

Mason Torrey on Evangelising to Children

My mother is a pentecostal Christian fundamentalist. Everything was black and white, right or wrong. In my mother's opinion, there are no grey areas in sin. I was taught from a young age that there are Christians and non-Christians, and the non-Christians are going to Hell. At the age of four, my grandfather passed away, and my mother told me that he went to Hell because he didn't accept Jesus into his heart.

I was still in my early years when my mother slowly introduced the concepts of sin, like homosexuality, wearing inappropriate clothes, holding hands with someone you're not married to, etc. There were no exceptions; it was either a ok or it was a sin. No doubt, I took on this judgmental mentality and quite frankly, I could never figure out why I couldn't make friends even though I was so perfect and sinless unlike everyone else. I just figured that Jesus had me set apart from the rest because He had a great purpose for my life. That's what Mum said, anyway, so it must have been true. It hurt always being bullied, but at the same time, I held onto the reassurance that other children bullied me because the evil spirits inside them react to the power of Jesus inside me.

My mother was the Bible in Schools teacher at Utiku Primary School which I attended between 1986 - 1989. I remember two siblings from a particular family were forbidden to participate in the RI sessions, so they got to sit in the library and play on the brand new Apple Computer that the school had acquired which annoyed me, because as a boy who loved science and technology, I would rather be playing on the computer than listening to all the Bible stories that I had already read so many times before. The point I want to make about this, which isn't necessarily the case in every RI situation, was that when I complained to my mother that it's not fair that they get to play on the computer, she told me it's ok because they are going to Hell for not believing in Jesus. The fact that one of these siblings was my biggest bully sealed the deal that he was in fact evil, controlled by Satan and will end up in Hell.

One of the side benefits of being socially awkward was the fact that rather than engage in being social, I was always looking in from the outside learning how to be social (well, trying to). I grew up studying people's behaviours and interactions and I guess this is why I'm fascinated by psychology and sociology. This helped me to eventually, in my late teens, to learn how to make friends, and by my mid 20's, I had what I considered true friends and the skills to make more friends.

What I also learnt was the key to indoctrination. When young children are being taught Bible lessons, it seems so harmless. I have secular parents coming to me today and telling me that Bible in Schools is harmless and keeps the kids occupied. The son of one such parent said to me one day, quite out of the blue, "If Adam and Eve didn't eat the apple, then Dad wouldn't have left us." I was shocked and didn't know what to say. What on earth was taught in that morning's RI class?

These lessons may seem harmless, but children take on and retain things that seem relevant to their lives. This would be ok if it was positive, but the example of associating an absent father with a talking snake and an apple 6000 years ago, what's that meant to achieve in an already confused child's life? These things will stick with them, and later on when they are met with the opportunity to attend a church youth group with a Christian friend, or attend a Christian youth camp, these little seeds of indoctrination come back to them amplifying the effectiveness of these camps and youth groups.

In my years of attending these camps, youth services, Bible studies, etc, I got to experience it all, but I also absorbed everything like a sponge which is why it was so easy for me to go into youth ministry myself. Sucking children into church by manipulating their emotions is dangerously easy, and once they are in, it doesn't take long to lure the parents along as well.

My experience in children's ministry started at the age of 13 when I attended a three day course on teaching the gospel to young children. From this course, I learned how to present the gospel in Sunday School, Bible in Schools, children's camps, etc. I helped my mother with Bible in Schools on occasion and also helped with many Sunday School lessons at church. In my late teens, I attended another training session in teaching the gospel to young children at Crossroads Community Church which was an Assembly of God (AOG) church. From there, I was on a regular roster for teaching Children's Church lessons. It was around about this same time that I started helping my mother with her Bible in Schools lessons once again. At one point, I joined a group of volunteers from another church to take some Bible in Schools classes because there were a shortage of teachers. I continued this for only a short while until I moved away for 18 months.

While I was away, Simon Greening took on the role as youth pastor at Crossroads and when I moved back to Whangarei at the end of 2003, I worked under him as a youth leader for the couple of years he was there. Simon was one of the most energetic and enthusiastic youth pastors I'd ever met by that stage. I learned during this time how to create a good relationship with young people and make them eager to want more and continue to attend our youth groups and also come to church services.

Firstly, as a Christian youth leader, the fundamental requirement is to be a hero to the young people. In order to do this, we used what I like to call 'the favourite uncle technique'. It is quite simple and can be pulled off by pretty much anyone. It's not a technique that is taught, per se, but just something we pick up over the years as Christians. Christians have the mentality that Christ is living inside them and people can see something 'different' about them. When you believe this, you go about your day feeling as though you have this aura and people can see it. It's not an arrogant kind of attitude, but one of contentment. In church we were often told that we should be witnesses of Christ without needing to say anything.

