

LIBERTY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

EPIC FAMILIES: EQUIPPING PARENTS TO RECLAIM THEIR BIBLICAL
MANDATE WHILE INSPIRING CHILDREN TO KNOW AND LOVE THE GOD
WHO MADE THEM

A Thesis Project Submitted to

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by

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LIBERTY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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ABSTRACT

EPIC FAMILIES: EQUIPPING PARENTS TO RECLAIM THEIR BIBLICAL
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Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012

Mentor: Dr. Michael Mitchell

A review of current literature demonstrates that there is a fundamental problem in the church today: the church has taken on the primary role of discipling children, while many parents have abrogated their biblical mandate as outlined in Deuteronomy 6:6-9. Surveys of parents as well as practical ministry experience confirm that great confusion exists among parents as to the scope of their biblical responsibilities. This project reviews historical perspectives and the present situation in the church and offers guidance to both parents and ministry professionals to help parents reclaim their God-given responsibilities.

Abstract length: 93 words

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the many people who have stood by my side during many long years of ministry and study. First of all, I have to thank God who rocked my world eleven years ago when I put my trust in Jesus; it has been an amazing journey! To my husband, Cary, who has put up with long ministry hours and a much expanded “family” and provided the financial support that has made this possible; I love and appreciate you. To each of my children and grandchildren: Rachel, Matthew, Joshua, Daniel, Jonathan, Benjamin, and Hannah; thank you for making life an adventure and for providing me with inspiration for my ministry. To the men of God who have challenged and motivated me to be all God created me to be and to never be afraid to go out on a limb with the Holy Spirit by my side: Rev. William Walker, Dr. David Wheeler, Rev. Allen Perdue, Dr. Michael Mitchell, and Dr. David Appleby; I wouldn’t be where I am today if it were not for your guidance and mentoring. And, of course, to the many children whom I have had the privilege of serving over the years; you are not only the future of the church; you all have a vital role to play today. Thank you! I love you all!

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Chapter One

Introduction: Children in God's Plan

“Jesus loves me this I know; for the Bible says it’s so. Little ones to Him belong; they are weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.”¹ Sung in Sunday schools for generations, this classic children’s hymn affirms that children are special to Jesus. The chorus repeats many essential facts: the Bible is true; Jesus loves His children; children belong to Him; when they are weak, He is strong.

Many parents who grew up attending church fondly remember singing that song. They may, in fact, sing it with their own children. Times have changed, however, since the verses of that song were penned; life is not as simple. The biblical premises that were accepted by parents and children of previous generations are no longer in force. Not only is the veracity of the Bible questioned, but many fallacies compete with biblical truths in the lives of both children and parents.

Today’s children are not raised in a bubble. In 21st century America, children are bombarded with worldly wisdom, and tempted at earlier ages with things that would have stunned parents of previous generations. Many of these challenges come during the ages

¹ William Bradbury and Anna Bartlett Warner, 1862.
http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Jesus_Loves_Me/

of 10-13, when pre- and young teens are especially moldable and teachable. “By age 14, [kids’] moral development tapers off significantly; in other words, [their] hard-wired ethics are fairly well established. Kids with strong character grounding in their formative years are far more likely to make good ethical choices into adulthood.”¹ Children need a firm foundation, established throughout their lives, in order to meet the challenges of today’s world.

The foundation built during their formative years, however, does more than develop children who can make good ethical or moral choices. Beliefs that are cultivated during the early years can either point a child to or away from eternal life. Jesus loves children and wants them to come to Him², but He uses parents and other godly adults to shepherd and guide them on the path of righteousness. In fact, “the great hope for ... culture and people living in it is... Jesus Christ. Sadly, though [the church] has forgotten one thing. Jesus never said, ‘Bring your children to church so the professionals can lead them spiritually.’ The plan from the beginning has been for the church and family to work together for the spiritual formation of the next generation.”³

Those of us in church ministry are increasingly seeing parents who view church as one of the “checklist items’ that they fit into a busy schedule each week. The world has become so busy that, even for pastors’ families, there is a pressure to fit in social, sports, and academic activities while maintaining an intimate relationship with God and an overarching godly focus and worldview. I know that I have felt this pressure myself, and I am a children’s pastor. In the midst of all this hurriedness, parents have looked to the church

¹Alan Nelson, The 10/13 Window. *Children’s Ministry*, Volume 19, Issue 2, May/June 2009, 61-62.

²Matt. 19:13-15.

