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# GOSPEL-CENTERED CHILDREN'S CURRICULUM

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BY YANCEY C. ARRINGTON

**L**IKE MOST PARENTS, I HAVE CERTAIN DREAMS FOR MY CHILDREN. At the top of the list: I want my three boys to “fly the coop” of my home loving Jesus with all their hearts. In order to do that I believe they must seek to be gospel-centered children as early as possible. And while the bulk of responsibility for their discipleship falls upon me and my wife, the local church has partnered with us in that most weighty of endeavors. Accordingly, our preschool, elementary, middle and high school ministries will have a huge impact on the spiritual direction of my children...and everyone else's kids who gather there. That should necessitate a question: Does the curriculum our age-graded ministries use help our children to be more gospel-centered?

Unfortunately, in my attempt to discover that answer, I have found that much of what is used in churches by preschool through high school ministries is woefully inadequate to this end. Indeed, I am convinced more than ever that churches and their leaders should reassess the materials they are using to see if it really helps lead people to have bigger hearts for Jesus as their Redeemer or does it lead them down the dangerous path of performance? In other words, is your curriculum gospel-centered? Or is it something else? In fact, this issue is something your highest level of local church leadership (e.g., elders) should be involved in since it deals with the primary avenue of teaching for huge segments of your congregation (cf., Ac. 20:28, Titus 1:9). We do well to heed the call of these passages:

Titus 2:1 (ESV) says, "*But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.*"

2 Timothy 1:13-15 (ESV), "*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*"

Frankly, it borders on pastoral neglect when those responsible for the doctrine and direction of the entire church assume that what is being taught in their age-graded ministries is sound simply because they have staffed those areas with capable people or because those ministries use a high-dollar, well-endorsed children's curriculum. Sometimes even our most capable people (and I believe age-graded ministries are full of wonderfully capable people) need someone whose role is to guard the doctrine of the church to come alongside them and intentionally wade through their curriculum, no matter how well-put together and acclaimed it may be. The sad irony is that there are senior pastors who work very hard to make sure their church is gospel-centered from the pulpit, while their other concurrent teaching venues are anything but gospel-centered.

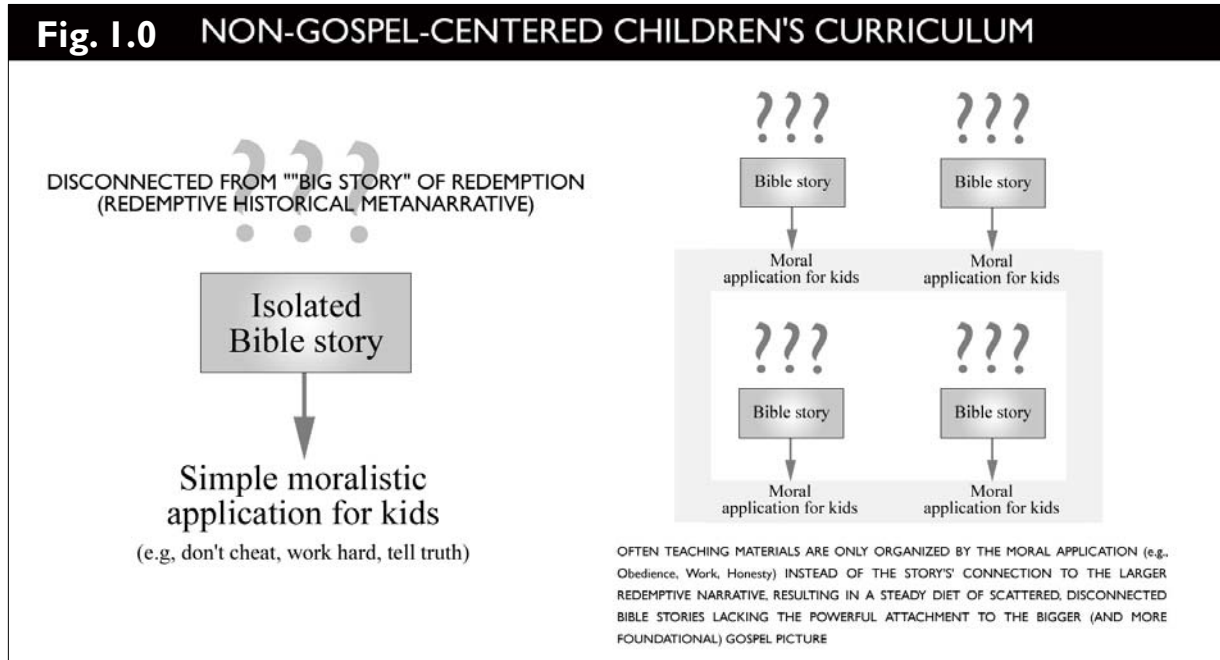
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That begs another question: What does gospel-centered curriculum look like? Simply put, gospel-centered curriculum is material which demonstrates how the entire Scripture ultimately highlights the beauty, worth, centrality and supremacy of God's saving action in Jesus' Person and Work. It reveals how Jesus is the ultimate end of every story, every book and every letter of Scripture. Gospel-centered curriculum takes seriously the approach Jesus