Going back to the favourite uncle technique, this is how it works. Just as the favourite uncle is the one who tends to buy the most treats, the favourite youth leader is the one who tends to be the most giving. I'll make this more interesting by setting the scene in a secular camp and you're the only Christian leader. You start simply by being nice and polite to everyone. You take up any opportunity you can to help someone out, take care of duties, show that you care and things like that. If something is spilt, you're the first to grab a mop. If a child falls and scrapes her knee, you're the first to run to her aid. When mealtime comes, you're the first to start preparing the food. When a child is naughty or is cheeky to you, you simply just be nice back. People will start to notice there's something 'different' about you. It doesn't take long at all before the children think you're awesome, and the other leaders have a great respect for you.

Now at a Christian camp, this is where the fun begins and we get to play on the emotions of children. When a child attends a youth camp, for example, we start out by providing lots of fun activities, like playing games, swimming, tramping, etc. By evening, the children are quite worn out, and although not necessary for the purpose, this heightens their emotional sensitivity. During this time, we are applying the 'favourite uncle technique' in the first part of the 'grooming' process.

We would sing a few songs, say a prayer and then settle into delivering a generic sermon on a topic that relates to every child or teen in the room. It would be something like dealing with rejection and throughout the sermon, the children will be thinking about things in their own lives, like their father moving out, breaking up with their first girlfriend, being bullied, not being accepted into the cricket team and many, many other examples of where rejection could apply to their lives. Jesus will be mentioned from time to time, being the one who overcomes the hurt caused by rejection in your life.

Each young person sitting there will be feeling as though the sermon was being directed right at them. Their mouth will start to get dry, their heart rate will increase, they are aware of their own breathing and feel flushed. At the end of the sermon, the speaker will say something along the lines of, "Did this sermon speak to you today? You may feel Jesus prompting you right now to allow Him to lay your rejection at the foot of the cross."

This is where everyone's hearts are really beating and every face is frozen and focussed on the speaker. Then the speaker will say, "I want everyone to close your eyes and bow your heads. I don't want anyone looking around. This is just between you and God. Those of you who feel the hand of Jesus tugging on you to give all pain, rejection and suffering over to Him so he can give in return the love that He so dearly wants you to have, please raise your hand now. Remember this is just between you and God. No one else is looking around." As hands start to raise, the speaker will say, "I see that hand. I see that hand. I see that hand over there. Thank you. I see that hand. God sees those hands and Jesus is rejoicing at the opportunity to bring you into His Kingdom. I see that hand." This causes the shy ones to feel either guilty or out of place and eventually raise their hand because everyone else is doing it.

The speaker will pray a prayer something along the lines of, "Dear heavenly Father, I thank you for these wonderful, precious young people that have responded to You tonight. I see the pain in these young people's lives, and You see it too, and I thank You that it is Your greatest desire to heal these young ones of the pain, the hurt, the rejection they have suffered. I thank You that you are the true Healer. In Jesus mighty Name, Amen."

By now, there may be a few young people in tears, but the emotional manipulation session hasn't finished yet. The next stage is for the speaker to invite the youth who raised their hands to come forward and speak with a counselor. Since most of the young people have raised their hands, any Christian there automatically becomes a counselor so no one is left out.

The counselor will sit down with the child, and ask the child about the rejection. If it's something insignificant that doesn't have much emotional leverage, the counselor will plant another idea in the child's head by asking something like, "Have you ever been rejected by your father?" Even if the child has a great childhood and gets along well with their parents, the counselor will then ask, "But has there ever been a time when you went to talk to your father, but he was busy with something and couldn't talk at that time?" Of course the answer is going to be yes because this is bound to have happened to every child on the planet at some stage.

The counselor then asks the child, "How did this make you feel?" and then gives an example of being rejected when they were a child, describing themselves as "feeling abandoned and unloved." The child will respond similarly and before long, you've played with this child's emotions enough that they start to cry. As soon as the child is in tears, you are successful because now the child feels that for the first time, someone actually understands them and cares about them. The counselor will now hug the child and reaffirm that Jesus loves them

and wants to help them have a better relationship with their parents, etc. Mission accomplished.

Because of this newfound love of God, the child will begin to come along to more Christian events, youth services and church. The child's siblings will start to come along and eventually, even the parents might pop along on occasion. Throughout my years in Children's ministry, we often had meetings on how to lure people into church. Children were the best way to get adults. We were reminded over and over, in order to get the adult, you need to get their own children.

I would just like to add, I have been associated with and practiced with Pentecostal, Methodist, Wesleyan Methodist, Baptist, Anglican and Evangelical Pentecostal denominations. I have been on all stages of the Fundamental - Conservative spectrum.

I must make it quite clear, that regardless of the fact that there will be those who claim that I happened to be brought up in some bizarre form of Christianity because nothing of which I said goes on in a 'proper children's ministry' run by CEC, this is a weak attempt at avoiding the truth. I have been part of the very denominations that support CEC and the CEC curriculum. Simon Greening himself was at one stage a member of the same church of which I attended. I have attended as a child and as an adult helper many youth camps run by many different denominations of Christianity.

One last thing, while there are differences between denominations, the fundamentals of Christianity remain the same in children's ministry and are taught by the same universal method.