

“DO YOU HEAR WHAT THESE CHILDREN ARE SAYING?”:
HOSPITALITY AS A THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM FOR MINISTRY WITH CHILDREN

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Introduction

The practice of hospitality has been shown to be a significant component of Jesus' earthly ministry and the theological vision of the early church. Several scholars have articulated a vision for recovering the practice of hospitality in the contemporary church (Newman, 2007; Oden, 2001; Pineda, 2010; Pohl, 1999). Elizabeth Conde-Frazier writes that “the place of hospitality offers attentive listening and mutual sharing of lives and life stories” (Conde-Frazier 2004, p. 171). Hospitality is recognition of human value and equality, as well as the rejection of “social arrangements of class, ethnicity, or race” (Conde-Frazier, 2004, p. 172).

Based on this renaissance of theological literature on hospitality, some have argued that the biblical and theological vision of hospitality should be the overarching framework for certain ministries in ecclesial and cross-cultural contexts (Anderson, 2011; Brinton, 2012; Espinoza, 2014; Nouwen, 1975; Stratman, 2013). However, while some have championed a vision for a children's ministry that accepts all (Csinos and Beckwith, 2013; Green, 2014), resources that thoroughly explore how the theological vision of hospitality informs and shapes the church's ministry to and with children are lacking.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how hospitality serves as a theological resource and paradigm that undergirds a robust, holistic approach to ecclesial children's ministry. The paper will first explore hospitality in biblical and theological perspective, with attention given to the triune nature of God, the ministry of Jesus, New Testament references to hospitality, and early church practices. Essentially, hospitality is rooted in the Trinitarian nature of God, expressing itself throughout the pages of Scripture. This theological vision of hospitality will be shown to be a radical impulse wherein the lines of guest and host are blurred, and all are welcome to the table of mission and ecclesial service.

With these foundations in place, the paper will engage relevant literature to craft a holistic paradigm for ecclesial children's ministry. In particular, the paper will attend to three aspects of the church's ministry (preaching and teaching the gospel, cultivating worship, creating community) and demonstrate how a theology of hospitality radically shapes and transforms the way we conceptualize of “children's ministry” in the local church. This model of ecclesial hospitality will cut through the traditional approaches to children's ministry by creating an intergenerational church culture that respects and values the impact children can make for the kingdom when fully integrated and welcomed into all aspects of church ministry. In other words, the paper will seek to reframe children's ministry not as “ministry to children,” but as “ministry alongside children.”

Hospitality and the Triune God

In order to survey the biblical and theological landscape of hospitality, we must first begin with the hospitable nature of the Triune God. One of the most distinctive doctrines in Christian theology is that of the paradoxical oneness, togetherness, and equality of the Godhead. God exists as one entity, eternally exists as the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, and all members of the Trinity are wholly and equally God.

But how do God's oneness, togetherness, and equality relate to each other? This is where the concept of *perichoresis* comes into focus. *Perichoresis* has its origins in the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, such as Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, whose student Maximus the Confessor was also a proponent of the concept (Harrison, 1991, p. 53). The root of the word, "peri," literally means "in and around," and serves as the basis for words such as "perimeter." The other component of the word, "chore" literally means "movement" (Gombis, 2008). The word thus means, literally, "movement, in and around," but the basic thrust of the term is "interpenetration." Kim (2012) defines *perichoresis* as the Trinity's ability to maintain "the individuality of the three persons while at the same time asserting that each person partook in the life of the other two" (p. 256). Thus, the persons of the Trinity maintain their distinct identity and function while expressed themselves to one another in an intimate manner.

Gombis (2008) beautifully describes this notion of perichoresis:

The Persons of the Trinity from all eternity are caught up in a relationship of interpenetration and envelopment. That is, each of the Persons of the Trinity is always going out to the other, always plunging deeply into the other, to know and to understand, to comprehend and to discover, and then to delight and rejoice in, to exult in the other's glories, beauties, perfections, and excellencies. And each member of the Trinity is always welcoming the other into Himself, to be fully known, to be discovered and comprehended, to be delighted in. The Trinity, then, is an eternal community of mutual delight.

This vivid description of *perichoresis* emphasizes the mutuality and participation of the Godhead. The Persons of the Trinity desires to make themselves known, to know one another, to be transparent with one another, and to glory in one another's character and being. Based on her understanding of Trinitarian perichoresis, Elizabeth Newman writes "God's triune hospitality calls us to a different place, a place where we practice living lives determined by God's giving across the grand sweep of time rather than our own limited grasp of the ways things are" (2007, p. 15). Thus, the Triunity of God is inherently hospitable.