³Bryan Haynes, quoted in Jennifer Hooks, “One Home at a Time,” *Children’s Ministry*, Volume 19, Issue 3, July/August 2009, 91-93.

for answers and spiritual nourishment. As a result, they have forgotten how to feed themselves and their children. While they should be teaching their children the words and ways of the Lord, they remain as babes themselves, unable or unwilling to do more.⁴

The church, for its part, has picked up the slack, become quite consumer-oriented, and presented programs and curriculums to lead children in righteousness. Those churches with the most dazzling children's departments are often the best attended churches in their communities. But, frequently, they are not producing committed Christ-followers. Recent surveys show that upwards of 61% of young adults will leave church.⁵ No doubt, there are many reasons for this, but the church's unbiblical role as the primary spiritual teacher of children must certainly play a part, as must the relinquishing of this essential role by parents. The church dropout rate for teens and young adults might not be so high if true disciples were being formed. How can we expect God to bless our efforts if they are contrary to His teachings on familial discipleship?

Ed Stetzer puts it starkly, "There is no easy way to say it, but it must be said. Parents and churches are not passing on a robust Christian faith and an accompanying commitment to the church. We can take some solace in the fact that many do eventually return. But, Christian parents and churches need to ask the hard question, "What is it about our faith commitment that does not find root in the lives of our children?"⁶ In other words, what type of biblical leadership are we showing in the church and in our homes? And why is it so ineffective?

⁴Heb. 5:12-13.

⁵Ken Ham and Britt Beemer, *Already Gone*, (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009), 19.

⁶Ibid., 144.

Lessons from Road Kill

God has provided me with many interesting lessons in spiritual leadership. One spring morning a couple of years ago, my husband and I loaded the kids in the car and headed out for a week's vacation. Shortly after we had merged onto Interstate 95, we noticed what we thought was a tire retread making its way across the highway. As we got closer, we realized with horror that it was not a retread, but a mother duck and her ducklings waddling across the busy roadway. There was no way for us to avoid her without endangering ourselves and others, so our car ran over the mother duck. The ducklings immediately stopped because their leader had stopped. The two cars behind us flattened what was left of the ducklings. Our children were crying, and my husband and I felt terrible. As I prayed and begged God for some redemptive value in this tragedy, a lesson on leadership came to my mind: those who lead had better know where they are headed; those who follow had better make sure the one they follow is going the right way.

This lesson is applicable not only to mother ducks and ducklings; it is applicable to parents as well. For much of their formative years, children put unconditional trust in their parents and elders. Unlike a mother duck, parents operate on more than sheer instinct; made in the image of God, they possess the ability to think, reason, love, and to have faith. They are morally responsible for the truths or untruths they present to their children. Ultimately, parents are either leading their children to the light or into the darkness, pointing them to eternal life or eternal damnation.

Although parents love their children, they are often puzzled about how to introduce them to Jesus and how to disciple them in His ways. A blessing from the Lord, children bring with them a variety of challenges. Most parents want what is best for their progeny, and parents who know the Lord surely desire that their children have a relationship with their Creator and Savior. Knowing in theory what is right and good for their children is one thing; practical application of these truths in daily life is altogether a different challenge, especially in today's society. How does one raise a child to love and fear the Lord? Is imparting biblical truths and precepts the job of the parents or of the church?

Lessons from History's Wisest King

Solomon's stated purpose for the Book of Proverbs provides some insight. The Proverbs are "for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young."⁷ Written to address a variety of situations and to a wide audience, Proverbs is a wonderful primer for all aspects of godly living and parenting. Proverbs 22:6 exhorts, "Train a child in the way he should go. . ."

But what does it mean to train a child? The word used by Solomon, the Hebrew *chanak*, appears in the Old Testament four other times, in three verses of Scripture. In these instances (Deut 20:5, 1 Kings 8:63, 2 Ch. 7:5), *chanak* is translated as "dedicate" and is related to sacrificing or dedicating something to the Lord.⁸ Used as a verb with an object, the English word, *train*, is defined as developing or forming thoughts, habits, or

⁷Prov. 1:2-4, NKJV.

⁸ <http://BlueLetterBible.org/search/translationResults.cfm?Strong's=H2596>.

behavior through discipline and instruction; to make proficient by instruction and practice, and to make a person fit by proper exercise, diet, and practice.⁹ Training children, therefore, involves using instruction and discipline to mold their thoughts, habits, and behavior in a godly fashion. The goal of training them in godliness is to make them spiritually fit and healthy by providing a steady diet of spiritual exercise and practice. Based on the other uses of *chanak*, training may also include dedicating children to the Lord in a formal sense as well as in daily life activities.

Lessons from Moses

Moses was certainly a proponent of living a life dedicated to the Lord. He reminded the Israelites of this responsibility just after he had reiterated the Ten Commandments to the second generation of Israelites, those about to enter the Promised Land. After he reiterated the Ten Commandments, he stressed the importance of intentionally allowing God's word to permeate all aspects of their lives and stressed their parental responsibility to impart these truths to their children and future generations. Moses' admonition to parents could not have been more clear, "Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them."¹⁰

Additionally, he affirmed that parents bear the responsibility of rearing their children in a godly manner. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 clearly states that parents must train their children in God's ways, in and out of the home, at play and at rest. "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your

⁹<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/train>.

