

Communally Discerning the Legitimacy of Children’s Revelatory Experiences with God: Conclusions Based on Recent PhD Research

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Julie¹ was preparing to be a guest speaker at a church service. When she asked God what to speak on, she believed God told her to speak on love, and to ask her nine-year-old daughter, Bella. Prayer and hearing from God was a normal and natural part of Julie’s family, even for the children. Bella was watching TV and had not planned to go with her mother to the service. When Julie asked Bella to pray regarding what Julie should speak about, Bella did so right away. Bella then told her mother that God said to speak about love. This confirmed what Julie believed God told her. However, Bella also saw a series of three vision-type pictures she believed were from God and were messages for the church. Bella’s mother decided to have Bella come and share with the church as well. Little did they know that the series of three pictures perfectly represented two seasons in the past and the potential future directions of the church. They also didn’t know the church was celebrating their 20th anniversary that day. The message Bella and her mother ended up sharing together with the church encouraged the congregation deeply. The first two pictures related to two distinct seasons representing the past 20 years of the church, and the third picture was an invitation and promise for a greater season to come ("Bella" 2015; "Julie" 2015).

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout to represent the research participants.

At another church, 10-year-old Sarah was enrolled in a special class that trained children about the importance of character and how to participate in ministry of various kinds including using the gifts of the Holy Spirit like prophesying, giving words of knowledge, praying for healing, etc. Sarah went with her class on a field trip to the State Capitol building in order to bless the people who worked there. The children asked God to tell them about specific people and/or places to go and what to say. When Sarah prayed with her teacher and other students, she heard God tell her a basement room number and a message for someone who worked in that room. The teacher didn't even think there was a room with that number, but decided to take the risk with Sarah to go and find out. They found the room number in the basement, and a man working in it. Sarah was then able to give her message to the man who was incredibly encouraged ("Anna" 2015; "Sarah" 2015).

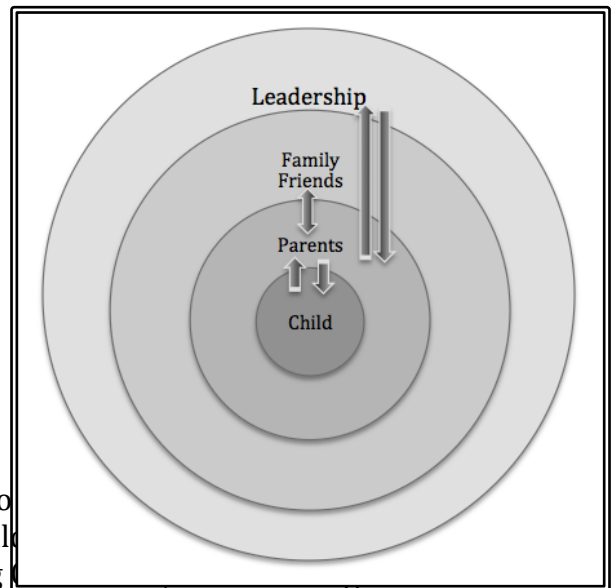
At yet another church, a children's Sunday school class was invited to come on stage and was given the opportunity to bless or pray for the congregation if they wanted to. Nine-year-old James was scared and had absolutely no desire or intention to say anything. Yet when he got on the stage, he said he instantly had courage and wanted to bless the congregation. He said he knew it was God because previously, he had been scared and had no desire to pray, and then he had courage. People in the congregation claimed to have been blessed by what he said and prayed ("James" & "Jenna's" Family 2015).

These stories are just some of the ones that were recounted in four case studies done at four different charismatic/non-denominational churches in California in 2015 and 2016 as part of my PhD research (Glanville 2016). These four churches (Expression 58, Bethel Church, Blazing

Fire Church, and Jesus Culture Sacramento) all have the foundational belief that God wanted to and was capable of speaking to and ministering through children. In fact they all specifically train their children to hear from God and see it as a natural part of being a Christian. The children interviewed were ages 8-10. All of those interviewed (children and adults) were asked to share what it was that made them believe a child’s specific revelatory experience² was from God. From these case studies, a “Child-Community Discernment Process Model” emerged (discussed further below). This model reveals a holistic method of how children in certain communities are being trained to recognize and experience God within the context of community by creating and cultivating a context where children can learn to practice hearing from and experiencing God, and by being coached through the processes of discernment and application of perceived revelatory experiences.