took to the Bible when he demonstrated to his disciples in Luke 24:14, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." In Jesus' mind, the Bible was about him. Gospel-centered curriculum capitalizes on this idea by responsibly demonstrating how everything in the Scriptures points to Jesus, promises Jesus, parallels Jesus, prefigures Jesus, proclaims Jesus, etc. Hopefully, as the listener/learner witnesses the glory of the gospel, his affections will be deeply and profoundly moved for Christ. Put another way, the individual's heart will grow for Jesus!

Unfortunately, this gospel-centered emphasis appears to be a rare commodity in children's curriculum which far too often devolves into mere moralism – Sesame Street with a little Jesus sprinkled on top. Every Sunday in churches all across America kids are given the impression by children's ministries that the main reason God gave the Bible is to teach them "how to" live – how to tell the truth, how to obey mommy and daddy, how to work hard and make good grades, how to develop the right friends – instead of it being the story of how God has come in Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves (i.e., the gospel).

Based on my observations, Fig. 1.0 is a typical approach to children's curriculum. You'll note from the graphic that the children's lesson usually is a biblical story that has been ripped from its redemptive historical context. This isolated story is then boiled down into a morality tale – a biblical *Aesop's Fables*, if you will – where children are called to do the right things. Often these teaching

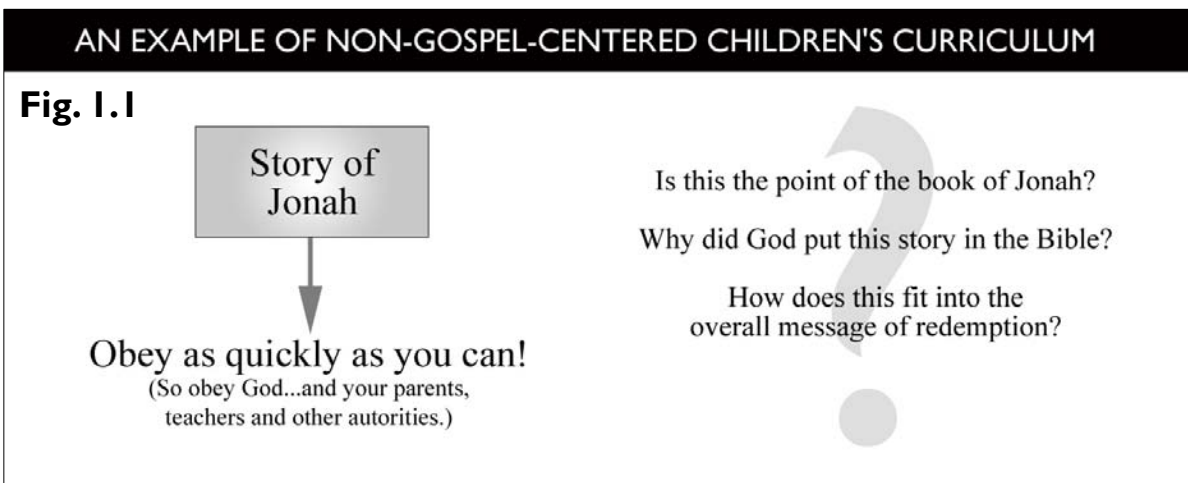


series are organized by the moral application instead of the stories connection to the larger narrative of redemption. Having children exclusively diet on this kind of teaching may lead them to a disjointed understanding of these stories where they see in them little to no attachment to the larger gospel picture.