¹⁰Deut. 4: 9-10.

children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”¹¹

Lessons from the New Testament

Nothing in the New Testament alters Moses’s admonitions. In fact, Jesus affirms and reinforces the importance of children to God. When His disciples asked Him who was the greatest in heaven, Jesus called a child over and used him as an object lesson to the adults. “[He] set him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea’.”¹² He clearly reveres children and cautions those who would seek to harm them spiritually. Jesus also spoke harshly to His disciples when they sought to prevent children from interrupting important adult business, stating, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”¹³

Paul also affirms that, while children are to obey their parents, parents are to give serious heed to raising their children in God’s ways. He specifically instructs fathers to

¹¹Deut. 6:6-9.

¹²Matt. 18:1-6.

¹³Matt. 19:14.

raise their children in the Lord's training and admonition, which includes the wisdom imparted by Moses, Solomon, and Jesus.¹⁴ Jude implores his readers to "contend earnestly for the faith."¹⁵ Certainly, this includes passing on the baton of faith to one's children. The Bible is clear; parents are to teach their children about the Lord in their household and in the course of their daily lives.

The Situation Today

While biblical precepts do not change over time, parenting styles, patterns of teaching, and societal mores have changed substantially since the Bible was penned. Pressure to conform to worldly views is enormous, both for parents and children. American society has continued to drift further and further away from God-honoring practices. Behaviors that God considers to be abominations are revered, while Christian beliefs are mocked. Children taught in public schools receive a daily inundation of worldly doctrine. Children cannot even turn on the television or browse the internet without encountering, at best, worldly paradigms or, at worst, pornography or other assaults on godly mores. They and their parents are bombarded daily with politically correct admonitions and worldviews. Raising godly children in the 21st century in America is a complicated task.¹⁶

In the midst of this secular assault on the church, contemporary American Christians have largely abrogated their biblically ordained responsibility. The busyness of daily life, academics, extracurricular activities, and the need for two incomes have left parents with

¹⁴Eph. 6:1-4.

¹⁵Jude 1:4.

¹⁶George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, (Ventura, Ca: Regal, 2003), 21-24.

little time and energy to share spiritual truths with their children with needed fervor and consistency. Satan has successfully hoodwinked parents and children into shifting their focus from godly pursuits to secular activities that may not be sinful in their own right, but that serve as a diversion from the things of eternal consequence. Church has just become one activity among many that parents and children attend. Just as parents rely on professional advice in many areas of child-rearing, they have also come to depend upon professionals within the church to “teach -Jesus” to their children.

As parental expectations of Christian education have shifted to the church, the church has readily complied, developing many programs designed to impart Christian truths to children: VBS, AWANA, children’s church, Sunday school, and church camp, to name a few. Christian educators have become the “experts,” while parents have become increasingly bewildered about how to pass on the baton of faith to their children.

There is nothing wrong with churches teaching biblical stories and precepts to children; in fact, that is a good thing. However, the church should not be the primary or sole source of this information to children. The church’s role should be an adjunct role, partnering with and supporting parents as they raise their children to know and love the Lord.

Some churches and Sunday school curriculums recognize this and are reticent to offer a gospel presentation to children, correctly reasoning that it is the parent’s responsibility to lead their own children to love and serve the Lord. Some include a monthly program for parents and children, designed to stimulate family discussions and bring parents into

the fold.¹⁷ These are steps in the right direction, but are still program- and church-oriented rather than parent-oriented.

Many contemporary parents feel ill-equipped to disciple their kids on their own because they are baby-Christians, or have been reared in a church-focused system of discipleship. Others have become so accustomed to outsourcing every aspect of their children's education to experts, that they willingly outsource their children's Christian education as well. Most parents today are so caught up in society's harried pace that they purposefully or inadvertently neglect their biblical responsibility to their children.

These circumstances set up a situation where no-one is leading children to Christ and intentionally discipling them. Because of this, the church risks creating a lost generation. By replacing the parents as the primary imparter of Christian truths to children, churches are missing an opportunity to disciple and educate parents and partner with them in mentoring the next generation of God's people.

In addition, many churches and parents are ignorant satanic devices designed to keep children in darkness. The evangelical church does not do a good job of educating parents about strongholds the enemy can place on their lives and the lives of their children. Satan has done a superb job of keeping the church and parents in the dark about his methods and devices. Surveys confirm that children (and parents) are woefully ignorant of basic biblical truths, such as the deity of Jesus, the Trinity, the reality of the devil and hell, and the way of salvation.¹⁸ A change must take place; churches must equip parents to reclaim

¹⁷See www.kidstuf252.com.

¹⁸Barna, 38.

their biblical mandate, lead their children to love and serve the Lord, and overcome the enemy so that they and their children can live abundant lives in Christ.

