

Identification theory, when reduced to its simplest level, suggests that children find themselves attracted to significant persons in their lives—especially parents and adults to whom they are exposed frequently. They indulge in extensive imitative behavior, play at being those specific people, and in the process learn to act in ways that please the people they are imitating. They do these things quite spontaneously and unconsciously because they observe from all of the clues available that they are good things to do. They go to great lengths to learn important language and behaviors of their models. And they observe what kinds of events evoke the greatest pleasure of those parents or friends.

To the extent that identification theory offers a good explanation for what we see happening around us day by day it is useful to us. And this strategem for passing along treasured values and beliefs from one generation to another cannot have been the product of random chance, but of the wisdom of the Creator.

Seen through the identification model, the young child's religious life may come clear in two important ways: (a) It may be seen as the serious business that it really is—stretching to measure up to the impossible dream of being the kind of person one's father or mother or other significant person is. (2) It may be seen as an essentially "secondary faith," in contrast to the "primary faith" contract of the respondent who is in the throes of the identity crisis.

We are well aware of the distinction between "secondary status" for the young child, during which time he delights in being "Joe, the grocer's son," and "primary status" needs by which the emerging teen-ager longs to be recognized for his own worth and not for his father's reputation. Similarly, we might hypothesize that the younger child's religious feelings, experiences, and expressions are a part of this secondary package which is umbilically tied to the world of adults—his heroes and models. This is far from saying that these secondary expressions are false or defective. It may be to suggest, however, that we should nourish the child's growing appetite for God's presence and work in his life and stop short of attaching the language of discipleship commitments to these important identification responses of our children.

Notice the obvious identification elements in a continuation of this interview with the seventeen-year-old who felt his conversion at age four was essential at that time to keep him from going to hell:
The Asbury Seminarian

John (17:2): "Outside of your family, what person would you say was the greatest influence on your being a Christian? I would say Bill Glass (professional football player, now an evangelist). How did you come in contact with him? At a Youth for Christ meeting in Winona Lake. I didn't hear him at that time, but my Dad did. He told me all about it, and bought me some of the books he had written, and then we heard him a couple of other times. His Christian testimony and everything—I guess he'd be one of the biggest influences outside of our own family" (Jay Comstock).

Implications

We have been looking for clues to help us understand why the church seems to lose its children after early success in winning and holding their attention. The interview data and impressions reported here are based on several hundred separate, recorded, and transcribed interviews. They seem to point to a series of possible causes and combinations of conditions which may contribute to the child's rejection of a religious orientation and continuing participation in church activities. We can at least formulate the following kinds of hypotheses which are worth testing:

1. Children tend to quietly slip away during the age ten to thirteen period and thereafter, because the early childhood "salvation" experiences occurred with the limited tools of the child mind; without exchanging those tools for more advanced ones, the childhood experience turns hollow and inadequate for the increasingly complex faith needs of the emerging adult.

2. Children's first conclusions about morality and Christian faith are inevitably defined in external, concrete terms; as they develop powers of abstract thinking which are applied to the other universes of knowledge and experience, it is possible that the "sacred area" of religion is barricaded against change, with the result that an infantile set of religious ideas is carried over into otherwise more mature years, becoming the source of embarrassment and perhaps leading to desertion from faith.

3. Arrival at sexual majority, the onset of pubescence, seems to usher in successive waves of need for independence, the search for personal meaning and identity, the development of abstract
thinking and reasoning, and the awareness of the personal need of God's grace for becoming reconciled with himself and the entire moral universe; in the face of these yearnings, the child may well conclude that religion as he knows it has no adequate answers.

In the meantime, we can affirm commitment to Christian education principles which have not been widely articulated, but which may in the long run prove to be highly important.

1. Effective value transfer requires that we work "with the grain" which we find in God's creation, namely the ways in which persons form values, develop moral thinking, and internalize the store of treasured beliefs available to them. If we ignore God's design and the human pattern, we sin against God, ourselves, and those who are looking to us for life.

2. Christian education priorities must be revised to place non-verbal modes of representation very high on the scale of effectiveness when value transfer is at stake. Commitment to values occurs only voluntarily, often spontaneously, and exclusively in environments which are rich and warm toward meeting needs and bestowing dignity and affection.

