

Five Values of Christian Camping

by Dr. George “Bud” Williams



Christian camping demands the investment of time, energy, and physical resources. Is it worth it? What benefits do participants—children and adults—receive from the experience?

Why are so many groups—churches, mission agencies, youth organizations, schools, colleges, and social agencies—involved in Christian camping? Because it's where five significant values are realized.

1. Genuine community is experienced.
2. Ministry to the whole person takes place.
3. Relationships are built with God and others.
4. Memories and major life commitments are made.
5. Tomorrow's leaders are developed today.

These values drive the Christian camping movement as a vital instrument of change for individuals and groups.

1. Genuine Community

Camp contrasts with the familiar. Those who go to camp leave behind labels, expectations of others, mindless daily routines, and influences of parents, teachers, peers, colleagues, the media, and friends in favor of a special temporary community with focused purpose: presenting Christ and nurturing those in the faith toward maturity and Christian

leadership. The camp people and the unique environment accomplishes this purpose.

Because we live in a secularized culture, most campers have not experienced genuine Christian community. Physically separated from the powerful influences of the home (permanent) community, campers are immersed in a contrasting, Christ-centered, loving community, free to embrace the values and lifestyle of that community. A Christian camp can be a clear model demonstrating how Christians should live.

Separation from home removes the familiar physical and social supports that provide comfort and security. Campers are forced to transfer trust to others or depend on someone more secure and mature. Some camps remove more of this familiarity by introducing wilderness travel, adventure activities, or social or ethnic diversity.

Camp is a place to try new things, meet new people, and have new adventures. This newness works wonders, opening campers to change in many ways—most significantly, spiritually. Freed from the negative and constraining power often existing in the permanent community, and caught up with the expectation of trying new things, campers are excited about personal change and growth.

Jesus knew this when He called His disciples from their permanent communities where they were known as mere fishermen, tax collectors, carpenters, and so forth, to a temporary community experience where they would be more free to change. Christ taught His disciples as He walked with them “in the way” and traveled beyond their homes. He withdrew from His hometown where He had little power to minister because of the locals’ long-held expectations of Him (see Matt. 13:54–57).

One of the longest camps in recorded history was the Hebrews’ 40-year trek through the wilderness. God used what was meant to be a temporary experience to



its mysteries. It is here for us to enjoy as we recognize the infinite wisdom behind each element He created—and praise Him for it.

Jesus, the Creator of the universe, traveled with His disciples, spending much of the time in the outdoors. He ministered to physical needs as He cooked for His disciples, fed crowds, and restored the sick to health. He devoted attention to spiritual growth as He gave many messages using nature to demonstrate eternal truths. Likewise, Jesus helped His disciples develop mentally and socially.

Camp powerfully communicates spiritual truths and spurs spiritual growth among campers as they spend time in the midst of God's creation, participate in Bible studies, experience teachable moments, worship, relax, and take time to reflect.

The activities at camp provide many opportunities to teach truths. When we are engaged in archery, swimming, canoeing, and crafts, we have opportunities to learn how to treat others fairly, to exercise control over our bodies, to create, and to play. And through such activities, while showing respect for the bodies God has created, we grow physically strong, skilled, and healthy.

Camp engages the mind as well. The stimulation of a new environment, unfamiliar people, different activities, and a changed schedule facilitate mental growth.

3. Relationship Building

The activities of daily camp life teach valuable social skills. Camp is foremost a highly relational experience. At a Christian camp, spiritual mentors are always present. They are visual examples of how to live when tired, be kind when others are not, control anger, discipline with love, ask for forgiveness, grow spiritually, deal with

temptation, and live in community.

Further, a relationship with Jesus Christ is held as the most significant relationship to cultivate, and the one that brings meaning and healing to all other relationships.

Youth campers often return home talking about their counselors and what they did with the young people they got to know. Counselors are their heroes, models, and friends. The 24-hour, living relationship with campers allows counselors in a typical week of camp to have more time to minister to campers than youth pastors have in a year, and as much quality time as parents have in six months.

The bonding that occurs through living, playing, worshipping, facing challenges, and learning together internalizes values taught and translates experience into character formation. Whereas young people view parents as a generation removed, they see counselors as contemporaries who understand their needs.

Youth and adults aspire to be like those slightly older who model success to them. When these models take an interest in them and share their lives, campers emulate their behaviors. Parents wonder at changes that occur in behavior and appearance of their children upon their return from camp, only to recognize those same features when they meet their kids' counselors.

