

Jesus Wants Me for . . .

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WE LIVE IN A WARD on the fringes of Salt Lake City's central city neighborhood. Demographically, the ward contains a core of people who began young married life in their homes and are now slowly disappearing, a high percentage of transient young couples beginning families, and waves of people who appear briefly in search of welfare. It is ethnically and economically mixed. Paul and I moved into this ward, predictably as newlyweds, and I began working in its Primary in 1980, first as organist for three years and then as the Sunbeam teacher from 1983 until February of 1991. After eight years in that position, I was again called to be the organist, which is my current position.

By my third year, I had been in Primary longer than any other officer or teacher there but one. By my fifth year, *no* one, except some of the children, had been in Primary longer than I. I have worked in my ward's Primary for eleven consecutive years. And, speaking from the front-line trenches, I have a firm opinion about Primary.

It's this: Hierarchy may be an efficient and rational way to run organizations, but it inevitably works to the advantage of those on top—not to the advantage of those on the bottom. And children are on the very bottom of the Church hierarchical ladder.

Hierarchy means status, and children have no status. Oh, they have status as statistics (80 percent attendance in class) or as numbers ("You have how many children?") or as potentialities—as future missionaries, as future priesthood holders, as future mothers, as future tithe-payers. This attitude is so commonplace as to be a cliché requiring no documentation; but Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, speaking at the April 1991 conference, gave typical expression to it:

These little ones are like seedlings in a plant nursery. All look much the same in the beginning, but each one will grow to become independent and unique.

Saying that three-year-olds "all look much the same in the beginning" could not possibly have been uttered by anyone who has actually dealt with real three-year-olds.

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Parents and teachers should see beyond the little girl in pigtails and should not be misled by the ragged little boy with a dirty face and holes in the knees of his pants.

This statement may possibly be a variation of the “blessings-on-thee-little-man-barefoot-boy-with cheeks-of-tan” view of American boyhood. I am mystified, however, by the equation of feminine pigtails with masculine dirty faces and ragged trousers. Dirt and rags are evidence of neglect. Anyone wishing to neglect a child, however, will not undertake a project requiring the skill and patience that pigtails demand. Only love produces pigtails.

True teachers and leaders see children as they may become. They see the valiant missionary who will one day share his testimony with the world and later become a righteous father who honors his priesthood. The inspired teacher sees pure and beautiful mothers and future presidents of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary, even though today they may be girls who giggle and chatter on the back row in the classroom.

I think it is significant that Elder Ballard does not see becoming a Primary *teacher* as among these honored potential roles.

Sometimes people say, “Well, boys will be boys!” Not so—boys will be men, and almost before we know it. To see our children grow, succeed, and take their places in society and in the Lord’s kingdom is an eternal reward worth any inconvenience or sacrifice. (1991, 78–79)

This stress on the potential of children—and hence the necessity for deferred gratification in dealing with children—speaks volumes about the view of children as unimportant for their *present* individuality, the rewards of *present* interactions with them, and the devaluation of the *present* contributions that children make to Church. Children are valued as potential adults—not *as children*.

Think for a moment about status in a ward. Any priesthood quorum, no matter how dysfunctional, has status because men are involved in it. The Relief Society, although its members are women, has status because it consists of adult women representing other adult women. Teenagers have considerably more status than children because the most important person in the ward—the bishop—has been institutionally assigned to interview them quarterly and supervise, however indirectly, their activities. Furthermore, teenagers are not passive consumers of religion. Teenagers can and do drop out of activity and get in spectacular trouble. (Children aren’t passive either; they’re just helpless.)

But the Primary consists of women representing children—a recipe for institutional forgetfulness. Wards differ widely; bishoprics and Primary presidencies also differ widely. I do not mean my remarks as

a blanket indictment of all wards nor even of my own Primary over the past eleven years. In fact, our Primary is currently in better shape than it's ever been. We have a stellar president—energetic, clear in her goals for the children, creative, organized, loving, and gifted at communicating with children. Five of the bishop's seven children are still in Primary, and his wife replaced me as Sunbeam teacher.