Anticipations

Before the interviews commenced, I anticipated finding various theological and non-theological ways adults practiced discerning a child’s experience. My preconceived idea of discernment within these communities could be



² For this study, I left it up to the communities to “experience from/with God.” For example, it could be considered to be a God-inspired dream, hearing from a spirit being, being used by God to give a prophecy to someone, or being used by God through any revelatory gifts of the Spirit mentioned in 1 Cor. 12:8-10.

described as a series of concentric circles as seen in Figure 1. I anticipated after a child had a revelatory experience with God of some kind, they would tell their parents (or in some cases their children's ministry leader first), who would then do their best to validate and/or discern whether the experience was from God or not. I did not consider the issue of whether much weight would be given to the child's opinion. If the parents were unsure in their discernment, I expected they might talk with others from their church with whom they had closer relationships (fellow members or leaders they knew personally). If the source of the experience still could not be determined to the parents' satisfaction, and the possible implications of the experience seemed significant enough to the parents, I anticipated them reaching out more specifically to leaders within the church.

As Figure 1 shows, I expected the relationship between the child and parents to be more hierarchical, with the child relating the experience and the parent(s) passing judgment (two one-way arrows). I expected the interaction between the parents and the family friends as more equal and dialogical (represented by a two-way arrow). If the leadership of the church was brought in, I anticipated that too would tend to be more hierarchical (two one-way arrows), with the parents as the liaison between leaders and the child.

While reviewing current non-academic literature and resources from charismatic sources, my anticipated model was challenged through comments made by Becky Fischer. I had emailed her to ask if she had any curriculum that covered teaching children how to discern and/or parents

and leaders how to discern whether their children's experiences were from God or not.³ Part of her reply was as follows.

To answer your question, my curriculum Hearing God's Voice would address this in general by default. We teach the children how to recognize God's voice and how to spot counterfeits. There is one specific lesson on counterfeit voices and spiritual activity. But we have always felt by teaching them the real voice of God, and constantly encouraging them to read their Bibles, pray, etc., that they will learn to spot the counterfeit (Fischer 2014b).

Further review of non-academic literature and training materials proved she was not alone in her approach (Toledo 2012; Lane 1998; Walters 1995; Baker ca.1950; Harper 1999; Mapes 2009; Williams 2009; Fischer 2008; La Guardia 2007). Discernment from the top down, or even in general, was not addressed specifically per se, as much as was the importance of teaching children how to hear God for themselves. As the interviews of the children and those in their communities progressed, it became evident that what was taught in the non-academic books and training materials I examined, was actually largely carried over into practice.

Contrary to the anticipated discernment process (Figure 1), each of the case studies provided examples of the parents and/or children's ministry leaders giving great weight to whether the child actually thought their experience was from God or not. Sometimes, if there were no "red flags"⁴ in what the child believed they had experienced with God, the adults simply took the child's declaration of it being from God as enough. This was especially the case if there was a history that had proven to the adults that the child could hear from God. As will be seen

³ Becky Fischer ministry, Kids in Ministry International, publishes a wide variety of children's ministry curriculum.

⁴ Some of the larger "red flags" would consist of the child saying or describing something related to the experience that went against Scripture and against the centrality of Christ.

further below, the community's support before and after a child's experience helps to explain why so much trust could be placed in the child's ability to discern.

The discernment process in the communities could be seen to start significantly before the actual revelatory experience. As the children and their communities shared their stories, the processes that emerged were "Creating and Cultivating the Context," the actual perceived "revelatory experience," and the subsequent "Coaching Through Follow-Up."

Creating and Cultivating the Context

In all of these churches, these children's revelatory experiences did not come completely unexpected. The parents and surrounding church community expected, facilitated and attempted to prepare their children for it. In all of the communities, the following categories emerged related specifically to **creating and cultivating the context**.

Children's ministry leaders and parents:

1. Expected children to experience God and minister to others by the power of the Holy Spirit as a normal part of life.
2. Specifically trained the children in ways they believed would teach the children how to hear from God.
3. Included the children as part of the dialogue regarding growing in a relationship with God and hearing from him. This dialoguing included coaching, discussing and praying together related to hearing from and experiencing God.

4. Gave the children opportunities within the church and/or home to purposefully seek to experience God,⁵ as well as participate in ministry opportunities.⁶

All of the parents interviewed:

1. Were intentional about incorporating their relationship with God into their family life on a daily basis. They purposefully shared with their children about their own relationship with God, and attempted to live it out as an example for their children.
2. Talked with or taught their children about stories from the Bible.

Children's ministry workers:

1. Specifically trained the children how to prophesy over other people (peers and in some cases also adults).

The larger church community:

1. Generally carried the supportive belief that children experiencing God and ministering to others by the power of the Holy Spirit was possible and could be expected.