The influence for change is great at camp, where relationships are valued. Jesus, our model for ministry, disciplined His 12 by living and traveling with them in a relational ministry.

4. Memory Making

Temporariness makes camp a unique experience and a memory-making opportunity. Because camp is a contrast to everyday life, and because this contrast heightens campers' senses, time takes on new meaning. Campers live more in the psychological present. Events at camp become more engaging, alive, and vivid; they are filled with energy and totally absorb campers.

free His chosen people from the physical and spiritual slavery of Egypt.

2. Whole-Person Ministry

While many institutions focus on a certain dimension of the person, camp is designed to minister to the whole person. Churches minister spiritually, schools educate mentally, the home and peers influence socially, and athletic programs help individuals develop physically.

In Luke 2:52, we learn that Jesus grew in wisdom (mentally), stature (physically), and favor with God (spiritually) and men (socially). When He entered our existence, Jesus experienced human development and grew in all dimensions.

Camp, in the midst of God's glorious creation, is an ideal environment for whole-person ministry. His creation, which reveals His existence and eternal power, is a source of continuous study and investigation; we can never uncover all of

Camp powerfully communicates spiritual truths and spurs spiritual growth among campers as they spend time in the midst of God's creation.

Because most camp experiences are beyond the traditional and familiar, they provide moments that render campers ready for learning.

Struggling with new games, adventure activities, wilderness trips, difficult peers, wet, cold, heat, darkness, disappointments, camp duties, and separation from home and friends add to the variety and intensity of these experiences. These teachable moments open doors of opportunity for camp leaders to present spiritual truth.

Spiritual truth comes from many sources: modeling by counselors and other staff or campers, recall of past truths learned and songs heard, intentional reflection on the experience led by counselors or other staff, and regular spiritual input at Bible studies, chapel, and so forth. A sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's prompting and a heart to see campers learn through each special experience are key to intentionally using these ideal moments to teach.

Jesus taught in this manner. He used special events and situations that prepared His disciples for learning: the hungry 5,000, the storm on Galilee, the demon-possessed man, those in need of healing, the barren fig tree, a vista of Jerusalem, the 10 lepers, the death of a friend, a beggar, and so forth. His messages usually flowed out of the life experiences and accompanying felt needs of His students, and then He carefully addressed deeper needs.

The products of heightened senses, total engagement, and readiness to learn—combined with spiritual truths attached to these memory-making experiences—are life-shaping memories.

God used this process with the Old Testament Hebrews. They never forgot the crossing of the Red Sea, the water from the rock, the military battles won and lost—and the spiritual truths presented on these and other occasions. Their memories were refreshed through yearly feasts and ceremonies, tassels sewn in garments, stones of remembrance, and the like.

Jesus used this process with His disciples. They never forgot the miraculous experiences He shared with them, or the truths He attached to such experiences, often related through parables.

Camp is a distinct and intense experience that will forever stand out from other life experiences in campers' memories. It offers the opportunity to attach spiritual truths to memory-making experiences. After they have long since returned home, when memories of camp return, campers also remember the spiritual truths and are moved to respond to those truths.

5. Leadership Development

A camp counselor (or cabin leader) is a leader in the making. Camps are ideal nurturing environments for developing leaders for church and society.

Where else are young people given the opportunity for leadership development? To build leadership skills, people must be given responsibility for others and be mentored in the process of ministering and leading. Very few opportunities exist for young people to be given significant responsibility for others, especially responsibility to minister to others. If structured properly, with focused training present, a camp can provide that ideal opportunity.

A camp cabin unit of 6 to 10 campers provides an ideal group through which the cabin leader/counselor can learn leadership skills. But the cabin leader/counselor must be given the opportunity to lead—to make decisions, and to succeed or fail in those decisions.

Cabin leaders/counselors need to be given as much responsibility as they can handle to stretch them and provide a chance for them to try out their leadership styles. They also need support when they fail, and continuous feedback from peers and mentors to learn from their mistakes.

Emerging leaders need to discover three proofs—proof of self, proof of learning, and proof of God. Camp can provide an ideal crucible to test one's capabil-

ities and expose weaknesses, and to sort out and prove what they've learned is consistent with reality and actually works. It's a chance to discover God in a deeper way, and to see His faithfulness to His promises in tough situations. Jesus' three-year "travel camp" experience with His disciples did just that.