But I want to speak out against the curious blind spot that Primary occupies institutionally. I have long felt the pain of what hierarchy does to women in the Church, but I have never heard anyone speak about the damage hierarchy inflicts on children. Ideally, Primary exists to teach our children gospel principles in a loving setting that will reinforce the home.

But what are the *institutional* purposes for the Primary? Obviously, the institution needs to socialize the children so that they will grow up to be dependable members of the Church—the “future value” function described by Elder Ballard. This instructional function, equally obviously, will best be met by age-grouped classes, teachers, and manuals. These requirements demand meeting spaces, budget, scheduling, and staffing, all of which involve some action on the part of the ward's male leaders. During my years in Primary, our ward has had five bishoprics. The bishops have all been sincere, committed, kindly men who have given a very tough job their best effort. I don't believe that they were unsupportive, and I willingly concede that the Primary presidency's perspective may be far more positive than mine; but from my position in the trenches, not one of those bishops gave Primary more than cursory attention aside from periodic visits by the counselor in charge and turning over one sacrament meeting per year for the Primary program.

I have few complaints about the meeting spaces and no information about budget allocations, but the hierarchy's management of scheduling and staffing I find more problematic. Given the block program, the Primary schedule is set not by the needs of the children but by the needs of the other ward members for child care. Primary lasts an hour and fifty minutes—not for the convenience of its teachers and certainly not because of the needs of the children but for the convenience of the other ward members. (Primary may be less painful for the children than many alternatives, but that's a coincidence.) This problem, manifested in our Primary, stems from the ungainly and inhumane compromise between the original organizational need to condense the Sunday meeting schedule that produced the block schedule and the fierce insistence for institutional representation that kept the Sunday School's turf more or less intact, but which required a three-hour block instead of a two-hour one. In our ward, three capable men are prevented from

doing more needed work by being designated the Sunday School presidency. Their job seems to consist of staffing the adult and youth classes, and conducting the ridiculous veriform appendix of song practice, a ten-minute meeting sutured to its unwilling host, sacrament meeting.

Staffing, however, is where the institutional rubber really hits the rocky road of reality. During my eight years as a Sunbeam teacher, I can remember nine presidencies. The problems of continuity, training, and experience are obvious, just from the math. Given the demographics of our ward, staffing would be a problem anyway; but I remember one gruesome week when the Primary president conducted, led the singing, did sharing time, and taught the Merrie Miss class. One counselor was covering the nursery, the other counselor was absent, and the secretary hadn't come either. (We had four secretaries within one three-month period.) I was teaching Sunbeams but was also pressed into service as organist.

It was not uncommon during one period for two sisters who were teaching a class of about eight children and a class of fourteen children respectively to simply not show up. I kept track one winter, and they averaged such unannounced absences one Sunday a month, or 25 percent of the time. The overburdened presidency's solution was to smile apologetically at the teachers of the classes just older and younger and ask, "Would you mind if the children came in with you today?" The presidency thus enabled the irresponsible teachers and burdened the responsible ones with the consequences. The responsible teachers also, by rising to the emergency, became enablers for a passive presidency. I was not surprised when these responsible teachers were gone by summer. When I asked the president why the two notoriously unreliable teachers were not replaced, she answered helplessly: "It's so hard to find teachers and get them approved."

She was saying no more than the truth. When my husband, Paul, a new counselor in the bishopric, went out on his first assignment to find a Primary teacher, six women straight in a row turned him down for a variety of reasons. They didn't like Primary. It was too hard. It isolated them from the other women in the ward. They didn't like children. They did not say, but I'm sure some felt, that it was also not a very "important" calling. I realize that Primary has no monopoly on teaching problems or inadequate staffing, but I suspect its low status in the hierarchy makes staffing particularly troublesome. Furthermore, many adults do not relate well to children, can't get them to behave, and don't know how to teach children effectively.

According to my observations, the best teachers in our Primary are parents concerned about their own children. That's why both Paul and I are currently in the Primary. I started teaching Sunbeams when

Christian entered the class at age three. It was an enormous class—fourteen children. The presidency said they couldn't divide the class because there weren't enough meeting rooms. It was obvious that the teacher, a sweet, ineffectual woman with an infant daughter, was completely overwhelmed. Her idea of a fun activity—to give her her due, it *was* an activity prescribed in the manual—was tossing a beanbag into the lap of each child in turn and asking a question like, "How can you help at home?" This activity might have worked with four or five children. The fourteenth, of course, was long gone by the time she got to the end of the row.