Hospitality in the Old Testament

How does the trinitarian life of God play out in Scripture? The first major instance of hospitality in the Old Testament occurs in Genesis 18, when Abraham welcomes three mysterious strangers into his home. The text reads that Abraham rushed to greet these strangers, treating them with the utmost respect, and offering them a lavish feast, refreshment, and rest. The text uses the Hebrew word *hinneh* to describe that Abraham took this encounter as a complete surprise (Vogels, p.

164). Genesis 18:1 indicates that God was somehow present in these strangers, and the instance was thus a divine encounter. The writer of Hebrews alludes to this episode, exhorting the audience to not “neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (13:2). The purpose of this visit was for God to communicate to Abraham that his wife Sarah would bear a son, and that judgment was on the horizon for Sodom and Gomorrah. Pohl writes, “This first formative story of the biblical tradition on hospitality is unambiguously positive about welcoming strangers. It connects hospitality with the presence of God, with promise, and with blessing” (1999, p. 24).

While the children of Abraham were living in bondage under the oppressive hands of the Egyptians, it is God who freed them, and provided their daily sustenance, including protection from their oppressors. The purpose of the Mosaic law was to mark the Israelites as the people of God. The law mandated a code of hospitality that welcomed strangers and sojourners, just as the Israelites were once wanderers and sojourners (Exod. 22:21; Lev. 19:1-2, 9–10, 33–34). Pohl suggests, “They were to view themselves as aliens in their own land, for God owned the land and they were to be its stewards and caretakers, living in it by God’s permission and grace. They were the chosen people--chosen, yet still aliens” (1999, p. 27). Though Israel consistently rebelled against God’s Lordship, God continuously invited Israel back into a relationship through the work of prophets. This is especially clear in the case of Jonah, whom God called to preach repentance to the Ninevites, only to reject God’s command and flee. While Jonah reluctantly agrees to God’s wishes, he nonetheless expresses discontent that God would welcome such pagans into the fold. This highlights that in the Old Testament, we observe how God consistently invites and seeks out fellowship with not only the fold of Israel, but also with Gentiles.

Hospitality in the New Testament

The New Testament continues to explore the practice of hospitality in the life, teachings, and salvific work of Jesus Christ. In the incarnation of Christ, we see an intentional move on the part of God to extend hospitality to not only the people of Israel, but also to the Gentiles. Most of all, however, Jesus extends the hospitality of God the Father by reaching out and welcoming the marginalized in society. According to Anderson, Jesus “spoke of acts of hospitality toward people who are strangers, hungry, in prison, poor, diseased, or disabled. Jesus said that as we practice hospitality, it should be done as if Jesus himself were the recipient” (Anderson 2008, 15-16).

Jesus specifically explores hospitality with His disciples and others in two key passages: Matthew 25 (the parable of the sheep and the goats) and Luke 14 (the parable of the great banquet). In each of these parables, Christ shares the defining characteristics of hospitality, that when we are truly hospitable toward others, it is as though we are exhibiting hospitality to Christ Himself. “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). Moving forward in the gospels, we see that Christ’s death and resurrection serve as the ultimate form of hospitality, welcoming those who were previously the enemies of God. Christ’s death and resurrection provide the means through which we are invited to “come boldly” before God in prayer (Heb 4:16) and make our requests known to Him. This reciprocal relationship is at the core of the gospel; it is the message of hospitality, rooted in the character of God in Christ.

As we survey through the rest of the New Testament, we see the thread of hospitality continue to weave its way into the early church. When Jesus commissioned the seventy disciples, he expected them to depend on the hospitality of others. It is the gracious hosts who welcome the disciples that would receive great blessing from God. The disciples were to treat their hosts with respect, and not move from house to house seeking more luxurious accommodations.

In Acts 9-10, we see three revolving stories that demonstrate how hospitality functioned in early church evangelism, and Peter accepts the hospitality of Simon the tanner in Joppa (9:43 and 10:6), Peter extends hospitality to Cornelius's messengers despite the fact that Peter is already a guest in the house of Simon (10:17-23), and Peter accepts hospitality from Cornelius, a Roman centurion living in Caesarea (10:24-48). This last episode is pivotal, as Peter realized through a vision from God that he should no longer consider Gentiles as unclean, but that the gospel was for all people. The rest of the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul, grapples with how Jewish and Gentile Christians can live together in hospitable community with one another. Pineda (2008) notes that the New Testament uses the term *philoxenia*, which generally means "the love of the stranger." Pineda notes the term "can also mean love of the whole atmosphere of hospitality and the whole activity of guesting and hosting" (2008, p. 33). Jesus inhabits this love of strangers when He arrived at the wedding in Cana as a guest but quickly became a host (John 2).