In the example of Fig. 1.1, we see the story of Jonah as the teaching for Sunday. The moral of Jonah is to obey as quickly as you can. "Don't be like Jonah who got swallowed by a fish for not

obeying as soon as possible! This teaches us we should obey God the first time. Accordingly, we should obey our parents the first time. And our teachers. And other people God has put in authority over us. If we don't, bad things can happen to us." Sound farfetched or like last week's lesson at your church? Just so you know, I took this example from a very well-known and prevalent children's curriculum.

This type of moralistic interpretation of biblical narratives should lead us to ask questions like:



- *Is this the point of the book of Jonah?*
- *Why did God put this story in the Bible?*
- *How does this story fit into the overall message of redemption?*

Asking those questions might lead someone to discover a different purpose for Jonah – like how it reveals God’s heart for salvation and that anyone (the Assyrians in Jonah’s case) has an opportunity to be forgiven, even if they’re people you struggle to care about. Needless to say, this understanding of Jonah would easily highlight the beauty and worth of Jesus and the gospel.

Would Jonah have spared himself a lot of trouble if he had just been obedient? Absolutely. Do I want my children to exhibit these same characteristics in their own lives? Without a doubt. But the question becomes what is the real reason God wanted these stories in the Bible? Could it be that the things we often focus on in teaching children Bible stories are secondary truths, supporting details instead of the main idea? Could it be that instead of giving our kids the life-giving truth of Jesus each week, we have mistakenly given them moralism; something that never grows a heart for Christ but does quite the opposite.

Are we giving kids the good news or just good advice?

In Fig. 2.0 we see several ways in which morality-based curriculum is *generally* different from gospel-centered curriculum (some of these characteristics will be fleshed-out later). As noted in the last row, a gospel-centered Bible story will seek to demonstrate how it ties into the bigger story of Redemption in Jesus. This means the

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teacher seeks to go “up” from the smaller, individual Bible story into the “Big Story”.

Discontent with giving another moral lesson for children, gospel-centered curriculum understands the Bible ultimately reveals one story – the story of redemption in Jesus. It seeks to help the learner understand how the specific Bible story contributes to God’s plan of salvation through Christ. *How does this story “move the ball down the field” for the gospel? Do we see any types or prefigures of Jesus in this story? Does this story set up a scenario that Christ fulfills to a greater degree? Etc.* A question I like to ask myself before I preach would also help here: *Why did Jesus have to die for today’s message? Am I going to give the congregation simply*

a moral exhortation or does Jesus’ sacrifice bring something to bear on the subject? If the entire Bible ultimately points to Jesus and his work at the Cross then surely my Sunday message, or what is going to be taught to hundreds of children that same day, should make that connection clear. We should seek to be gospel-centered by going “up” with the story (See Fig. 2.1).

To be fair, this can happen in all kinds of ways and it doesn’t mean we never teach any semblance of morality to our children. The New Testament is replete with moral exhortations in the name of personal holiness. Our task is to show how those exhortations link to the gospel. For example, in Ephesians 5, Paul calls on husbands to love their wives (a moral exhortation). But notice how he puts that call in the context of the gospel in Eph. 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (underline mine)” This helps us see that we can and should give moral exhortation when the text calls for it. However, we should always attempt to put that exhortation within the

Fig. 2.0 MORALITY-BASED	GOSPEL-CENTERED
You must try for Jesus	You must trust in Jesus
What you do	What Christ has done for you
Obedience from obligation/duty	Obedience from gratitude/love
You are the hero of the story	God is the hero of the story
The story is basically about me	The story is basically about Jesus
Aims primarily at action	Aims primarily at the heart
Stays small with the story	Appeals to the Big Story of Redemption