The 2007 CCCA *Industry Survey of Christian Camps and Conferences* noted that two in five camp executive directors had committed their lives to full-time ministry at camp, and 22 percent had become Christians during a camp experience. Clearly, camp is a worthwhile investment.

Camp is a powerful tool for ministry and leadership development because it closely follows a pattern of ministry used by our Lord and embraces five closely held values consistent with His ministry.

The Values of Christian Camping: In the United States

Ask about the values of Christian camping, and you'll get a host of responses. The following are a sampling of what campers, parents, pastors, and Christian camping leaders from across the United States appreciate about camp ministry.

- ➔ Appreciation for God's creative work in nature
- ➔ Unhurried time to contemplate the truth of God's Word
- ➔ Relaxation and renewal in a pleasant and supportive environment

—Dr. Dick Turner, coordinator of a camp outdoor education program

- ➔ Christian community is lived.
- ➔ Campers learn independence, and how to manage their lives away from home.

When we are engaged in archery, swimming, canoeing, and crafts, we have opportunities to learn how to treat others fairly, to exercise control over our bodies, to create, and to play.



[Camp is a] chance to move out of the comfort zone—to be stretched, to be challenged, and to develop a deeper trust in God.

- ➔ A thankful spirit is fostered where the essentials of life are in different supply.

—Barb Anderson, parent of campers and third-generation camper

- ➔ Chance to move out of the comfort zone—to be stretched, to be challenged, and to develop a deeper trust in God
- ➔ Solitude and community: a balance that reveals the value and necessity of both
- ➔ Opportunity for action and reflection, and learning how to balance the two and reflect on our lives to learn from experience

—Lizzie Gosden, wilderness leader, United States and South Africa

- ➔ Commitment to a biblical lifestyle
- ➔ Respect for other cultures
- ➔ The value of the learning process

—Dr. David Klopfenstein, who formerly oversaw an extensive camping ministry for inner-city youth

- ➔ Environment and structure to learn and live out Christian values with an anchor in God's Word
- ➔ Opportunity to learn about and enjoy God's created world, to understand how God's creation fits into His plan
- ➔ A foundation for life in experiences, relationships, and memories on which to build

—Sam Gray, former president of Christian Service Brigade, with 50 years of involvement in Christian camping

- ➔ A wholesome, interactive learning environment away from daily hassles, struggles, and worldly influences for reflection, listening to God, refreshment, and much, much more

- ➔ An experience that integrates real living and godly encouragement to be Christ-like in an affirming, Christ-centered community that lives the gospel in day-to-day situations

- ➔ Allows people to experience a non-status, accepting environment where they are not distinguished by profession, money, and so forth

—Timber-lee Christian Center (East Troy, Wisc.) staff

- ➔ Deepening our relationship with God
- ➔ Testing and strengthening our Christian walk and faith
- ➔ Learning how to work together as a team to get something done

—Hannah Gentry, multi-year camper

- ➔ Establishment of devotions and prayer life
- ➔ Setting, attempting, and achieving goals that might not have been accomplished elsewhere
- ➔ Developing an appreciation for the environment and natural beauty of God's creation

—Harry Agabedis, educational administrator

- ➔ Seeing our problems against the backdrop of God's creation and might
- ➔ Learning things about ourselves through the stress of wilderness experiences
- ➔ Developing new, practical skills that we can use for a lifetime

—Rev. John Casey, pastor

The Values of Christian Camping: Around the World

Christian camping is a movement through which God has chosen to extend His kingdom into every

part of the world. Christian camps exist in more than 90 countries. Christian Camping International connects many countries through an alliance of organized national and regional associations.

Here international leaders address the key values of Christian camping:

Bob McKemey, former director of Okutama Bible Chalet in Japan, says camping is the greatest tool of the church for doing evangelism in the pagan culture of Japan.

Janet Hardie, director of Rocklands Centre in South Africa, says camping has been a major tool for reconciliation of racial tensions for the youth and adults of South Africa.

Dinho Pereira, veteran camping leader in Brazil, says Christian camps attract youth who are not permitted by their religious background to attend evangelical churches.

Tim Long, former director of Carey Park Christian Camp in New Zealand, sees camping as a means of producing strong moral leaders for a rapidly decaying society.

Alexander Kharitonov, Ph.D., president of CCI/Russia, desires that camping help reclaim for Christ people who have lived under an atheistic philosophy for decades. ➔

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