Hospitality as a Paradigm for Ecclesial Ministry with Children

Hospitality is a movement of the Triune God to bring humanity into relationship with himself and a way of life grounded in the person and work of Christ. Henri Nouwen (1975) wrote that hospitality "creates new and free space where we can reach out to strangers and invite them to become our friends" (p. 79). Hospitality acknowledges that all are created in the image of God and thus deserve dignity, respect, and indiscriminate welcome. It is in the act of hospitality that we discover new ideas about who we are, who God is, and encourages to empathize with the plight of others. Pineda (2010) reflects on how hospitality inherently recognizes the *imago dei*:

To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human made in God's image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves—indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own. The stranger's gifts may come to a family circle or to a society. Yet the undocumented foreigner... is too often not greeted with hospitality or even acknowledged as a human being in God's image.

Hospitality is thus a practice of ethics, not simply the practice of kindness. It means opening up our lives with others, sharing in the roles of guest and host, and exhibiting true generosity toward one another.

This particular theology carries several implications across of spectrum of ecclesial practices. Some have written that a theology of hospitality applies to the use of greeters and coffee hosts on Sunday mornings, ministries that reach out to the marginalized in society, and evangelism and mission. Some have also argued that the theology of hospitality possesses relevant applications to education both in ecclesial and school settings.

As it stands, the theology and practice of hospitality has been applied to questions related to practical theology, but has yet to be applied to questions related to ministry with children in the local church in a substantive way. Many scholars have proposed that the church must provide a welcome, safe space for children, as their spirituality is sensitive to such an environment. Such a space provides children with a sense of belonging, and encourages their ongoing spiritual development. However, this thinking tends to be rooted in the social sciences and developmental psychology, with some biblical support, yet lacks a firm theological foundation (Allen & Ross, 2012). The theology of hospitality affirms the findings of social science and encourages those of us in church ministry to radically welcome and support children not only as persons of value to the church community, but valuable participants as well. In other words, the theology of hospitality supports an *intergenerational* church culture wherein relationships between people across the spectrum of age are welcomed and brought into relationship with one another.

How can we create an ecclesial culture that welcomes children and engages them in all aspects of ecclesial life and ministry? The theology of hospitality should not simply be relegated to providing a welcoming Sunday school or VBS atmosphere, but must penetrate all aspects of the church's ministry to fully embody the hospitable impulse. In order to describe how the theology of hospitality can transform an ecclesial culture, I have utilized the "ecology of ministry" my team crafted during my time in pastoral ministry. The three core practices of ministry the church embraces are preaching the gospel, cultivating worship, creating community.. When the theology of hospitality truly undergirds these four core practices, the way church embraces, engages, involves, and encourages children is transformed.

Preaching and Teaching the Gospel

Scholars have spilt much ink articulating how to best teach children biblical truths and create a space for substantive spiritual formation and Christian education. However, these conversations are generally relegated to the Sunday school classroom or special children's events. While spaces for teaching assume a hospitable culture, when the theology of hospitality enters the picture, the ministry of teaching takes a larger, more holistic role in the life of the church. While we can and should ask, in the vein of Bushnell and Westerhoff, "how are we creating spaces to teach the gospel to our children in the context of the community of faith?" I would like to focus my attention on one ministry which engages children very little--preaching.

In many churches in the United States, children are rarely present for the sermon (Allen & Ross, 2012). In my own church, we let our children stay with their parents until after the first worship set, and then "dismiss" them to go enjoy their time in Sunday school. While such an approach pleases parents and developmental psychologists, what does it say to our children when we disallow them from sharing in the same spiritual experience of listening to a sermon with their parents? Mind you, some churches will ensure that children's curriculum aligns with the sermon. However, we foster a sense of "developmental segregation," wherein we separate two factions of the body in order to teach them the same ideas and preach the same gospel. Such an approach, while developmentally aware, potentially undercuts a theology of hospitality, and misses out on the potential spiritual riches that may come when families can hear the same gospel proclaimed in the same room.