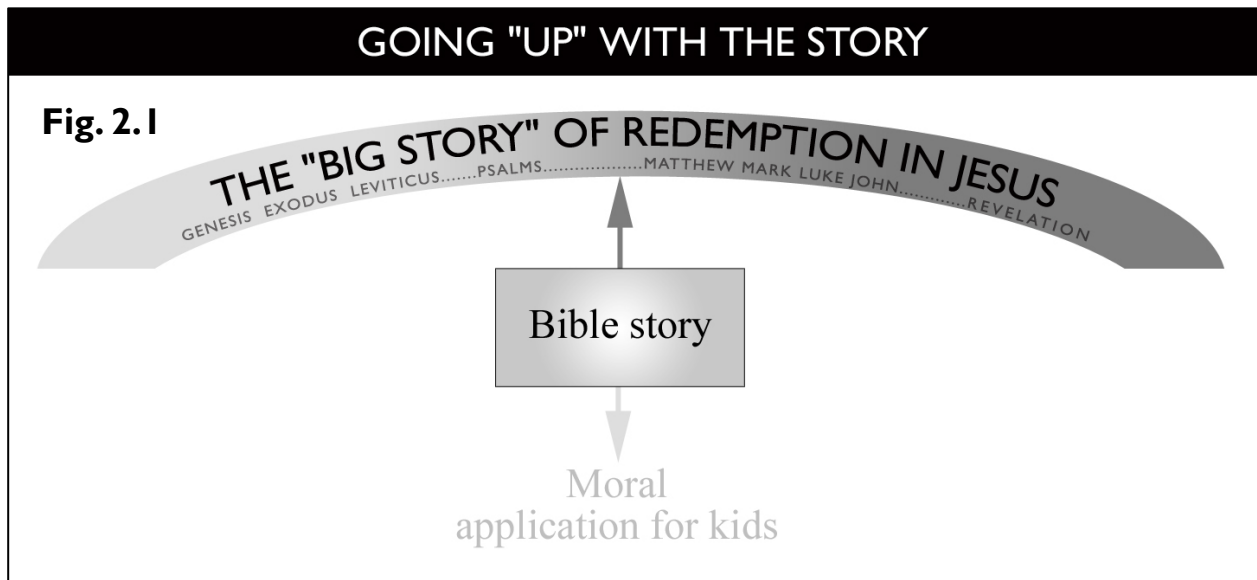


Fig. 2.1

frame of the gospel. For example, how does the gospel inform my seeking to be truthful? Well, for starters, people often lie because they want others to accept them. But, through the work of the cross, I should realize that I have been made acceptable to God. Thus, in continuing to



trust the gospel, I can be freed from the desire to find acceptance in human approval. As a result, my desire to lie to others weakens. Therefore, gospel-centered curriculum isn't anti-moral exhortation, it is anti-moralism.

Another strength of gospel-centered curriculum is that the gospel aims at the heart while moral "how to" lessons only aim at the surface of behavior. If Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Reformers understood Jesus correctly, all sin ultimately is an issue of worshipping something or someone other than God in Christ. John Calvin said, "The human *heart* is a *factory of idols*...Everyone of us is, from his mother's womb, expert in inventing *idols*."<sup>1</sup> This is the WHY behind our sinning. Martin Luther believed that any sin rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. Therefore, in sin we are always

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"forgetting" what God has done for us in Christ and are instead being moved by some idol.<sup>2</sup> In other words, we sin because we have forgotten the gospel!

