Self identity in adolescence verses childhood spiritual development religion essa...

Raising children in a spiritually oriented family can certainly be an enjoyable and a life long experiences to the parents, however, there are time when it becomes a headache; and non other period is full with such headache and missteps than during adolescence period. The parts of enjoyable blessings are undoubtedly the sense of safety it brings to a family whose root strongly grounded in the words of God. The headaches are the nuisance that arise as children begins to acquire the sense of " self identity" and not regarding parents opinions whereas prior to to this stage, they were going along and following after whatever their parents based their beliefs upon. This paper will be written with intentions of enlightening the readers with these cons and pros in mind. When one put in consideration the faith of the adolescent children from within the congregation or from the family prospective in contrast to rebellious stage they go through at adolescence period, one wonder how they hold on to their faith that their family had nurtured into them and; making one begs to ask the question, " Should the parents continue to help guide them at such period of time when they are likely to rebel and become harder to listen to their parents advice?" of course yes, they are one's own children and are blessings from God. God expect every parent to love their kids as the way God loves each one of them. All in all, parents just need to be understanding and patient with them as the behaviors developed at these stages will last indefinitely. However, before putting more emphasis on these developmental stages drawn from studies put forth by several well-known psychologists, I, first, would like to start with a personal childhood experience of a friend of mind, whom I came to know during my basic combat training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina; and whom we are stationed together in Camp Robinson, North Little Rock.

He went further by saying that they were as similar as to the rest of the kids at his neighborhood or school, but evidently the bond that they had, held them closer to the influence of the church. " Therefore, deciding to follow or be saving in Christ was not a choice but something we had to do.," he said. In the case of Andrew, one is left to believe they had no other choice other than go with the flow. So, as early as the age of five, the two of the best friends would respond to the request of their children's Sunday school instructors and hope that Christ would be receive in their hearts without having a firm cognitive sense of their prayers. Was there a change in their lives? No, they were just going with the normal activities for the children in the church.

Furthermore, Andrew stated that when they were twelve, after several years later, they would meet for bible study at one of the church leaders' house, where he would baptize those who decided to be immersed in Christ. Once more, expectations of their parents mandated them it was time for them to step up and be baptized. So, one Sunday evening, Andrew and his friends, along with others in their class, stepped into the water and were baptized. " Were we demonstrating to the world that we were now dead in our sins and transformed into new life in Christ?" he asked interrogatively. " No, we were following the normal routine that was expected of all the church kids that went before us. It was a right of passage into the next level of life in the church. Were we forced or coerced into doing this? No, we decided to take these steps as it was the proper thing to do."

Andrew confessed that as he grew in his understanding and faith, he came to resent both the actions of the church and home. He perceived the events as

irresponsible and meaningless. He felt that he had been misled and was given a false sense of his position in Christ. " I concluded that I was not saved during those early years and I objected to the practice of child evangelism," he protested. This state of hostility toward his church lasted for about three years during his late teens as he struggled with his own identity and his relationship with God.

Now, Andrew is a married man and Chaplain assistance in the military unit. His wife and he are planning to have children in the nearest future. Therefore, in light of his own spiritual development he is left to wonder how he would measure a child's spiritual readiness or more explicitly, how would he know when a child is ready to make a decision for Christ and for baptism. It is with such wondering that all parents out there should bear in mind when considering raising their children spiritually oriented family.

Furthermore, my friend's main experience, to me, sounds as if he was going through some of the stages that famous psychologist had put forth. He sounds as if is seeking some kind of self identity despite the fact that his family has tried to instill a sense of security in him. In this case important that one considers to put some emphasis on the developmental aspects of Piaget and Kornberg. Those of us who went through adolescent stage and the parents who work or live with adolescents know first-hand that they are at once impossible to live with and a joy to have around. Adolescents are full as attitudes such as, critical, combative, and absent-minded; they are also creative, energetic, and impassioned about the world and their place in it. However, research on adolescents development has shown clearly that the surface behaviors of early adolescents provide poor clues as to what is really

happening with them; as what they were thinking. At this stage most believe that adolescents children at the age between 14 to 17 as easily prone to be stressful and stormy, , easily give in to the pressure from friends, rebellious toward adults, moody, uncommunicative and unpredictable. Unfortunately, these views are popular myths and have resulted in generations of misunderstanding and inappropriate attention to the needs of 10 to 14 years old.

