

# Covenant Children's Ministry

## *Theological Vision for Children's Ministry*

The Presbyterian Church has a rich tradition of reformed theology that shapes our worship and our church vision. Rooted in our tradition is a history of children's education that is transformative and full of grace.

Every page of scripture shows how people are broken but loved, and how God is in control. This is different than many popularly available biblical curricula. It is a distinctly reformed perspective. When we see a story in the bible about a human being, it is always okay to acknowledge how this human being is broken. A human being does not have to be a hero that is admired or imitated. From the reformed point of view, God is the hero of scripture and He alone is the One to be admired and imitated. Even though human beings are broken, they are loved. Part of this love from God is that in spite of human weakness, He uses us and works through us, to achieve His good plan so that even the good things that human beings do are ultimately a sign that God is in control.

This is particularly important when it comes to teaching about God's salvation. The natural impulse is to teach children to "be good" to receive a reward. This is how much of a child's life works. They must learn to behave in the home to be allowed to play. They must learn to behave in school to receive their teachers' approval. This fits into the biblical genre of wisdom literature. It is wise for children to learn how to do good and how to avoid bad (see the book of Proverbs). However, that is not the principle teaching of salvation. The principle teaching of salvation is that even when we were bad, we received the good reward of salvation through Jesus Christ. God does not require us to first behave and then receive this reward. Rather, Christ behaved on our behalf when we were still broken, so that we could receive eternal life. Because this is contrary to the wise teachings children receive elsewhere, it needs careful emphasis. As Paul wrote, the gospel is "foolishness to the Greeks" (1 Corinthians 1:23). It is the best and truest example of scripture's theme that humans are broken but loved and God is in control.

### *What does this look like in the Old Testament?*

John Calvin, the founder of Presbyterianism, was unique among his peers in his willingness to see the brokenness in human biblical characters. He was comfortable acknowledging that Abraham had troubled family relationships. Moses was a murderer. David was a liar. He felt he did not have to somehow ignore or defend the sins of these heroes of the faith because *their* faith was not the point of the biblical story. The point of the biblical story was that even great humans like these were broken. Nevertheless, God loved them and worked through them and God remained in control.

### *How does this shape our view of the whole biblical narrative?*

It is this view of scripture that allowed Calvin, and encourages us, to read and understand both the Old Testament and the New Testament. We believe that God's grace among a broken but loved people is the thread

that runs through every book of the Bible. Not just the New Testament. This continuous story of God's faithfulness to his promises throughout all time is called "Covenant Theology" or "Salvation History."

As Presbyterians, we believe that this love is so powerful that it actually precedes the act of creation itself, so that before the foundations of the world, God chose us to be his beloved people. There was never a moment in time in which we were not already folded in to God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. This statement describes the reformed view of what is called "election". Election is the Greek word for "choice". From a reformed point of view, we always emphasize that God's choice of us is more important than our choice of God. There are key moments where we do choose God. In fact, we must do this daily. Yet, all of these moments of choosing either big or small, pale next to the one mighty choice of God on our behalf to be our father before creation.

This is particularly shown through the reformed understanding of baptism, which touches very near the heart of the children's ministry. When we baptize infants as a church, we visibly proclaim the central tenant of our reformed faith: God's grace towards humanity. It is a presentation of the work that is being done on the child's behalf, for no other reason than the child is loved – by parents, by the congregation and by God. In Romans 5:8 Paul writes about this work of God: "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This is a picture of the grace and love that we believe covers over our children – over all of us – regardless of anything that we do to earn it.

This is at the foundation of our children's ministry at Covenant Presbyterian Church: we believe as a congregation in a God of grace who loves our children even before they have a chance to respond. Every child who is in our program or who walks through our doors on a Sunday is covered by this grace and love of Christ. It is our responsibility to help children follow their Lord Jesus with deeper understanding each day while assuring them that God has already chosen them.

#### *Why is it important to teach children the scriptures?*

We are training our children to be missionaries, apostles, evangelists, wherever they go. Developmentally, this is the age at which truly complex information must be absorbed. If you want to be a concert musician, you begin training as a child. If you want to learn a second language, it is best to begin as a child. Children's brains are hardwired to learn not only what is useful to them as children, but also begin the first stages of mastery to perform at a high level as adults. The calling of God in the life of the church to be witnesses to the ends of the earth is a calling of equal weight. Scripture is very large and complex. We must teach our children to be bilingual, to teach them the language of scripture, so that they will be able to be their own interpreter as they interact with the world. Able to listen to the pain and joy of the world and to interpret to the world the promises of scripture with fluency.

Our church's first strategic goal is to transform disciples into apostles. That means we are taking Christians of every age to go from being students of Jesus to being Jesus' sent ones, missionaries in the world, able to share their faith in what they do and what they say.

### *How does this shape our teaching?*

When we are looking at scripture from this vantage point, we ask key questions of each story that help us teach children and guide our theological understanding of the biblical text. We can ask these questions:

- What does this story teach us about God?
- How did God use human beings in this story?
- Is there a way that human beings messed up?
- Did God find a way to make things better?
- What does this story teach me about how much Jesus loves me?

Helen Holbrook has this set of questions which is similar:

1. What does this story tell me about God, who He is, what He is like?
2. How does this story point to the bigger story of Jesus and the cross?
3. How does this story help me understand my heart and why I need Jesus?

### Hermeneutical Examples of our Children's Ministry Theology:

The lens through which we interpret scripture is grace. Many people trying to prepare a lesson will look at scripture with a lens that is searching for examples of heroes who have good behavior so that we can give children an example of good behavior. Follow the rules. But we will be seeking as a team to give our teachers a Christ-centered, grace-focused lens. With this lens, you read the story and look for examples of how God was faithful even when human beings were messed up. God is the hero of the story. It isn't that we are avoiding moral lessons or giving people ethical instruction, it's that these readings are always secondary. A reformed reading of the text always shows grace first, God's faithfulness when we don't deserve it, in Christ, and behavior second. A transformed life lived in gratitude for God's gift, not to earn that gift.

- **David and Goliath:** This story focuses not on David's power, but on the power of God. The power of David is nothing compared to the power of Goliath. David declares: "The battle is the Lord's." Jesus on the cross, even though his human power is nothing compared to the power of Rome, is nevertheless the power of God delivering salvation and conquering evil.
- **Ruth and Naomi:** Ruth essentially makes a covenant and refuses to leave Naomi no matter what the cost. The drama of this story comes from the fact that Ruth should not be faithful to Naomi or to God in the eyes of the world. She has lost her husband, there is a famine, she should look after herself and leave like Orpah does. But instead she makes a crazy promise to remain faithful to God and Naomi even at the risk of her own life. Jesus makes a new covenant with us and refuses to leave us no matter what the cost to himself. This woman, in the eyes of the world is extremely vulnerable and has no power, and yet God uses her as an example of His own faithfulness. God is faithful to Naomi and to Ruth and does provide for them a new community and security, not because they were powerful and achieved it on their own, but because God was faithful to them.
- **Jonah:** God shows his grace to Nineveh, even when they were bad. God is gracious to Jonah, even when he runs away and gives him a second chance to share in God's goodness. Jonah spends three days in the belly of the whale, then emerges just like Jesus spent three days in the tomb and is resurrected.