However, if we invite children into our worship services, will they be able to substantively engage the ideas contained in a sermon on an emotional, spiritual, or intellectual level? I propose that in intergenerational worship settings, pastors embrace an approach to preaching that can stimulate the hearts and minds of children while simultaneously engaging adults as well. Espinoza (2015) calls this approach “child-conscious preaching.” “At its core, child-conscious preaching uses child-friendly language, stimulates the spiritual imaginations of children, uses narrative as a means of communicating deep theological truths to children, and recognizes and celebrates the place and contribution of children to the Christian community” (Espinoza 2015, p. 27). I will briefly highlight each component of child-conscious preaching.

Child-friendly language. Child-conscious preaching uses child-friendly language, recognizing the unique developmental needs of children and their capacity to fundamentally understand specific concepts and ideas related to faith.

Stimulating spiritual imaginations. “Child-conscious preaching stimulates the spiritually imaginative lives of children through explorations of the wonder, awe, and majesty of a living God who has reached down to the earth and touched our lives. While it could easily be said that imagination is a needed component in effective preaching for everyone, it especially rings true for children” (Espinoza 2015, p. 29).

Using narratives. Gary Newton writes that “As a good storyteller shares an adventure, listeners of all ages picture themselves in the characters rehearsing emotions, thoughts, and dreams. Stories are intensely interactive. They spawn activity within the hearts of all ages” (2012, p. 124). Child-conscious preaching makes use of narratives and invites children to enter simple yet powerful storylines with their hearts and minds.

Brings children into Christian community. Child-conscious preaching brings children into the conversations. It uses examples from their world and culture and validates them in the Christian community. Children are challenged to be active players in the community, and adults are challenged to let them.

Cultivating Worship

The theology of hospitality demands that children be involved in worship with adults. Daniel Hyde contends that this was the tradition of the early church that was eventually lost within the last hundred years (2014). Allen and Ross define intergenerational worship as “the regular (usually weekly) gathering when the body of Christ as a community meets together to praise and honor God, to hear from God’s Word, and to encourage one another” (Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 189). Many would not find issue with Allen and Ross’ definition. However, in practice, the topic of welcoming children into worship with adults has its passionate detractors. Hauerwas and Willimon (1989) summarize the concerns of these detractors, albeit in a relatively cynical manner.

in many of our modern, sophisticated congregations, children are often viewed as distractions. We tolerate children only to the extent they promise to become “adults” like

us. Adult members sometimes complain that they cannot pay attention to the sermon, they cannot listen to the beautiful music, when fidgety children are beside them in the pews. “Send them away,” many adults say. Create “Children’s Church” so these distracting children can be removed in order that we adults can pay attention. (p. 96)

While their assessment of the situation reeks of some cynicism, it is not far from the truth. Dale Hudson (2015), writing for a popular children’s ministry website, reflects on the reasons why it would be unwise to allow children into the worship service:

Children in the adult service distract their parents and those around them. Parents end up spending more time trying to keep their children from disrupting the service than they do focusing on what is being taught. It’s heartbreaking to watch a guest who doesn’t know Jesus get distracted from hearing the Gospel because he is watching the preschooler in front of him act out because the little guy is bored out of his mind. It saddens me to see a new believer miss vital teaching because she is preoccupied with smiling at the cute baby in front of her.

At the core of Hudson’s concerns seems to be the clear proclamation of the gospel in addition the potential distraction of children in worship. Such a concern is valid. However, if the theology of hospitality were to undergird our approach to cultivating worship, our services would look significantly different. The purpose behind a worship service to bring honor and glory to God through the outpouring of our hearts, minds, and voices. Such an event need not be considered a concert event with formality and decorum, but rather as a messy banquet hall with crying, screaming, dancing, and perhaps the occasional clean-up. Robert Pendergraft (2015) writes that “The services should be planned in a manner that the gospel is communicated to the children present. It is not just the visiting adult that needs to hear and see the gospel, but also those in the church’s greatest mission field, its own children” (p. 169).

Welcoming children into worship services is a way of welcoming them into a different the culture, language, and lifestyle of the church. To welcome children into the Christian community by way of the worship service powerfully demonstrates their importance to the community of faith. Including children in worship inculcates within them the *moves* of the faith that they will hopefully adopt later in life. Piper (1980) writes that

But even where most of the sermon goes over their heads, the children profit. They learn more theology and piety from the hymns than we realize, they come to be comfortable and at home with the form of the service, they experience from time-to-time the large and awesome moments of quietness or the blast of an organ prelude or fervor of an old man’s prayer. Week-after-week they see hundreds of adults bowed in worship, and unless we teach them otherwise, they will grow up thinking, “This is where I belong on Sunday morning, and this is the way one behaves in Sunday worship.” It will never enter their heads that not being there is a possibility if we expect it of them and insist on their right behavior.