3. Christian education teaching tasks must now be defined by careful analysis of actual types of moral thinking present in the learning group, and by the skilful introduction of creative tension related to genuine conflict in moral thinking in order to elevate moral thinking skills and thus move the learner to new and higher levels of thinking so that his moral and spiritual thinking center leads instead of follows his other developmental characteristics.

At this point in our observations we are prepared to make no final conclusions. The clues do seem to indicate certain patterns and trends in the development of conscience and in the acquisition of meaningful long-range Christian salvation experience. From those patterns and trends we can infer certain tentative guidelines which may immediately improve our effectiveness with children and youth, who are, after all, our greatest treasure:

(1) Surround the child, from infancy upward, with a warm and rich "identification" environment. Although he may incorrectly interpret his observation in those early years from external, legalistic,
and rigid ways, he is laying the base for later personal evaluation and internalization of those values represented to him convincingly.

(2) Help the young child affirm and celebrate his relationship with God during the years of his innocence. If he senses “guilt” during these pre-identity crisis years, help him to find release through prayer, restoration of fellowship with God, and your own acceptance and warmth.

(3) Avoid suggesting that his childhood experiences with God are identical to those rugged responses of adolescence when the battle is entirely one’s own and the issues are of life and death proportions. Instead, nourish the identification process. Hold up the importance of commitments being made by adolescents and adults who are obviously acting independently and with deep awareness of the nature of discipleship.

Jim (10:5): "Could you tell me the difference between God and Jesus? I think they are both the same. What does the term 'being saved' mean to you? To turn over a new leaf and have another life. Like, if you were a prisoner or something and always did things wrong, to just believe on God and have your sins washed away. At what age do you think everyone should be saved? In your teens. Why? Well, before your teens you really don’t know enough, but in your teens you should know" (Tom Pitcher).

Obviously Jim is in an environment which is saying to him in many ways that there are big things beside cars and girls coming “in your teens.” His expectations include that very personal commitment he is going to make to Jesus Christ. We can let the child speak of how he “loves Jesus” and how “Jesus forgives him,” but we need not insist that he apply our language of discipleship and salvation to his own identification responses.

(4) View the emerging adolescent as entering into the years of golden opportunity to respond personally to God in a “primary” as opposed to a “secondary” and derived relationship. It is as if every person passes through two childhoods, one as an extension of his parents, and the next all alone. The rigorous claims of Christian discipleship can ultimately be met only personally. No doubt some religious children pass smoothly into independently committed discipleship, but more often the childhood experiences are inadequate for the emerging independence and formal thinking of adulthood.

We believe that characteristically one of three things will happen to the child as he moves from the concrete and pre-moral thinking period.
He will either (a) repudiate his "religion" as childish and unworthy of his more mature level of development; (b) dichotomize religion and all the rest of life and thought, retaining his childhood perceptions, attending church, but never letting his adult thinking in secular realms touch his childhood perceptions about God, Jesus, and salvation; or (c) batter down the concretions and pre-moral perceptions, exchanging them, as he does in the other essential areas of life and thought, for more mature and accurate primary experience.

We are wise to remember that all around us are children in the many stages of thinking and perceiving. We fail the future when we neglect to help every child take that independent, "primary" step in establishing a relationship with Christ. Any warm and respected adult in the church can evoke positive feelings in any teen-ager with whom he has established bonds of friendship by saying, "You've grown up so quickly, and I've never even inquired since you've come into your own as a young man whether you've found a really personal relationship with Christ."

1 A composite of data gathered by Wayne Kenney, Pamela Wilhoite, and the author in twenty percent random samples of congregational enrollments of churches in five conferences of the Free Methodist Church: Central Illinois, East Michigan, Pacific Northwest, Southern Michigan, and Wabash.

2 Such a sex imbalance in populations of evangelical churches is the source of growing concern to some observers; it was identified as such by the author in "Building Children's Belief," Christianity Today, June 19, 1970.

3 Numbers in parentheses following names indicate the subject's age in years and months. Italics indicate the words of the interviewer; in each case his name appears in parentheses at the end of the transcript.