Luther believed the Ten Commandments all flowed from the first commandment which is based in worshipping the true God. He writes,

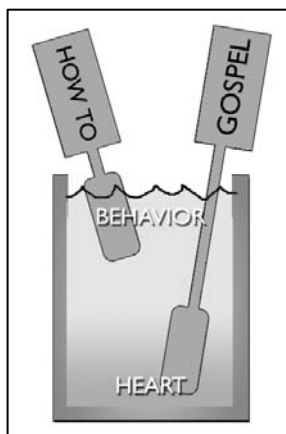
*And this faith, faithfulness, confidence deep in the heart, is the true fulfilling of the First Commandment; without this there is no other work that is able to satisfy this Commandment. And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured...*<sup>3</sup>

In other words, if we are breaking one of the commandments it is ultimately because we have *broken the first*. We have forgotten or neglect to worship God in our hearts. How do we return to robustly worshipping God in our hearts? We must be moved in our deepest affections by the worthy and glory of Jesus. We

must have the gospel put before us time and time again! Thomas Chalmers words upon the need for gospel-work do well here:

# Do kids leave each Sunday

*This, we trust, will explain the operation of that charm which accompanies the effectual preaching of the gospel. The love of God and the love of the world, are two affections, not merely in a state of rivalry, but in a state of enmity - and that so irreconcilable, that they cannot dwell together in the same bosom. We have already affirmed how impossible it were for the heart, by any innate elasticity of its own, to cast the world away from it; and thus reduce itself to a wilderness. The heart is not so constituted; and the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one.<sup>4</sup>*



We cannot simply tell children (or adults for that matter) to simply stop worshipping whatever idol to which their heart is given. The idol is too powerful. To remove it we must replace it with something greater. We need the expulsive power of a new affection. The gospel, not mere moral exhortations, is that power. Not taking children

to the gospel but only teaching “how to’s” each Sunday is like trying to stir something deep but only having a small stick to work at your disposal. While on the surface you may have a lot of action, deep down there is little to no change at

all. In the end, “how to’s” only affect the behavior of a child for a brief time. Maybe the “changes” last only a few days if not evaporate by the time the child leaves the church campus. But when you exhort boys and girls to continue to trust and abide in the gospel, you are dealing with their heart. You are using the only instrument that really dislodges the sins of the heart – sins beneath the sins. Sins that behavioral change can never reach. Again, “how to’s” only affect the surface while the gospel affects the heart.

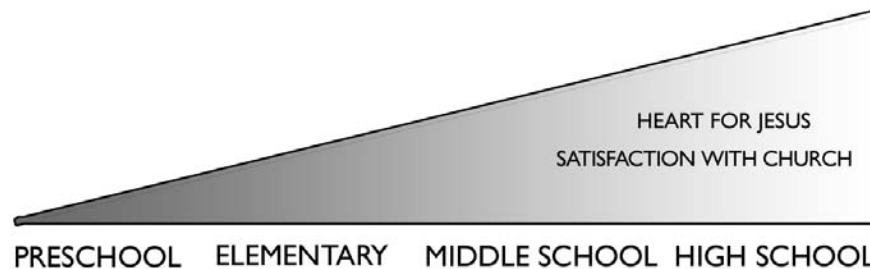
Indeed, when the chief aim is behavior modification you will likely produce wonderfully proud legalists who can perform well for you (the kids you like), or you will frustrate believers who don’t (the kids you don’t like so much). When the gospel becomes secondary and treated like it’s only the front door for the faith instead of being the room we live in, we are place our children on the fast track for either being very religious (read: rule keeper) or rebellious (read: rule breaker). Both of those groups will be far from God.

Instead of growing the heart via the gospel, we shrink it via moralism. You can almost see this in real-time as kids go through our age-graded ministries. Religious, rule-following “Christianity” takes its toll (see Fig. 3.0).