The enemy is crafty and has used many devices both within the church and society to keep parents from fulfilling their God-given parental role in their children's spiritual upbringing. John warned his readers: "For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world."¹⁹ Satan skillfully uses each one of these entities to distract believers from the Lord's plan for their lives. Parents and children today stand at risk of strongholds through busy-ness, moral relativism, political correctness, sinful behavior, and an obsession with the occult that is so prevalent in contemporary society. The church has largely been asleep as a future generation drifts away from the truth. The time to wake up is now, before it is too late.

Statements of Limitations and Methodology

The research portion of this project accepts as its premise that the church is at risk of losing a future generation of Christians. It also focuses on developing a plan to equip parents to disciple their children, and implementing a sixty-day pilot program for reclaiming the current generation of children. Churched parents and children made up my primary research groups. I recognize that not everyone who is churched is a Christ-follower by the biblical definition (one who has accepted Christ as Lord and Savior and seeks to follow Him daily). Although most people participating in my study attend evangelical, Bible-believing, Protestant churches, some families within my sphere of influence, who have either left church or who attend churches other than evangelical

¹⁹1 John 2:16 NKJV.

Protestant churches, also chose to participate. I trust that the Holy Spirit can use the survey and study to bring Himself glory and honor, whether the participants are currently churched or not.

This study accepts that Scripture dictates it is the parents' responsibility to train their children in God's ways. Therefore, the study infers that Christian parents are indeed capable of teaching their children to know, love, and serve the Lord. It also assumes that the Lord will honor parents' efforts to raise their children to be godly young men and women. If the parents' hearts are right with the Lord, they love Him, and they desire their children to love Him, and are willing to do whatever is in their power to point the children in God's direction, God will bless their prayers and efforts.

As a premise, this study also understands that foolishness is bound up in the hearts of children, and that they need to be intentionally instructed and disciplined in God's ways.²⁰ It will accept the premises that children are indeed special to the Lord Jesus and that He longs for them to come to Him.

While my primary focus is children, my study also focuses on parents and families, as these are the primary vehicles that the Lord uses to pass on the baton of faith to children. Since I minister in a church, most of my contacts are the families whom I serve. This covers a broad range of ages: parents in their twenties through forties, and children from preschool through high school age.

The pilot program is a home-based plan, designed to encourage and equip parents to fulfill their mandate as defined in Deuteronomy 6: 6-9. It includes suggested Bible studies, activities, and assignments for parents to complete with their children. A post-program assessment was used to help determine its effectiveness; this will allow me to

²⁰Prov. 22:15.

trouble shoot and perhaps make changes to future ministry ventures. Although I use the word “program,” this is not a typical church-based program. It is designed to facilitate an organic return to a biblical form of child discipleship. I expect that this program could be successfully used by evangelical Protestant churches to partner with parents, returning parents to their biblical role and transitioning the church into a supporting role, more consistent with its historical role.

Theoretical and Biblical Basis for the Project

In Old Testament times and the days of the early church, the job of teaching children about the Lord fell squarely on the shoulders of parents. Through Moses, God told fathers and mothers that they were to have His words and precepts on their hearts and pass them along to the next generation. These admonitions bear repeating: “teach them diligently to your children, and...talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”²¹ Clearly, the Lord’s words were to permeate every facet of home life, each and every day. The Shema strongly implied that biblical truths and precepts should be taught to children simply throughout the course of the day, as parents went about the daily tasks and activities of life.

Spare the rod; spoil the child

In Proverbs, Solomon reinforces the wisdom of placing all aspects of life under the sovereignty of God. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”²² Solomon consistently encourages parents to discipline

²¹Deut. 6:6-9, NKJV.

²²Prov. 1:7, NIV.

and train their children, using a rod if necessary: “He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly.”²³ Scripture warns of serious consequences for those who do not comply. Solomon says, “The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left *to himself* brings shame to his mother” and exhorts parents to “...not withhold correction from a child; for *if* you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell.”²⁴ A parent’s action or inaction can bring blessings or disastrous consequences.

The same precepts given to parents by Moses and Solomon can also be applied to Christian parents today. Every aspect of daily life should be under the Lord’s umbrella. His word should be in the hearts of parents and should be intentionally taught to their children through everyday happenings. Godly fathers and mothers in Moses’ day would likely find contemporary practices such as Sunday school or children’s church quite strange in the absence of daily training in the word of God.

Essentials: faith and the armor of God

The mandate to teach one’s children about the Lord is repeated in Ephesians. Paul reminds children to honor and obey their parents then tells fathers to bring their children up in the training and admonition of the Lord rather than provoking them.²⁵ Later in the same chapter, Paul exhorts his readers to enlist the Lord’s protection by putting on the full armor of God so that they will be ready to respond to spiritual attacks when they come. He reminds them that their battle is not against flesh and blood but rather against

²³Prov. 13:24.

²⁴Prov. 23:13-14; 29:15.