5 We have found intentionality in the answers of five and six year olds. They tend, however, to become confused after a moment or two and to revert to more rigid quantitative thinking. This may have implications about the usefulness of open moralistic teaching with the young child on matters where intentionality is an important element.

Sunday School Enrollment Population
Forty-eight Churches

Nursery 305 492
Kindergarten 718
Primary 1206
Junior 1341
Teen 983
Senior Teen 856

Total population: 5901

Cradle Roll 305
Nursery 492
7 See the helpful discussion in David Krathwohl, Benjamin Bloom, and Bertram Masia, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Affective Domain*, New York: David McKay, pp. 29 ff.


**RESPONSES**

I immediately identified with the article, because the things it deals with have been perplexing me for some time, both in class-room situations and in things I have faced personally in working with CYC groups, in VBS, and in the regular church C. E. programs. I observe, too, that the church generally does not seem to do much about it. I think the approach of the article is a good one; no hard and fast conclusions can be drawn from the statistical profile, but the curtain is raised somewhat and we get a pretty good idea of what is happening. Here are some specific responses to elements of the report:

“Brent” echoes what I have often said to people who feel uneasy about child responses to God: “I wouldn’t say that it was not enough at the time that I was a child.” God leads the child as a child. When I have discussed the matter of salvation in childhood with our Christian education students, they have constantly spoken of such a “two-stage” history as those to which the article refers. Very few students have repudiated the fact that they made contact with God when they were young children, but the majority recognize a second experience, usually during adolescence.

In relation to the external type of moral judgment made by children, I think we would have to plead guilty. But as serious as that is, I think we may also be guilty of imposing undue adult constraint in the matter of the child’s salvation responses. Here are two examples that come from personal experience while I served as the Bible teacher or evangelist at children’s camps. (a) One child upon leaving the altar was heard to say, “Well, that is over for this year.” The expectation seemed to be that each camper would, in due process of time, every season end up at the altar. (b) In a camp that ran from Monday night through Friday morning, I was using the approach of building sound concepts and helping the children grow in their awareness of intentionality and
personal responsibility. I was getting excellent response from the junior-age campers and was urging thought and response on a personal basis. After one session I asked a rather deep and pointed question. Some four or five hands went up, all fellows. I asked them to talk to me after the meeting, and they seriously and hungrily gathered around the table up front, and, along with them, one girl. We had a wonderful exchange of ideas on things that really matter. But when Wednesday morning came and there had been no altar call, I could sense that a number of the leaders and workers were very glum and that the whole purpose of the camp was being thwarted. After this, God did graciously break through on us and about half of the nearly one-hundred-fifty CYCers came up front. In spite of this I felt more encouraged with that first half dozen, and had wanted more of that type of interaction.

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This is just the kind of probe we need and the kind of thing we need to do more of in Christian education to get to firm foundations for our educational ministries. I have always felt close to the author as I followed his writings, and now it becomes apparent that we are moving on in similar directions. I am particularly glad to see the application of the identification theory as a base for restructuring educational practice, a theory, it seems to me, in much fuller harmony with Scripture than our present theory-less state. In fact, my dissertation at Northwestern University and my next few years here in Phoenix are being devoted to developing and testing a Christian education system constructed on this model involving the church and the home. I am pleased to respond to the report. The insights which it offers are excellent and, I am convinced, accurate and valid, and can be supported both theoretically and theologically.

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This work is impressive. I am especially pleased about the empirical work—the use of random samples rather than convenience samples, the caution about generalizations, and the careful use of Piaget's observations. Small issues hardly deserve mention, but I suspect the sources on identification processes may be a bit out of date, peer orientation having recently become so dominant so early. Also early in the report there is mention made of having persons describe themselves at earlier stages. This always sets up a suspicion in me that the investigator might take at face value what a person says. I doubt seriously that anyone not under hypnosis or drugs can really tell us what he was like and how he looked at things in an earlier stage of development. However, the author didn't fall into this trap as he went ahead in the text. As I said, the reservations are minor, and in the face of such a solid article, it is hardly appropriate to mention them. I especially like the "two-stage history" construct. It helps to explain some rough spots in developmental studies.

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