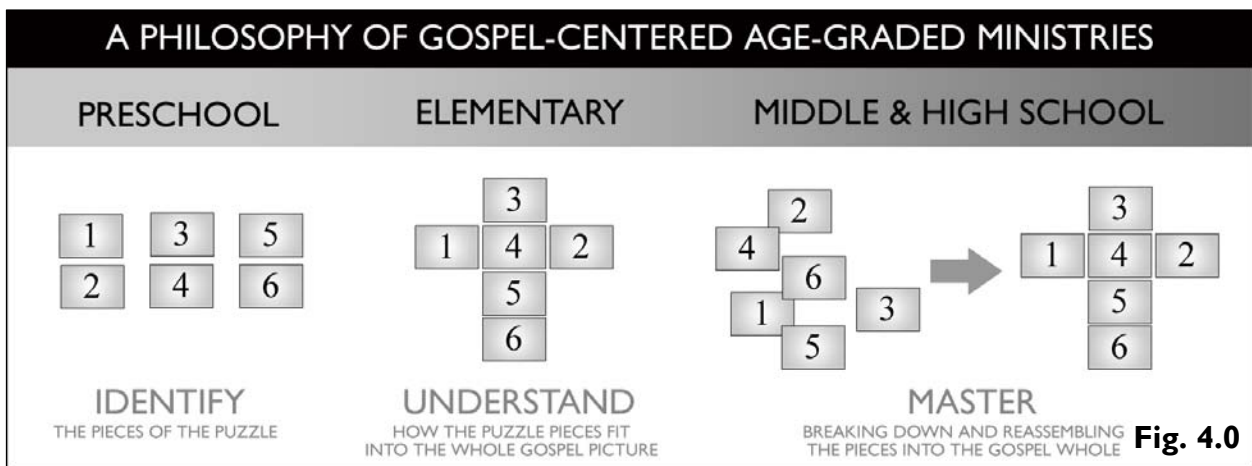
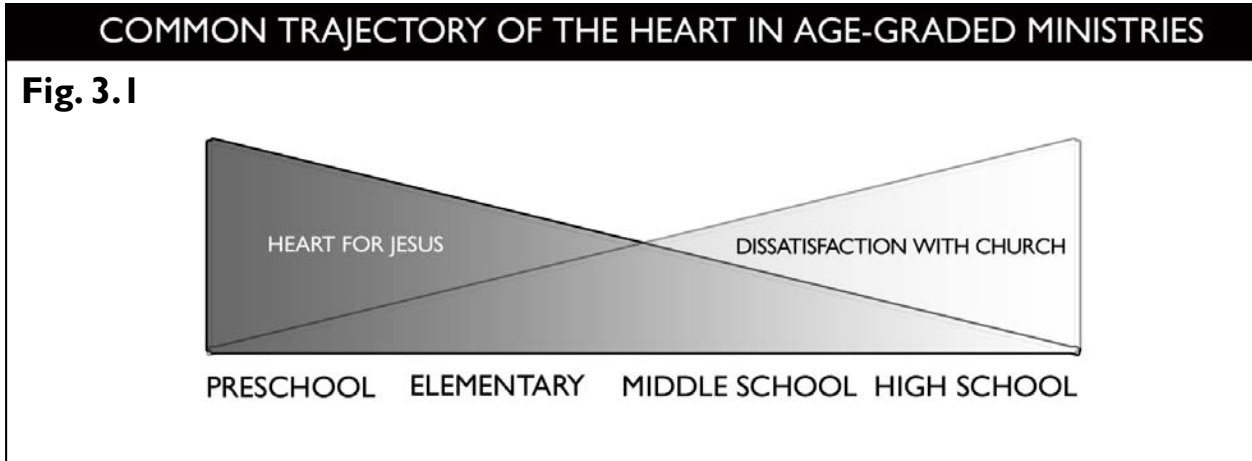
As kids progress through each grade, more and more find themselves with smaller hearts for Jesus and a growing dissatisfaction with the church that gives them those rules. Should we be surprised that in America, most student ministries have active, engaged senior classes that you could fit in a thimble. The bleak picture is, without gospel-centered age-graded ministries, students

## INTENDED TRAJECTORY OF THE HEART IN AGE-GRADED MINISTRIES

**Fig. 3.0**



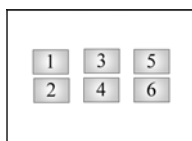
# with good news or good advice?



will graduate not only from high school but from church as well. That's what people with small hearts for Jesus do. They see Christianity as something you, for all intents and purposes, "graduate" from. But with gospel-centered curriculum in gospel-centered ministries there should be a different hope and expectation (see Fig. 3.1).

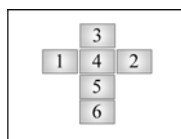
Is this iron-clad? Obviously not. But I would argue that churches have a better shot at reaching this type of trajectory for our students if each Sunday we would help them see the glory and greatness of the gospel!

