



## Where's the Beef? Substance in Children's Ministry

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**B**e nice. God loves you. And oh... Be nice some more. Too often, that's as far as we go when it comes to teaching our children about God and His expectations for us. And while the messages of God's love and His commands that we treat one another with love are good lessons, there is much more that we need to teach our children.

We live in a world that is so influenced by the entertainment industry, the news media, and humanistic ideas that the church is becoming one of the most confused places on earth. The reason for this is that too many churches are turning their backs on the Word of God, either by rejecting it outright or by refusing to give their attenders anything more than a shallow, low-calorie version of the gospel. After all, who wants to hear about the grim realities of sin? Who wants to be convicted? Who wants to be told that God is calling us to take up our crosses and follow Him?

And so, to fill more seats, the gospel has been watered down to the simplest form of spiritual milk. Be nice. God loves you. And the spiritual infants who take in this diet of only milk will never grow to spiritual maturity. As Christians, we have the most valuable asset in the universe; the Truth of God's Word. Yet, like Esau, we are selling our birthright for a bowl of stew, trading the truth of God for the hollow philosophies of the world. Too many churches have bought into the lie that we have to make God's Word taste better by ignoring all but the most basic teachings of Scripture. The church in America is trying to change its product.

Since its creation, Coca-Cola has changed its packaging several times. New materials have been used and new shapes, colors and designs have been employed over the years to keep the packaging of Coca-Cola appealing to the modern consumer. Yet, the *essence* of Coca-Cola did not change, until one day in the 1980's, when the formula for Coke itself was altered. Coca-Cola quickly discovered that changing the *formula* of their product was a terrible mistake. By changing the *essence* of what Coke was, they alienated all who had come to love the former product. Not long after, the "new" Coke faded into oblivion, being

replaced once again by the original Coke, and the formula change went down in history as one of the great blunders of its time.

We in the church are in danger of repeating Coke's mistake. While the church can generally change its packaging to meet modern demands, such as utilizing technology to help communicate the gospel or using puppets, video, and even green slime to engage kids as we teach them God's truths, the *essence* must *not* change. God does not change. Jesus does not change. God's Word does not change. We must not try to change God's message. We must not try to water it down. If we do, we will ruin it. There is nothing wrong with making church fun for kids, and there are many resources, from Vacation Bible School to video series to fun and games that can make church a fun place for kids. But, we must remember that all the fun should be *secondary*. Kids can go to any McDonalds and have fun. They can watch videos and play games every day of the week. But, how often can we teach them to walk in holiness? When kids are in the Lord's house, it should be to worship, to learn, and to grow. And while fun can certainly be part of that equation, it should not come at the cost of substance in our teaching. Church is not about us and making us happy, it's about *God* and worshipping Him. Our duty is to share God's Word, in its original "formula" and at its full strength.

"Be nice, God loves you" is a starting point for teaching children about God, but it is not the end point. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commanded His disciples to go and make disciples. Jesus did not ask us only to share the gospel and then to drop off kids at the curb. He did not command us simply to teach kids that He loved them. Jesus didn't request that we simply teach kids to be nice to each other. A disciple is a *follower*, and in order to be a follower, one must be in the continuous process of following. If we are to make disciples for Jesus, we must train kids with all of God's Word, training them how to follow Jesus every day of their lives. In other words, children need substance, or solid food, so that they can grow to spiritual maturity.

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So, how do we teach children Biblical principles

with substance? For starters, we need to understand that children can learn more than we often give them credit for. Kids may not have the sophisticated vocabularies of adults, but if simple language and engaging teaching methods are used, children can gain a basic understanding of some pretty big concepts. In our ministry, we've seen children as young as four or five grasping concepts such as the Trinity, the creation, and the concept that we should set no vile thing before our eyes (Ps. 101:3).

Additionally, you can use visual aids, object lessons, hands-on examples, games, music, and general silliness to help children to grasp and to remember the Bible lessons you're teaching. In other words, you can package your teaching in any number of ways in order to gain and hold the attention of the kids, but never forget to put something *inside* the packaging; namely, the undiluted truth of God's Word! You might be surprised what kids can learn if you give them the opportunity.

Not only are kids capable of learning a great deal, their hearts and minds are open to instruction on a level unmatched by most adults. That's why Jesus told His disciples that they needed to become like little children; because they are teachable and possess a simple and true form of faith. Children are not only able to learn more than we often teach them; they are *eager* to learn more.

This fact has not escaped the secular world. For although children may not be taught to read and write in school at as early an age as we'd like, they are often educated in the humanistic ideals of the world, being indoctrinated about such topics as evolution and homosexuality. The fact is, kids are ready to learn, and if we don't teach them God's ways, the world will teach them its ways.

If all we're willing to teach children is the most basic ideas of God's love and His desire for us to "be nice," we will starve our kids into complacency and make them easy targets for the deceptions and temptations of the enemy who seeks to derail them.

To be sure, children need to know that God loves them. But, it will matter very little to a child that God loves them if we fail to teach them *who* God is. And, in the course of teaching kids who God is, they will also begin to learn about His expectations of us. Beyond simply loving their neighbors, they need to learn to love GOD with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength. Like soldiers in basic training, they need to know not only that they are in the Lord's army, but

they also need to know how to fight, how to defend themselves, and how to use the tools God has given them.

As children's ministry workers, we have a most important role. We are not (and should not be) merely babysitters. When the kids are in the Lord's house, we have a prime opportunity to teach them not only the milk, but also the solid food of the things of God.

Will everyone approve if you teach more in-depth Scripture to your kids? Probably not. Yet, it is better to have a near-empty classroom with fullness in your teaching than a full classroom with empty teaching.

So, the next time you have a classroom of kids sitting before you at church, remember that you have a golden opportunity. Remember that you may never get this chance again. Remember that those children need to know all of God's truth, and remember that those children will be the leaders of the next generation. Will they be complacent in their beliefs and useless to God's kingdom, or will they be warriors for Christ, used mightily by God? You have a part in the outcome. So what will you teach? Be nice? God loves you? Of course. But then, open up God's Word, and teach them *more*...