²⁵Eph. 6: 1-4.

powers, principalities, and spiritual forces of wickedness.²⁶ Coming right on the heels of Paul's admonition to parents about child-rearing, this warning should be taken seriously by Christian parents.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.²⁷

Parents should take Paul's advice seriously. The fact that so many professing Christians remain clueless about clothing their children in the Lord's armor indicates that the enemy is presently winning the battle. Unless children are intentionally brought up in the training and admonition of the Lord, their spiritual nakedness will render them easy targets of Satan and his minions.

To protect themselves and their children from the devil's schemes, parents must be prepared. The list of armor with which parents should arm themselves and their children is extensive: truth, righteousness, salvation, knowledge of the gospel, and faith. These characteristics provide the Christian's defensive armor.

Paul stresses the importance of faith in the Christian's defensive armor. Paul states that Christians *above all* need the shield of faith to defend against the enemy's attacks. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. "He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."²⁸ Jesus also spoke

²⁶Eph. 6:10-12.

²⁷Eph. 6: 13-24 NKJV.

²⁸Heb. 11:6.

about the importance of faith: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.”²⁹ Jesus spoke frequently about faith and the lack of faith; He performed many miracles on the basis of the recipient’s faith, including instances in which He healed children based on the faith of their parents.³⁰

The Bible also states that God justifies those who have faith in Jesus.³¹ Faith is a life and death matter; with it, Christians can trust in their salvation, experience healing, mourn with hope, and live in complete trust, resting in the Lord’s promises. Without faith, people cannot please God, face eternity apart from Him, and are vulnerable to the enemy. Christian parents have a responsibility to pass on their faith to their children and prepare them to defend themselves against evil. Paul does not imply that attacks *may* come; he implies that they *will* come.

The word of God and prayer

Two other essential weapons with which parents can arm themselves and their children are offensive weapons: the sword of the Spirit and prayer. The sword of the Spirit, the word of God, serves to protect children in many ways. Memorization of God’s word will protect them from sin: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”³² The writer of Hebrews states that God’s word is powerful and sharper

²⁹John 5:24.

³⁰Matt. 8:10; 15: 28.

³¹Rom. 3:26.

³²Psalms 119:11, NIV.

than any two-edged sword and is a discerner of thoughts and intents of the heart.³³ Knowledge of God's word is essential to take thoughts captive to Christ, which effectively thwarts the enemy's attacks.³⁴ It is interesting to note that when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he countered each attack with Scripture. The craftiness of the enemy in this encounter with Jesus also should be noted; each time Satan was rebuked by Jesus with one verse of Scripture, he tried a different approach. Only after several rebukes by Jesus did he depart. Interestingly, Satan did not give up; he merely regrouped: "Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time."³⁵ This should serve as a stark warning to Christians; children and their parents remain vulnerable when their knowledge of Scripture is weak.

Paul also admonishes his readers to pray. Prayer harnesses and releases God's power.³⁶ The Bible contains many examples of miracles on behalf of children in response to the prayers of their parents. Samuel, conceived as a result of the fervent, sincere, and sacrificial prayer of his mother, Hannah, considered it sinful not to pray for his (spiritual) children. Jairus' daughter was brought back to life in response to his request. A Canaanite woman's demonized daughter was instantly set free from her tormentors.³⁷

³³Heb. 4:12.

³⁴2 Cor. 10:4-5.

³⁵Luke 4:13.

³⁶Eph. 1:19.

³⁷Elmer Towns and Dave Earley, *Praying for Your Children*, (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image: 2010), 14.

Repeatedly in the Old Testament, the Lord warns that He will curse, to the third and fourth generation, those who hate Him, but show mercy to thousands, to those who love and keep His commandments.³⁸ The earnest prayers of parents on behalf of their children will transcend their and their children's generation. Jesus encourages His followers to ask, seek, and knock, and He promises an answer to prayer.³⁹ Prayer is perhaps the greatest gift parents can give to their children. Persistent, fervent prayers that they will love, honor, and serve the Lord all the days of their lives will empower and protect them in ways that defy the limits of imagination.

Historical Basis for Project

The Bible affirms that “sons are a heritage from the Lord; children are a blessing from Him, and the man who has many children (a quiver full) will be happy.”⁴⁰ Most biblical families were large. To the Israelites, many children constituted a great honor and blessing from the Lord; barrenness was considered disgraceful and a sign of the Lord's displeasure.⁴¹ They believed that all children are planned by God and should be graciously accepted into the family. They affirmed that God opened and closed wombs and guided children into the world.⁴² Pagan practices such as infanticide and sacrificing one's children to the gods, were considered abominations.⁴³

³⁸Deut. 5:8-10.

³⁹Matt. 7:7-8.

⁴⁰Psalms 127: 3, 5.

⁴¹Roy B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 46-47.

⁴²Ibid, 47.

⁴³Mic. 6:7.