Early adolescents are rarely perceived as being deeply thinking, caring and paying more attentions to people who are thought to be impressed by love from the older ones. Also, at this level, they are reaching the last developmental stage of classifying themselves as grownups; difficult, serious and individual search for sources of why life is what it is and why there is death. All these ignite the excitement and, hence, become the bases of developing or strengthening their own faith.

In the theory of cognitive development (Table 1), Jean Piaget put forth the intellectual counterpart of biological adaptation to the environment. He said that as we adapt biologically to our environment, so too we adapt intellectually. Through assimilation, accommodation and rejection, the external world is organized and given structure.

Adaptation begins at birth with the exercise of sensory-motor reflexes. Differentiations via reflexes are the initial modifications that are later on significantly enhanced child's cognitive development. And as far as the child continue growing, the adoption he does eventually become less related to

sensory and motor behaviors alone, and may be less clearly seen as adaptations by the untrained eye.

Each successive stage is built upon the one before in an accumulating, orderly, sequential and hierarchical manner. Yet the cognitive structures are developed in an invariant sequence. That is, the course of cognitive development, marked by the development of structures, is the same for all children, although the ages at which they attain particular structures may vary with intelligence and the environmental settings or social settings (Inhalers and Piaget, 1968, p. 154).

Erikson's theory of psychosocial stages (Table 3), similarly mentioned that a person's personality develops according to predefined steps that are maturely set. Society is structured in a way that brings in and galvanizes the challenges that come up at these particular times. Each stage presents the individual with a crisis. If a particular crisis is handled well, the outcome is positive. If it is not handled well, the outcome is negative. The resolution of each stage lays the foundation for negotiating the challenges of the next.

Lawrence Kohlberg views the development of morality in terms of moral reasoning (Table 3). The stage of moral reasoning at which people can be placed depends upon the reasoning behind their decisions, not the decisions themselves. He believes that the stages are sequential and that people do not skip stages, although they come and departs from them at different period times.

Furthermore, it is also important to notice the negative outcomes on Spiritual formation. Considering Eriksonian, Piagetian, and Kolbergian theories, James

Fowler set out to analyze the process of spiritual development in his description of several stages that occur in the development of faith in a person's lifetime (Table 4). He called the stage of most adolescence to be mythic-literal faith. This stage is consistent with Piaget's concrete operational stage and Erikson's industry vs. inferiority stage. It is at this stage that children develop their sense of position relative to others in the peer group by mastering the academic and social skills. Their individuality is defined by their position in the group. They become less egocentric and begin to understand complex concepts like conservation. The child continues to have difficulties even though he developed in respect to abstract terms such as his or her liberty or his or her freedom. Children entering this level of stage understand the concept of the world on a basic concrete degree.

Fouler mentioned that most adolescents are at synthetic-conventional faith. This stage correlates to Erikson's identity vs. role confusion stage and a more mature level of Piaget's concrete operational stage. They establish a feeling of who they think they are and where they think they belong. A strong emphasis is placed on being part of the group. There is an even more desire for changes to take place in order to the fully accepted by the society. Their identification and expression of faith are an extension of their family, their church and their peers.

During childhood, religious beliefs and behaviors are greatly influenced by one's parents. Children tend to imitate their parents' beliefs and behaviors. In adolescence, however, there is a change and a questioning of many of these religious beliefs. David deVaus looked at the importance of parental influence in relation to religious values and behavior in Australian teenagers.

The results showed that, at least for religious activity (behavior), both parents and peers were about equal in importance. However, when asked who had been most influential in development of their religious feelings, the most common answer was the mother (51 percent), followed by father (42 percent).

