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Biblical Equality and Ministry with Children

by David M. Csinos

Two Stories

A few months ago, my wife and I were working at a weekend family camp as directors of the children's ministries. On the first day of camp, we asked the children to gather around a long table and draw or paint pictures of what they think God might look like. They each quickly found their place around our common table and began to create their images of God. The attitude of this creative activity remained quite peaceful until one young boy — perhaps four or five years of age — expressed a desire to stand and draw beside his older sister. As he sidled up beside his sibling, the other young girls around him became upset because they had decided that end of the long table would be the "girls' side." My wife and I were both quite surprised with this comment, because we had not encouraged the girls and boys to separate from one another at any point during our time with them. The children were the ones who created an environment of gender segregation.

This kind of episode was not new to me, but I was somewhat alarmed by what it demonstrates. Evidently, these children were being fed the message that females and males are fundamentally different (more than just biologically) and need to remain and interact solely with those of the same gender. It seems as though the gender inequality of the wider culture had seeped into their world views and lifestyles and affected how they interact with one another on a daily basis.

Even within churches, children and young people continue to learn about gender inequality through both obvious and subtle messages. While some churches overtly teach them that God created one gender of the human race to be in a position of power, while the other is to be subordinated, other congregations pass on this message in more covert ways, such as designing programs and activities for children based on gender, rather than on the interests, talents, abilities, or gifts of the children. Let me illustrate this through another story.

Early this summer, my wife volunteered at a five-day overnight camp for children between the ages of five and twelve. During their week away from home, these children were able to hear messages of God's love for them, and the importance of using the unique gifts, talents, and abilities that God has bestowed on each of them.

Although the camp volunteers were intentional in stressing these ideas during times of devotion, worship, and teaching, they planned an activity that would unintentionally challenge their message of equality. Toward the end of the week, the leadership of the camp decided to offer some optional activities that children could participate in during their afternoon free time. During their morning staff meeting, the director told the counselors about the two optional activities: decorating the dining hall for their themed dinner or playing a game of soccer on the camp's athletic field. The only problem with these activities was that they were not going to be open for all children — the girls would be invited to help decorate, while the boys would be allowed to join the soccer game.



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Evidently, this Christian camp was going to implicitly teach their children that males and females are to perform different roles based on their God-given gender; while boys could run and play outside, girls were to remain in the kitchen and engage in interior decorating. Rather than promoting these optional activities based on interests, talents, or skills, they were to be offered to the children solely based on their gender. Thankfully, my wife recognized the implicit messages that these gender-exclusive activities could teach the children and convinced the camp director to open up both options to all children. In the end, many young girls enjoyed a great game of soccer, while some of the boys were able to help decorate the dining hall in preparation for dinner.

This story speaks to the need for Christian communities to examine their “implicit curriculum,” or the covert or unspoken messages that they convey to their congregants, including children. Even though this camp spoke of the significance of all the campers’ gifts, they were at risk of implicitly teaching the children that their gender should define what they are capable of doing. In

The Educational Imagination (Macmillan, 1985), Elliot Eisner defines implicit curriculum as, “what [a school] teaches because of the kind of place it is...And because [features of the implicit curriculum] are salient and pervasive features of schooling, what they teach may be among the most important lessons a child learns” (p. 97). The same is true for churches, Christian camps, and parachurch organizations; some of the most significant messages that children receive from their Christian faith communities are unspoken, covert, and implicit. These are the lessons and messages that have a significant impact on how children think and act and who children become.

The two stories that I have just offered demonstrate that children continue to be taught that men and women should have different roles in church and society. They also learn that boys and girls should not socialize with members of the other sex. They are implicitly taught that one’s activities and interests should be defined by one’s gender. Such false messages of inequality and gender segregation are still quite pervasive, both in churches and in the wider western culture. Churches and ministry leaders that are committed to creating wholeness and peace through equality among the sexes must recognize the pervasiveness of these false messages and actively work to teach children that all human beings are created equal.