After the first visit, I announced that I would be her assistant. She didn't want me, but she was too sweet to say no. As matters turned out, she became pregnant and, while she was paralyzed with nausea, I told the president that I'd just help out for awhile. Before the baby was born, the president who had accepted my offer was released, and the teacher had moved from the ward; but I stayed relentlessly on—self-called and never set apart during the entire eight years. I liked teaching Christian's class and enjoyed a new set of Sunbeams at the year's end while he and his thirteen colleagues stumped off into Star A's.

But I watched Christian's progress for the next few years with increasing misgivings. Many times, I quietly took Christian back into my Sunbeam class as he progressed through Star A and Star B, CTR A, CTR B, and Valiant A. With one exception, I considered his teachers unsatisfactory. Many of them were totally inexperienced. More seriously many more were chronically unprepared. And most of all, there were *many*. Only once did he end a year with the same teacher who had started. In one case, his class had a series of substitutes for literally months. He became increasingly bored and actually begged to come back to Sunbeams. Talks with the presidency and the bishopric produced expressions of concern but no better teachers. During his Valiant A year, I bought the manual and gave him a choice. If his teacher was there, he could stay for class or go home to read the lesson during class time and talk about it with us at dinner. If she wasn't there, he could come with me or go home, as he chose. I explained this family policy to the Primary president. "Oh," she said vaguely, "I don't think the other parents have a problem." After this had gone on for months, Paul finally resigned from the high council to teach Christian's Valiant B class. I have a hard time believing that such teaching incompetence would have been tolerated in, say, the teachers' quorum or that parents would have been so indifferent.

On another occasion, the whole ward was anxious to welcome a young woman who was marrying a member of our ward. She was bright, pleasant, and musically gifted. Eight weeks—two full months—

before the wedding, the Primary president asked the bishop to call this woman as Primary chorister. "Oh no," he frowned. "The Relief Society will want her." And the Relief Society got her. She conducted the Relief Society's opening song, closing song, and practice song for a sum total of no more than six minutes while, next door, the Primary was faltering through opening, closing, reverence, rest, activity, and practice songs for about thirty minutes with an underqualified and unimaginative chorister.

Our nine Primary presidents have all been conscientious and well meaning, but their interest in the job and their personal capabilities have varied widely. Several struggled with their callings when they were also struggling with heavy personal burdens. The marriages of two presidents in a row—one right after the other—disintegrated, but they struggled gamely with their children, work, unhappy home situations, *and* the Primary until they moved out, simultaneous with the divorces. One struggled with a nonmember husband who resented her activity; I haven't seen her in church since she was released. A fourth was trying to sell the house and take care of four children by herself, including a handicapped child, so she could join her husband who had already moved to another state. My point is this: these women already had more than full-time jobs managing their personal lives. If the Primary offered spiritual comfort or a sharing sisterhood or support for these burdens, I might have felt differently. Perhaps their counselors supplied these emotional needs. But from my perspective, sitting with the Sunbeams, I saw them struggling to maintain the facade that all was well while they became more drawn and desperate, resorted to reading stories out of *The Friend* or showing videotapes for sharing time, and frequently just didn't come when it wasn't their turn to conduct. Everyone suffered with them, even when we didn't know the cause—especially the children.

Not all wards would experience the same staffing problems. I hope most would not. But in addition to the hierarchy's overriding concern with the bureaucratic requirements of running a program, hierarchy causes the children to suffer in yet another way. Because Primary is on Sunday and is a religious meeting, it is often conducted along the organizational model of an adult religious meeting. The children are forced to sit still, often doing little beside listening for long periods of time. They are frequently frantic with fatigue and fidgety with boredom. They are hungry and thirsty. Yet they are scolded for not being "reverent" and are told that "Jesus is very sad at what you're doing."