While it may be tempting to say that children would absorb more in a worship setting especially designed for them, the theology of hospitality demands seriously consider welcoming children

into worship with adults. To do otherwise would be to disregard their status as our fellow worshippers of the Lord.

Creating Community

In their landmark work, *Children Matter*, May et. al briefly remark that “within churches children are invisible and not considered except in programed designated for them, and they may be disconnected from all but their peers and a few adults who work with them” (2005, p. 133). They point to the Christian tradition of hospitality to strengthen their argument that children are vital members of the faith community deserving of attention and nurture. In their chapter on community, the authors put forth a series of rhetorical questions aimed at the church’s lack of hospitality toward children:

How would our churches change of the whole congregation, not just the Sunday school teachers, took seriously Jesus’ admonition to welcome children—if as a congregation we truly offered hospitality to children? What places and activities of importance to adults need to be opened to children? Other than in children’s programs, how often do we turn our full attention to children? Who listens to them? Where are friendships built between children and adults? As a congregation, do we really see children as persons of value and dignity equal to teenagers and adults? Do we expect to receive gifts from them in the family of God, to see Jesus in them and hear his voice through them? The church will be a nurturing community for children when they experience it as a place of gracious hospitality. (May et. al, 2005, p. 134)

Unfortunately, while *Children Matter* was written over a decade ago, the question of how to best welcome children into the Christian community has yet to be thoroughly answered. Scholars and pastors have spilled loads of ink grappling with the questions that May and others propose. Some churches have become havens for intergenerational ministry, building friendships across the spectrum of age, while others continue to remain trapped in older, developmentally-driven paradigms.

A prime way to involve children in Christian community is by exploring the contours of Christian theology with them. While children may not be able to read Luther or Wesley, they nonetheless carry a capacity to understand the spiritual. Robert Coles wrote that “Children try to understand not only what is happening to them, but why; and in doing that, they call upon the religious life they have experienced, the spiritual values they have received, as well as other sources of explanation” (1990, p. 10). Dave Csinos and Ivy Beckwith argue that “children should be some of the church’s main theologians-in-residence, since their understandings of their God experiences are less likely to be fettered and boxed in by the adult conceptions that we teach them as they grow up” (2013, p. 71). Indeed, John Wesley affirmed that “the experiences of many of [children] match and in several instances surpass the experiences of their elders” (Wesley, 1872/1979, p. 75). The process of theological reflection begins early in childhood, as children grapple to make meaning of God and the spiritual life. The Christian community must envelop children into this process of theological reflection from an early age.

But the Christian community must also engage children in the process of Christian practice. In many cases, we view Christian practices such as the disciplines that adults do for spiritual growth. However, since children are our pilgrims in the Christian journey, it makes sense to bring them along in our Christian practices, such as fasting, sabbath, prayer, giving, outreach, and practicing the church calendar. Trevecca Okholm writes that “When a family celebrates the rituals and rhythms of the church year at home, the history and connection to the historical church becomes a means of being hospitable within the family home as it joins in celebrating with the whole church community” (2012, p. 169). Bringing children along into our practices is an act of hospitality will inculcate within our children a desire to continue those practices even into adolescence and adulthood. To neglect to envelop children into the Christian way of life is to teach them that their spirituality is not welcome in the community--a sure way of further alienating the already marginalized. For as the age-old adage goes, “if we don’t disciple our children, who will?” This renders the practice of actively inviting children from the local community into church life, particularly through family-based church events, as this invitation creates a bridge toward those who may never have felt welcomed by the community of God.

The theology of hospitality is one of radical welcome toward children, of full engagement and participation in the life of faith. This is a vision that cannot be done through simple programming or events. It is a cultural change which demands consistent preaching from the pulpit, casting in streams of communication, effective implementation, and holistic outreach. A community of faith cannot rely on one-off events to foster true community. Rather, true community comes from the organic relationships that coalesce around the bond of Christ through consistent acts of hospitality, especially with those outside of the church’s walls. Trinitarian hospitality offers us the perfect picture of how we can welcome others into our church communities, especially children.

Conclusion

Hospitality has become a crucial practice which the church must recover. As we push against cultural shifts that value exclusion and marginalization, hospitality has become more important than ever. As Jesus says to his disciples, “Do you hear what these children are saying?” (Matt. 21:16), we must continue to listen to those whom are often thought of last in our church communities. The practice of hospitality can serve as a powerful way of reminding the church of its responsibility to serve the youngest in society.

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