All of these aspects emerged as common elements of the context that was created and cultivated in each of the communities.

⁵ An example of seeking to experience God is something called "soaking prayer," where worship music is playing and the children are encouraged to lay down or be still and listen to what God might want to show or tell them.

⁶ Ministry opportunities included, but were not limited to, opportunities to pray for other children or adults for healing or to give a prophetic word of encouragement.

A good example of creating and cultivating the context can be seen with Sarah, mentioned above. As well as enrolling Sarah in the special class at their church, Sarah's parents regularly shared with her and her siblings about their growing relationship with God and all they believed they were learning about how God speaks. Her parents also talked with them about what they believed to be identifying characteristics of the way God speaks, so the children would be able to potentially discern for themselves whether or not an experience was from God.⁷ The assumption and expectation from Sarah's family, from the children's classes at church, and from the congregation and leadership of the church at large, was that children could experience God, hear from him, and be used by him through the Holy Spirit ("Sarah" 2015; "Anna" 2015, 2016).

The Revelatory Experience

Because revelatory experiences with God were seen as something that could be expected among these communities, the children were quite comfortable talking about their experiences among family members, children's ministry workers, and with me. Some examples of the perceived revelatory experiences of the children in this study were:

- Dreams
- Receiving a revelatory message they believed God wanted them to tell someone else
- Seeing Jesus and feeling his presence powerfully
- Given a revelatory or encouraging message, song or piece of artwork from God for the larger congregation.

Coaching Through Follow-Up

⁷ Identifying characteristics of Godly experiences included things such as: peace, God's love, it matched something in the Bible, it was encouraging, and it didn't leave the child in fear.

After the children were believed to have had a specific revelatory experience with God, coaching the child through follow-up was evident in all four of the communities. The following aspects of coaching through follow-up emerged among all of the churches and families:

1. Dialogue with the child regarding the child's perceived revelatory experience was present between the child and the children's ministry leader and/or parents. This dialogue could include discerning and praying together, helping the children learn from and/or apply what they'd experienced, and general encouragement. If the child needed help discerning whether their experience was from God or not, then the parents and/or children's ministry worker, were available to help the child discern.
2. Peers and/or siblings participated in listening to the child share their experience, and sometimes provided feedback on whether they thought the experience was from God or not. This was done in homes, churches and on 'field trips.'
3. The role of the whole church community functioned as a generally supportive background, in that they did not find children having revelatory experiences with God out of the ordinary. The children were able to practice hearing from God with the support and encouragement of the larger church community.

All of this provided the potential for support on the back end of the children's revelatory experiences.

The Whole Discernment Process

The community discernment process that emerged as a whole, was one of continual motion as the child moved through the various parts of creating and cultivating the context, a perceived revelatory experience, and receiving coaching through follow-up. The child interacted with various community members as they played various roles at different times.

The size of the teardrops and subsequent crescent shapes do not necessarily represent the amount of participation or roles the members played in every situation in each community. The vicinity of the teardrops and crescents to the child depicts, rather, the general proximity and influence of those members in the life of the child on a general daily basis. At any given time, it may be the parents, peers, siblings, church at large, or the children's ministry leader who are creating and cultivating the context or coaching the child through follow-up. The parents may or may not be the first ones to engage with the child after their revelatory experience.