According to Fowler it is not until a child reaches the next stage, individuative-reflective faith that individuals begin to assume personal responsibility for their own commitments, life-styles, or beliefs. As this takes place, adolescents are forced to address unavoidable tensions between the person they want to be and what others expect of them. This stage is associated with Erikson's intimacy vs. isolation and the beginning level of Piaget's formal operational stage when children begin to develop close interpersonal relationships, showing a willingness to commit to others. They start to cultivate the ability to examine these hypotheses in a developed, matured, scientific manner and can understand, and express their where they stand on moral and ethical matters that demand an ability to use the abstract. They can think about thinking -- that is they become aware of the processes whereby they come to hold a particular opinion. They begin to own the beliefs they hold. They are becoming adults.

Also, when considering these developmental ideas, it is important that one understand the implications and the dangers involved. A girl's body can begin to take on the shape and features of a woman. She can speak with the sophistication associated with adolescence or even adulthood. Social and legal arrangements can permit new freedoms simply because a person reaches a certain age. But until the evolution of meaning becomes

interpersonal, there is a very real sense in which the person is not yet an adolescent. If those around her should mistake physiology, calendar age, or verbal ability for psychological age and expect her to function inter-personally, they create a situation which is dangerous for the developing teenager.

In his discussion on the dangers of applying developmental theory to spiritual growth, John Ackerman states that we can make three grave mistakes. First, one may have a tendency to rank individuals according to their development. Second, one may interpret that because he has mentioned them, he knows them. Third, we may take the groupings and define an absolute relationship between psychological and spiritual growth. " We need to know where people are developmentally, but the focus is on God, in the person's perception of God." (Layman, 2001, p. 111)

I will venture to say that most churches, mine included, proceed with the expectation that chronological age defines spiritual readiness with respect to issues such as faith commitment and baptism. Within the structure of our institutions we have rituals that are performed, with some regularity, with children entering puberty. The Jewish Bar Mitzvah, Catholic and Lutheran Confirmation, and Baptist and Brethren Baptism are examples of ordinances that the church observes when children have reached their pre-teen years. Tradition dictates that at this age a child is ready to begin the transition to adulthood. They need to begin taking the faith they have been taught since infancy and make it their own. But are the children really ready for such a step? Do they really understand the steps they are taking?

The most common argument I hear in favor of child conversion are based on verses like the following:

Jesus proclaimed, " I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." (Matt 11: 25).

And he said: " Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18: 3).

Jesus said, " Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matt 19: 14).

Reasoning that God accepts the faith of a child, parents and teachers do their best to help the child to make these life decisions. But unfortunately, in the well-intentioned adults attempt to 'hurry up and save the children from eternal damnation," they have misunderstood the concept Jesus was teaching. Taken in their proper context we see that Jesus' teachings were pointing not to the childish faith as being the characteristic he was seeking, but to the humility and trust of a child as being the characteristic he was seeking in his followers. This teaching is not for the children but for the adults to follow. When it was time, the disciples came to Jesus and questioned, " Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: " I tell you the truth, unless you repent and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a

little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." (Matt 18: 1-5).

In each case, where Jesus speaks of the faith of a child he is using this attitude to offset the tendency for his followers to become proud and self-sufficient. One needs to see how helpless we really are without God and how our faith must grow out of one's trust rather than one's achievements.

So how then does one assess children's readiness to make these life changing decisions? One needs to consider each child as an individual and measure their spiritual readiness based upon their understanding of God and all that He had revealed to the child. Faith is a response to a need and if the child does not perceive the reality of the need then there cannot be true faith.

Measuring Spiritual Readiness

I remember when I visited the " Made in the Street," an orphanage ministry in Nairobi, Kenya, Charles Colton and his wife Sandy, who are missionaries from California, and who happened to be in Nairobi at the time, were holding a workshop with children ministries. The workshop was known as " Let the Children Come to Me." In this workshop, Colton said " children are free to go to Jesus just like grown-ups. He protested that parents should neither pressure their children into premature professions of faith nor neglect their spiritual formation."