What would age-graded ministries look like if they were gospel-centered? I suggest the following (see Fig. 4.0):



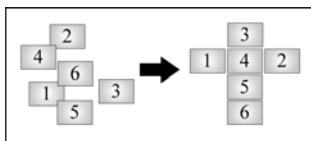
**PRESCHOOL MINISTRIES: IDENTIFY** – Preschool ministries deal with those who are obviously the least developmen-

tally advanced: infants and toddlers. Their role will primarily be helping children identify the major characters and stories of the Bible, not the least of which will be Jesus and his work. *Preschool ministry helps kids identify the pieces of the puzzle.*



**ELEMENTARY MINISTRIES: UNDERSTAND** – Ministries which revolve around children ages Kindergarten through grade school not only have the

task of helping those children understand the Big Story of Redemption (e.g., Creation, Fall, Cross) but also how the bible stories fit together in the Big Story of Redemption. *Elementary ministry helps kids understand how the puzzle pieces fit into the whole gospel picture.*



**MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL MINISTRIES: MASTER** – This is the last stage of age-graded ministry before

presumably leaving for college. Thus, like a fully-trained soldier who can take apart and reassemble his rifle in the dark, you must by default be able to master how the gospel integrates to your life, how each story of the Bible reveals the glory of Jesus' saving work and how you see the Story of Redemption working itself out in the every day. *Middle and High School Ministry helps students master the puzzle whereby they can break it down on their own and reassemble the pieces into the gospel whole.*

Each age-graded ministry is working toward one goal: gospel-centered young men and women. Young adults who leave church with big hearts for Jesus! Young adults who, while in college, will seek out a gospel-centered church to plug into and help others follow Jesus. As a parent, your dreams may very well be realized. As an age-graded ministry staff, there can be nothing more rewarding...or exciting!

Think about this: the moralistic approach to church isn't new for kids. I venture they are probably hearing the same things (e.g, obey your parents, don't tell a lie, work hard) from their parents, public school teachers, and Saturday morning cartoons. Even the most spiritually-hardened parent would likely instruct his child to be moral. So why not spend Sunday mornings giving kids what they will not hear from their schoolteacher, Dora the Explorer or maybe even their parent? They can get good advice practically anywhere. Why not give them the gospel? Give them what they may not get anywhere.

Here's what I believe. I believe shifting to a gospel-centered approach will not only bless the kids but it will bless those who work with those kids. Each week you display the glory of the gospel you help your entire team to have their own hearts stirred to worship Jesus! I could see how it would cause your volunteers to never want to miss Sundays again because they are getting encouraged, instructed and challenged by the gospel! It would also bless parents who may be bringing their kids to get morality-instruction (i.e.,

good advice).

However, in reality, they will be getting the good news – a good news they'll bring home each week to those very parents! How incredibly missional does that feel? Exciting to say the least!

Are you morality-based or gospel-centered? It's a question you must ask honestly. Look at the curriculum you teach, the songs you sing, the banners you hang. Question: how much of what you teach, sing and display on Sunday could be taken over by someone from another faith? Could a Muslim step right in and pick up where you left off on nine Sundays out of ten? What about a cult? Could a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness use your curriculum without batting an eye because it is so overly moralistic that it has basically squeezed out the gospel? Don't take the morality-based road. It's easier for a reason. As sinners, we like the Law. It appeals to our desire to feel in control. It's more "practical", right? It is also less difficult to teach. It's easier to put lessons

together when we focus only on "how to's" for morality. But the real question is, is it better?

What does shifting to gospel-centeredness mean? A different curriculum or writing your own? I don't know. Some may choose to edit their current curriculum, others will think it to be too much work and buy different curriculum, and still others will write their own. Whatever you choose, choose to be gospel-centered. For the love of the gospel and the hearts of those you wish to impact for the gospel!

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.8, 108.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Tim Keller, *Preaching the Gospel in a Post-Modern World*, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Treatise Concerning Good Works*, IX.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Chalmers, "Discourse 9", Vol. 6 *Discourses on the Application of Christianity to the Commercial and Ordinary Affairs of Life*.