Abortion, while not specifically discussed by name in Scripture, was nevertheless debated in ancient society.⁴⁴ Scripture provides many sound reasons for preserving life in the womb. The Bible states that individuals are both formed and called while in the womb; babies in the womb are not differentiated from those outside the womb. The Mosaic Code demanded adult life for fetal life, denoting equality. The Incarnate Jesus was still the second member of the Trinity while in Mary's womb. So, while abortion is not specifically condemned by name, a resounding argument can be made from Scripture that it was considered to be murder.⁴⁵ Both Philo and Josephus in their writings declared abortion to be a mortal crime and deserving of death.⁴⁶ This underscores the importance that God places on infants and children.

God's very first command to Adam and Eve was to be fruitful and multiply; biblical families consisted of fathers, mothers, and many children. Children were to honor, respect, and obey their parents. They also were expected to imitate and learn from their mothers and fathers.⁴⁷ The father's responsibilities to his children, along with their mother, were many. The father, as the head of the family, was to lead; he was responsible for their bodily and spiritual welfare along with his wife.⁴⁸ Parents were also to pray for their children, dedicate them to the Lord, love, encourage, and discipline them. They also were to enjoy their little ones and lead them to love and worship the Lord.⁴⁹ Children who

⁴⁴Zuck, 72-73.

⁴⁵Isa. 49:5; Gen. 25:22; Ex. 21:22-25; Gal. 4:4 as quoted in Zuck, 75-77.

⁴⁶Zuck, 73.

⁴⁷Ibid., 166-17.

⁴⁸Ibid., 107.

⁴⁹Ibid., 112-115.

saw their parents worshipping would ask questions; opportunities for sharing about the Lord, His precepts, miracles, and faithfulness would follow.

In biblical times, faith and worship were family ventures. Whole families participated in the gatherings to celebrate and remember God's deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery, to thank Him for his bountiful goodness towards them, and to seek His forgiveness and make atonement for sins.⁵⁰ In the account given by Luke of Jesus' childhood pilgrimage to the temple at Passover, Scripture indicates that both nuclear and extended families traveled together to worship the Lord.⁵¹

Once Jesus began his ministry, He also placed a high priority on children. Many accounts of Jesus' ministry indicate that children typically were present along with their parents.⁵² Jesus readily responded to pleas from parents to heal their children or drive demons from them.⁵³ He rebuked his disciples for shooing away parents who brought their children to Jesus to be blessed, stating, "Let the little children come to me; and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven."⁵⁴ Jesus also told adults that they must become as little children to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.⁵⁵ Clearly he valued the unabashed trust, faith, dependence, and perhaps, curiosity of children.

In the Epistles, Paul addresses adults and children in his letters with some instructions addressed to parents, some to children, and some to all. Scripture does not have separate

⁵⁰Scottie May, and Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell. *Children Matter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005), 131.

⁵¹Luke 2:41.

⁵²Matt. 15:38.

⁵³Matt. 17:14-18; Mark 7:25-30.

⁵⁴Matt. 19:13-14.

⁵⁵Matt. 18:15.

letters to adult believers, teen believers, and children; all are addressed together. It seems almost unimaginable that Jesus or Paul would have segregated children in age-appropriate classrooms while adults carried on the important business of church.

Contemporary Considerations

Yet, today this seems to have become the norm in all but the smallest churches. The result has been that parents and their kids have little in common when it comes to experiencing God together in church. In many ways, this reflects other segments of society, where children are separated from adults. This also has likely increased the gap between parents and children when it comes to spiritual matters and has chipped away at parent's confidence and desire to reclaim their biblical role as the primary disciplers of their children.

The problem is definitely multi-faceted; although the shifting of children's discipleship from parents to third parties plays a major role. Children's ideas about the world form quite early in life, and when they are not nurtured and pointed in the right direction, they will stray from the faith or form unbiblical notions about life and God. In non-western societies, children are perceived to be of little value; in western countries, the pendulum swings to the opposite extreme, and children are almost idolized. While parents shun their biblical roles as the primary spiritual influencer of their children, they spare no expense to expose their children to the best schools, sports, and extra-curricular activities. Churches have recognized the quality parents seek and have structured elaborate children's church programs to meet their needs, but their zeal may be misplaced. Increasingly, children see the things taught in church as irrelevant to their lives, regardless of their entertainment value.

Early intervention is essential

As a people ordained by God to sow seeds of faith in their children's lives, Christians need to close the spiritual gap between parents and children. The urgency of this need cannot be overstated. Even secular studies show that children's personalities are "set" by first grade, since the characteristics exhibited by six year-olds provide strong indicators of their adult personalities. In a study set to be published in the journal, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, researchers examined four areas of personality: verbal fluency, adaptability, impulsiveness, and self-minimizing behavior (excessive humility). Christopher Nave, a principal investigator in the study, found that, although life circumstances might affect behavior, basic personality characteristics were set by first grade and did not change in adulthood.⁵⁶ While this study takes the perspective that personality is biologically driven, it also underscores the importance of childhood in influencing adult beliefs and behaviors. A similar comparison can be made for spiritual matters.