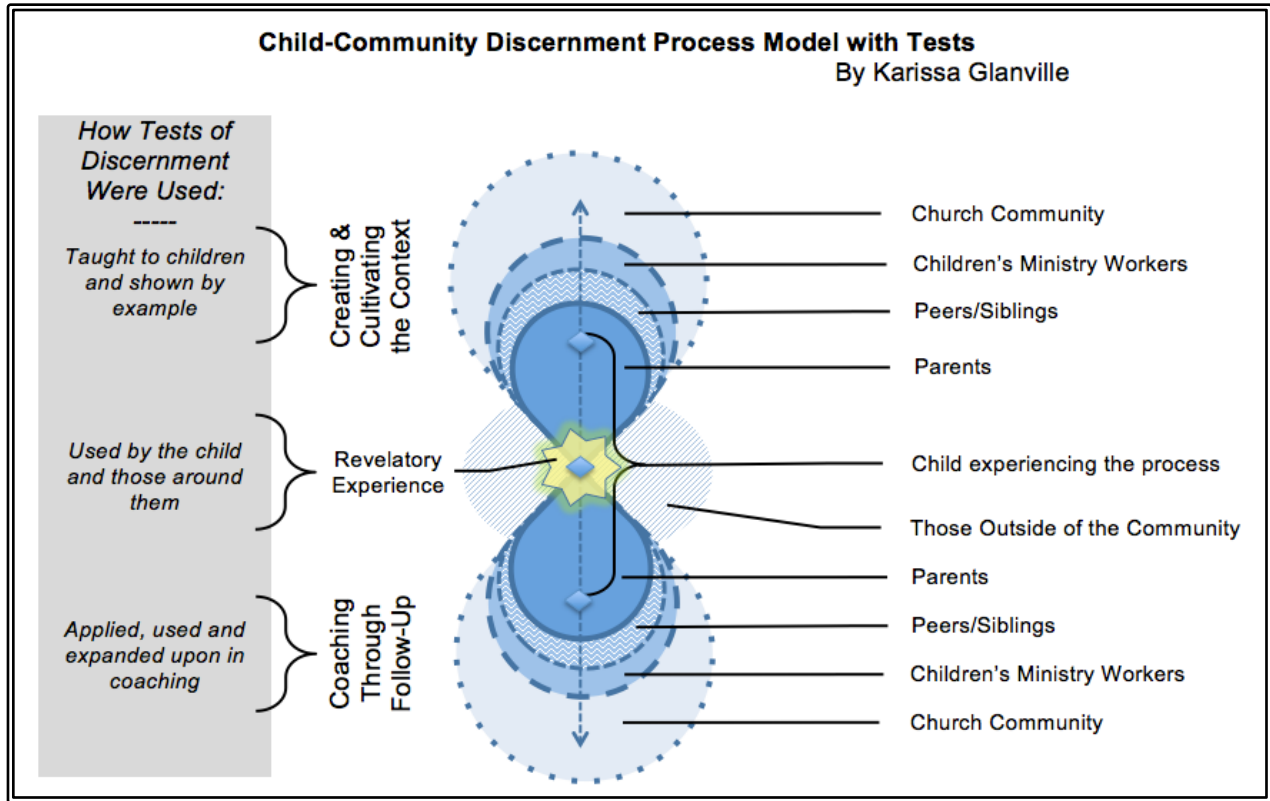


Figure 2

The lower half of the model, the “Coaching Through Follow-Up” section *could* also be seen as part of creating and cultivating the context, in that it is part of continuing to provide or cultivate a (generally) safe zone where the children can continue to feel free to share about their experiences, and learn and grow through the discernment process. I have separated “Creating and Cultivating the Context” and “Coaching Through Follow-Up” into two halves however, to highlight the timing, showing what was done before and after a child’s particular revelatory experience.

Rose’s story is a good example of seeing how the two ends of the “Child-Community Discernment Process Model” were evident in one community. I first heard ten-year-old Rose’s

story from, Rachel, the children's pastor at her church. During the worship times at their church services, Rachel is often up at the base of the stage, participating with the children in expressing worship through singing and dance. In her words, she helps "the kids engage in worship" ("Rachel" 2015). One particular service, she looked over at Rose worshipping and found Rose with head raised, eyes closed, and appearing to be totally tuned in to something other than her surroundings. Rachel also said she strongly sensed the presence of God during that worship time and particularly on Rose. After their class was over that day, a beaming Rose came up to Rachel and told her she'd had her "first contact with Jesus" earlier during worship. Rose went on to tell how she had seen Jesus and was so drawn to him, that she could think of wanting nothing else other than Jesus and worshipping him ("Rachel" 2015). Rose said that prior to this experience, she had never felt like she'd had a personal relationship with Jesus. That evening, however, she felt power when Jesus appeared to her. In Rose's own words, she elaborates how she felt afterward:

I was listening to Rachel preach, I couldn't pay attention, and every single word was like, was like stale . . . except the word "Jesus." . . . I just felt a joy filling, filling me that entire evening . . . it was just . . . an incredible joy . . . I've never felt anything like it. It was like, you can be joyful if you just got an invitation to a party . . . but it isn't the same thing ("Rose" 2015).

Rachel encouraged Rose to tell her parents about her experience, and Rose did when she got home ("Rachel" 2015). As Rose told me her account of the experience and what had followed, there were times she searched for descriptive words to use, or a clearer understanding of what had happened, or what the results of the experience meant for going forward in her life. As Rose shared, Rachel, and Rose's mother joined in the conversation, telling what they had

previously discussed with Rose about what had happened and how they believed she could continue to cultivate this relationship with God. They continued to give input and discuss it further with Rose during the interview as well. It was obvious this was an ongoing discussion. The two women were honest and open about their relationships with God and what they believed God was doing in Rose's life through this experience, and yet they admitted they also didn't have all the answers. They let Rose know they were on the journey together with her, to know and understand God and his ways. Rose's younger siblings sat or milled around the table where we were talking during the interview as well, evidence that the context of expectation and understanding how God works and speaks, was being cultivated in their family as a whole, as well as in the context of the larger community ("Rose" 2015).