" Teach parents that they have a responsibility to God in the stewardship of their children's spiritual development," said James Namanya, a Ugandan minister of childhood education at Mbale, Uganda who also led the workshop with Charles Colton and his wife Sandy

" The gospel idea of salvation can be expressed in way an older child - a fourth-, fifth- or sixth-grader - can easily understand," they noted. " Realize children think in literal terms, so avoid figurative language," they suggested. Colton and Knox advised parents and church leaders to look for signs of readiness in children such as:

Questions; Listen carefully to a child's questions about spiritual matters. " If the child is asking who the guy was that climbed the mango tree, he's probably just asking for factual information about Zaccheus," Colton said. " Just because you know the verse follows about Jesus Christ coming to save that which was lost but willing to seek Him, don't assume the child is making that leap." On the other hand, if a child begins to ask serious questions about sin, death and eternity, that could be a sign the Holy Spirit is drawing the child. Explore the level of interest and understanding by asking probing, open-ended questions, not queries that could be answered " yes" or " no."

Focus. Watch for a child who suddenly becomes focused on religious instruction. Unusual attentiveness in Sunday school or during worship could be a signal a child is ready to make a faith commitment.

Behavioral changes; Anything from a sudden interest in Bible-reading to expressions of guilt over wrongdoing at home could mean God is working in a child's heart.

Colton said that while some young children genuinely are converted, that is the exception, not the rule. Pastors, teachers and parents can help young children by distinguishing between the natural desire of a child to express love for Jesus and the life-changing decision of receiving him as Lord and Savior.

At another workshop, " Childhood Bible School - A Way Forward," leaders suggested a combination of small-group sessions, self-guided activities and large-group time for children's worship. Children life development minister John Hall and children's worship leader Emmanuel Kennedy from the Euless-area Episcopal Church of Euless said they incorporate lively music with " a lot of hand motions," drama and secular videos with spiritual applications into their " Adventure Zone" children's church service. " We make it fun for the kids," Kennedy said. " Kids tell their parents, 'I want to go back to that church where they sing, dance and have donuts holes.'"

" We try not to make it like school," Hall said. " We want it to be fun. We involve the kids in worship. Our goal is to raise up a generation of worshipers. Kids learn by doing. There's no altar call and no scare tactics. We let the Holy Spirit convict."

In conclusion, taking the information presented by developmental psychology one might conclude that adolescent children are simply not capable of making a decision for Christ. Maturely speaking, they have not developed the cognitive tools they need to come to this decision. Their thinking processes are still governed by mythical, literal understanding of their environment. They are more interested in fitting into the group than

making individual decisions. But this conclusion would be flawed. Indeed, Ackerman states that most adults within the church would possibly fall into this same category.

Rather, when we look more closely at the evidence we come to the conclusion that there is no magical age at which a child suddenly becomes able to understand spiritual matters. It seems quite clear that the only way to assess the spiritual readiness of a child is on an individual basis. And the real problem exists not with the children but the adults who are trying to teach them.

In our sometimes over-zealous attempts to bring children to a decision for Christ we forget what that decision is. First, it is the job of the Holy Spirit to convict the heart of the individual, to open their eyes to the truth, to help them understand the eternal significance of the decision. Only God knows when the time is right but we can watch for the signs to know when to open the Word to these children.

Second, tradition and ritual can be quite meaningful in helping us define our relationship with God, but it cannot create that relationship. Only through teaching and discipleship can a child begin to define his or her own relationship with God. It is through good biblical teaching that the child will understand why he needs the relationship and through godly Christian modeling that the child will understand how he develops that relationship.

In various aspects, this culture has made it very much easier to solve issues regarding the spiritual development of children. They define the quantifiable standard and make the decision easy. They excuse us from the difficult job

of working closely with each individual, to assess his or her specific spiritual needs. But in order to achieve the desired result - a life-changing decision for Christ - we must break free from our tradition and begin working to develop the spirituality of children in the only way that is truly effective - individually.

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