Having docile, passive children is a hierarchical value. It is not a religious value, nor is it a human value. I see nothing in the New

Testament to indicate that Jesus expects children—or adults either—to be passive. He was on the move constantly—striding along the roads, responding to a call for help, checking the sycamore trees for undersized tax collectors—and it seems pretty clear to me that the people who benefited from his teachings were those who kept close to him by moving, even if they had to do some leg-stretching and panting.

This organizational model also assumes that listening is learning. Concern with following the manual leads to the distressing spectacle of teachers standing in front of the class, reading mechanical stories from the manual and asking equally mechanical questions from the “discussion” list. But what are the unintended messages that the children learn from these situations?

Church is boring.

My teacher doesn't like me enough to come every week.

Sitting still is being reverent.

Jesus loves me when I'm quiet.

Learning about the gospel means listening to someone tell me things that are boring, tedious, and irrelevant.

I have been dismayed and distressed to see how faithfully children model this adult behavior. Short talks presented by the older children nearly always consist of material mumbled and mispronounced from *The Friend* and even manuals. As a final point, the hierarchical domination of Primary is blinding because it trains adults to see the needs of the hierarchy rather than the needs of the children, those the hierarchy theoretically serves. All too often now, Primary is a place to warehouse children while the adults do adult things. What if we stood the problem on its head and, instead of asking, “What does the organization need?” asked instead, “What is best for the children?” Then Primary would be a present joy and a genuine investment in the future—a place to eliminate many of the problems that receive expensive and time-consuming attention during adolescence. Each Primary worker probably has a wish-list, but here are some items on mine of a child-centered Primary:

1. The Primary president would be the ward's best executive.
2. We'd have a schedule that included vigorous physical activity for ten minutes or so right after sacrament meeting instead of another twenty minutes of sitting still.
3. Teaching candidates would be energetic, creative, *experienced* teachers. The Primary president would have her pick of the ward. Sweet young brides, shy converts, or people who are allowed to be undependable in their attendance and erratic in their performance can also grow from Primary callings, but the focus would remain on the children, rather than on the maturing adult. Teachers would be

spiritually mature people who would really love the children—as children, not as potential missionaries.

4. The best music person in the ward would be the Primary chorister. It is my firm opinion that the chorister is a much more significant person than the presidency in terms of impact on the children. Ironically, over the past eight years, our three best choristers were all “promoted” to Primary president, again, a clear imposition of hierarchical values upon the organization rather than a concern with the needs of the children. However, Paul is the current chorister; and since men are prohibited from serving in the Primary presidency, we may be safe for a few months.

5. Obviously, teachers would be trained in and encouraged to adapt the manuals. Discussions, role-play, activity, and other, more engaging, forms of teaching than lecturing would be stressed.

6. Parents would no longer be allowed to indulge their horrifying level of indifference about the quality of teaching in their children’s classroom. A rotating schedule of visits or other involving activities might be one solution.

7. The nursery would instantly stop being a free child care facility, to be replaced by a co-op arrangement that would get parents of both genders involved and keep them involved in Primary for the next nine years.

8. The counselor in the bishopric should, in my opinion, be the standby substitute teacher whenever a teacher doesn’t show up. I think this would create new motivation to find reliable, competent teachers. Similarly, if a classroom is inadequate, that class should meet in the bishop’s office until a satisfactory solution is discovered.

9. The sacrament meeting program should be abolished in favor of having one class each month sing and give short talks in sacrament meeting.

10. And finally, Primary should involve more men. My ultimate hope for the Church is to see the dissolution of the rigid, wrongful, limiting hierarchy that creates as many problems as it solves. However, realistically, hierarchy is quite clearly a function of the current system. So let’s use it! I think that the status of Primary and attention it receives will improve in direct proportion to the number of men involved in it. More men should be called as teachers, as officers, as nursery leaders, and, ideally, to the presidency.

The first class that I taught as Sunbeams will graduate within the next year. What I wanted to teach them, and all my Sunbeams, more than anything else was that Primary was a good place to be, a place where they were loved. I hope they felt that as three-year-olds. I don’t know if they did, or if they still do. But those years made a big difference

to me. In a culture that is simultaneously sentimental about children and dismissive of them, I hope to sense the dimensions of Jesus' unsparing challenge, "Except ye be converted and become as little children. . . ."

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