Just as biological factors contribute to character, which is formed while one is young, spiritual DNA is also crystalized at a young age. Indeed, studies compiled by Christian researcher George Barna indicate that children's spiritual identities are formed early in life. Barna has conducted extensive research regarding the age at which children accept Jesus as their Savior. His research highlights the importance of imparting spiritual truths to young people and offering them the opportunity to embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior. According to Barna, the probability of someone accepting Jesus as his or her Savior is "32 percent for those between the ages of 5 and 12; 4 percent for those in the

⁵⁶ <http://www.livescience.com/culture/children-personality-adults-100804.html>.

13-18 age range; and 6 percent for people 19 or older. In other words, if people do not embrace Jesus as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim.”⁵⁷

Barna laments the fact that, although thousands of people embrace Christ as their Savior each year, the total number of Christians is not growing. New Christians are simply replacing those who die or renounce their faith. More disturbing, the number of children who are evangelical believers is less than the number of adults who identify themselves so: just 4 percent of 13-year-olds define themselves as evangelicals compared to 6 percent of adults. Of the group he surveyed, 34 percent of the 13-year-olds he surveyed were born again, compared to 38 percent found among adults. His research shows that the spiritual condition of teens and adolescents today is more precarious than it was a few decades ago. Barna also concludes, based on twenty-five years of conducting surveys among children and adults, that the worldview of 13-year-olds is not likely to change as they age.⁵⁸ His research should quicken the hearts of parent and Christian educators. The best time to reach a soul for Christ is when that soul is tender. Why are we not doing more?

The news gets worse. Even among those children and teens who attend church, many have spiritually checked-out, or “already gone” as Ken Ham puts it. In his book by the same title, Ham compiles extensive research of young adults and examines why they left church. Ham considers this spiritual apathy among young adults to be an epidemic, affecting an astounding two-thirds of church kids, who find church and spiritual

⁵⁷Barna, 36.

⁵⁸Ibid., 34.

matters to be irrelevant to their everyday lives. He found that the “Sunday School Syndrome,” the telling of biblical stories to the kids absent solid apologetics, contributed greatly to the problem. Fancy programs, upbeat music, talented storytellers, and great snacks and crafts are not enough to retain kids in church. Ham’s research found that most of the one thousand young adults he surveyed were “already gone” by the time they reached older elementary or middle school age.⁵⁹ The church needs to reclaim children for Jesus, or better yet, reach them for Jesus when they are still young, *before* they check out.

A paradigm shift is needed

Wess Stafford, the president of Compassion International, calls the church’s blindness toward children a sin of great omission. He stresses that the church needs a paradigm shift. Children, the world’s most vulnerable citizens, have become its most disposable commodity. War, poverty, abuse, neglect, disease, and abortion kill astonishing numbers of children each and every day.⁶⁰ With no political or financial clout, children have no voice of their own to stand up for what’s right. This problem is seen, he says, even in the church, which focuses on nearly all aspects of the adult community with much more zeal and fervor than they focus on children. Sunday school and safe childcare may be available for children while their parents tend to the important business of adult church, but sadly, even in today’s evangelical churches, children may be viewed as second-class citizens. Yet these are the very people whom Jesus wooed; those of whom he warned adults not to lead into sin, children who, Jesus stated, make up the kingdom of Heaven;

⁵⁹Ken Ham and Britt Beemer, *Already Gone*, (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009), 21, 37.

⁶⁰Wess Stafford, *Too Small to Ignore*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2007), 3-4.

those whom others must become like to enter His kingdom.⁶¹ Why does the evangelical church not consistently place the utmost importance on the physical and *spiritual* well-being of children?

Increasingly, churches and pastors have gotten lost in the din of confusion surrounding the question of how to minister to families and children effectively. “Churches everywhere have struggled with these questions, striving to follow the mandates of Deuteronomy 6, focusing on making parents their children’s primary faith influencers, and working to create dynamic children’s ministries that inspire love for God and a yearning for His word. Yet, many churches have grown frustrated and confused after seasons of trial and error.”⁶² Too often, the result has simply been more programs that might succeed for a season but ultimately fail because they do not address the core issue: encouraging and equipping parents to fulfill their biblical mandate.

The problem will not self-correct. Spiritual forces of wickedness work against humanity day and night; we do not wrestle against flesh and blood; we wrestle against powers, principalities, and spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.⁶³ The enemy has successfully put blinders on many saints and lulled them into complacency. Even those who strive to ensure the spiritual development of children still miss the point that the enemy seeks to destroy their little ones, if not physically, then spiritually. Children are the enemy’s prey. Christians need a paradigm change now!