When specifically asked about how the adults helped to mentor their children to learn to hear from God (create and cultivate the context), Rose's mother shared that as a family, they read the Bible "several times a week and talk about" it, they "play worship music . . . go to church pretty regularly . . . pray for each other" and

More than anything, God is a natural part of our everyday life. There's nothing we do every day or even every week but we maintain relationships with God, and our kids see that and get invited to do the same. He's very real to us and is our biggest priority. Walking that out and making life decisions based on a Biblical mindset is something the kids see and hear us [the parents] doing ("Rose's Mother" 2016).

Rachel was also asked how she believed their children's ministry helps mentor children into hearing God's voice. Her first answer was "consistency," that "almost every week," they,

provide a time during our corporate worship & preaching, for the kids to have personal interaction with Jesus . . . Many kids have powerful experiences with the Holy Spirit during these encounter moments. I often give them an opportunity to share what God is doing and that helps for me (and other teachers) to pastor them through the encounter.

13

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This also gives a chance for the other kids and teachers to be encouraged with what God is doing in our midst ("Rachel" 2016).

Rachel went on to say that they teach weekly lessons on related Bible stories, and they reinforce that the Bible “is the living Word of God” ("Rachel" 2016). They also specifically train their kids to prophesy and pray by the power of the Holy Spirit ("Rachel" 2016).

Rose was supported on all sides by family, community, and peers who had an expectation that God could and would encounter children. The children at her church were given space to experience God as well as opportunities to minister to others. They are followed up with support, coaching, encouragement and further teaching.

Using Follow-Up to Work Through Negative Community Impact

Though the majority of community input was supportive, there were also times when unintentionally, it was not. Eight-year-old Jenna experienced some unintentional negative impact from her church community’s response. However, her family was able to guide and coach her through the negative experiences. In one of their church services, the pastor had asked if anyone in the congregation had something from God to share with everyone. Jenna believed she did, so her parents let her go forward to share with the church. This shows the entire community had created and was cultivating the context through welcoming child participation. After Jenna told the church what she believed God told her to share, members of the congregation were incredibly encouraging to her to the point that some of them were almost fawning over her. Because of this, Jenna decided to keep going forward each week to share something more with the congregation. She was enjoying all the attention. Her parents however, did not think that everything she was sharing was from God. Her father wanted to encourage Jenna and not shut her down from taking

risks, but also wanted to help guide her. He asked her if she thought all of the things she had shared were from God. Jenna admitted she thought only some of them were from God, and the others she had made up. He helped Jenna come to her own conclusion to share only what she believed God had given her. The father trusted his daughter to be able to largely discern for herself. He also took the negative impact of the congregation and was able to coach her through making related decisions (Dad 2015).

During the family's interview, Jenna also shared how she once took a picture she believed God had given her to draw, up on stage to show the congregation. The congregation had apparently laughed at her (because they thought she was so cute and precious, according to her parents), but she shared how she'd taken it as if they were making fun of her. She hadn't shared with the congregation since then. Upon realizing this during the interview, her parents gently helped Jenna to see the congregation had not been making fun of her. After that "coaching" discussion, Jenna showed renewed interest in sharing with the congregation once again ("James" & "Jenna's" Family 2015).

It cannot be known if or how long it would have taken Jenna's parents to realize what had hurt Jenna's feelings and kept her from sharing since then. However, the coaching that occurred during the interview session became a firsthand glimpse into the community "coaching through follow-up" part of the process.

Conclusion

This research showed (and was backed by current non-academic literature), that the children in these selected charismatic churches were actually expected to be able to participate in

the discernment process themselves.⁸ In anticipation that the children could and would have revelatory experiences with God, the community created and cultivated a context for this by teaching the children how to discern for themselves and providing opportunities for the children to practice hearing from God. After the children had revelatory experiences, the community coached the children through follow-up; creating space where the children could share about their experiences and be aided in discerning, understanding and applying what they experienced.

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⁸ Though not covered in this chapter, more in-depth analysis of the actual ways discernment was made in each of the communities during the entire discernment process as well as how the discernment methods largely corresponded to Cecil M. Robeck Jr.'s pentecostal theology of discernment (Robeck 1994), can be found in my dissertation (Glanville 2016).

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