How Shall We Teach Biblical Equality

The messages that children receive when they are young can form a foundation that can impact the way they think and act for the rest of their lives. Therefore, it is extremely important that we provide our children with implicit and explicit messages that demonstrate gender equality and the giftedness of all people. Let me briefly discuss how Christian communities can intentionally create environments that promote biblical equality.

First, Christian communities must intentionally teach children about the inherent worth, dignity, and value of human beings, regardless of ethnicity, age, or gender. The creation narrative in Genesis makes it clear that all humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Being made in God's image, the lives of both women and men are infinitely precious and have inherent value and worth. In addition to being made in God's image, all human beings are given different talents and gifts from God to be used to further God's kingdom. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work" (1 Cor. 12:4-6). This is a message that needs to be imparted to children as a core part of the biblical meta-narrative. Perhaps when teaching the creation story, pastors and teachers can pause to discuss how all humans have value because we are made in God's image. They can further teach that God has created each person with unique gifts and talents that are to help us determine our calling in the kingdom. Perhaps when this happens, children and young people can come to see that their roles in the church and the world are not to be determined by their biological gender, but by their God-given gifts and passions.

Another important approach to teaching children about biblical equality is to subvert the explicit and implicit messages of hierarchical complementarianism. Churches must work to counter the pervasiveness of gender inequality by putting a halt to practices that separate and differentiate boys and girls. One simple way of doing this is to avoid games and activities that are set up as "boys versus girls." But we must do more than simply oppose such practices; we must also initiate practices that intentionally subvert gender inequality and teach children biblical equality. Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer, in their recent book, *Lives to Offer* (Pilgrim, 2007), state that one way churches can subvert "the constructs of gender [that] still operate to shape us" (p. 91) is to use movies in which boys and girls assume roles that are traditionally reserved for people of the opposite gender. Such films, which include *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Holes*, and *Bend it Like Beckham*, allow children and youth to witness boys and men who let their relational, sensitive side shine through and girls and women pursue their passions and develop their gifts despite prescribed gender roles.

Karen-Marie Yust, in her excellent book, *Real Kids, Real Faith* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), makes it clear that children learn and develop by seeing and following the examples of the adults they encounter on a regular basis. If young people are to be taught the values of biblical equality, the parents, grandparents, pastors, and church leaders in their lives must do more than simply teach egalitarianism — they must model it in their daily lives. Adults within our Christian communities should demonstrate biblical equality through their words and deeds, by treating all individuals with dignity and worth, and by modeling the egalitarian way of Jesus. Through their ministries, the church should show children that they practice the words of Paul, who wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female,

Creating an Egalitarian Environment

- When playing team games, create teams with both boys and girls.
- Teach Bible stories in which women are the heroines.
- Have men and women as part of your children's ministry leadership team.
- Use words like "humankind" and "people" instead of "mankind" and "man."
- Offer activities that are not gender-specific.
- When an issue involving inequality arises (like a joke or a situation in a movie), don't avoid it; use it as a teaching tool.

for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This means that Christian communities should critically examine the life of their congregation to bring to light ways in which gender hierarchy is implicitly and explicitly imparted to children and young people. Perhaps segregated men's and women's ministries could be re-imagined and developed in a way that promotes equality and interdependence among the sexes. Perhaps men should give up some of their traditional power and roles in order to allow room for women to use the gifts that God has bestowed on them. In these ways, churches can come to demonstrate biblical equality through their corporate and individual lives and let the light of egalitarianism shine for all to see.

Thanks to the work of egalitarians and organizations like Christians for Biblical Equality, more and more Christians are recognizing that all people — regardless of gender — are equal in God's eyes. Yet through my involvement with various ministries with children, I have come to see that many children are still receiving messages of gender inequality and hierarchical complementarianism. If we are to continue to work towards biblical justice and equality between men and women, then we would do well to continually explore ways in which we can pass on these biblical values to children and youth. By explicitly teaching young people about biblical equality and by modeling it through the ways in which we live, children may no longer segregate themselves from the other gender, and Christian communities may no longer unintentionally spread the message of gender specific roles through their ministries with children. In this way, the younger generation can grow to understand and accept God's ideal design for women and men, a design of biblical equality.



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