⁶¹ Matt. 18:3-7.

⁶² Jennifer Hooks, “One Home at a Time,” *Children’s Ministry*, Volume 19:3, July/August 2009, 92.

⁶³ Eph. 6:10.

Review of Relevant Literature

Increasingly, pastors and children's advocates are recognizing that something must be done now. Church leaders, particularly those in children's ministry, seem to recognize that something is wrong and are seeking to "fix it" before it is too late. Most of the work in this area highlights the problem, or facets of the problem, and points out the need for reform. Few really offer a comprehensive plan for doing so: one that teaches sound biblical precepts to families, encourages prayer for and with children, encourages families to minister together, pray for, and share their story with others; teaches parents and children about spiritual warfare and the enemy's intentions towards their children, and develops a comprehensive plan to disciple families in this vein.

Magazine and journal articles

Increasingly, articles in trade magazines are at least raising the issue to the surface. Allen Nelson, in an article published in *Children's Ministry* magazine, discusses the importance of catching children for Jesus prior to the age of 14, the age at which they tend to solidify their spiritual and moral beliefs.⁶⁴ Professionals in the field are recognizing the need not only to see children come to the Lord at young ages but also to return biblical discipleship of children to their parents and are highlighting different ways to do this effectively. In one issue, they focused on one church's attempt to do this intentionally: a "Legacy Milestone" system put into place by a church in Texas in order to guide parents in the ways of Deuteronomy 6, partnering with parents to raise children who love and fear the Lord, from one generation to the next.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Nelson, 61- 62.

⁶⁵ Hooks, 91-93.

Ed Young, in his column in *Outreach* magazine, also discusses the importance of generational thinking when it comes to passing on the baton of faith. He stresses that the church is only one generation away from extinction if faith is not passed on. He focuses on the church as a generational church, where people think of others, especially young people, more than they think of themselves.⁶⁶

Yet, parents frequently miss out on placing their children's spiritual health above all else. An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* discusses how parents are their children's strongest advocates and sincerely seek the best for them, academically, in sports, and in extracurricular activities. The author then discusses the need to teach children to honor God and acknowledge that everything good about people comes from God.⁶⁷

This lack of focus on God evidences itself in biblical illiteracy both in parents and children. An article by Lillian Daniels in *Christianity Today* discusses the biblical illiteracy that is prevalent among young (and new) Christians today.⁶⁸ In America, we have gone from a society that at least had a rudimentary grasp of Christian principles to one in which both children and adults are ignorant of the Bible. The author touches upon a conundrum that I deal with every day in ministry and one that my program will hopefully address and remedy in parents who are willing to take the time to pursue the God of the Bible and teach His principles to their families.

⁶⁶Ed Young, "Creativity with Ed Young," *Outreach*, March/April 2011, 99.

⁶⁷"Honors--a parent's view." *Christian Science Monitor*, June 20, 1997., 17, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed September 20, 2011).

⁶⁸ Lillian Daniel. "I Love to Tell the Story to Those Who Know It Least." *Christianity Today* 43, no. 9 (August 9, 1999): 49. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed September 20, 2011).

Books

Josh McDowell in his book, *The Last Christian Generation*, explores the lack of knowledge that many in the church today have about God, the Bible, and godly living. McDowell laments the distorted view that many young people have about the God of the Bible. He stresses that, unless something is done, we may indeed be in the midst of the last Christian generation. He then provides a plan for individuals and churches to help young people connect with God and cultivate a living faith that they can then pass on.⁶⁹

George Barna's research also highlighted the problem in *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*. A veteran Christian researcher, Barna defines the problem as a gap between parental needs and church expectations: that while parents who have never had early spiritual training look to the church to provide it for their children, the church is generally focused on adults and teens. The problem, his research finds, is that a child's moral and spiritual development is set by the age of nine. He argues that the church must come alongside parents and equip them to teach biblical precepts to their children at the earliest possible age.⁷⁰

Ken Ham's conclusions in *Already Gone* follow Barna's, but also include additional insights into the spiritual problems that plague children and adults and the irrelevance of the church in recent times to address them. While Barna's research focuses on those who are in the church, Ham's surveys study young adults who have left the church and their reasons for leaving. From this, he hopes to formulate a plan for pastors and parents alike to staunch the flow of youth from the church. Both Ham and Barna focus on apologetics

⁶⁹ Josh McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation*, (Holiday, FL: Green Key Books, 2006), 42.

⁷⁰ Barna, back cover.

and discipleship as the keys to retaining the hearts and minds of youth in the church today. They both acknowledge that parents must be equipped to become the primary spiritual caregivers of their children and advocate that the church play a supporting role.

Wess Stafford, abused as a missionary child in Africa, is a staunch advocate for children. In *Too Small to Ignore*, he makes his case for the church to love and respect children in the manner of Jesus, neither disrespecting them nor idolizing them. While his work primarily highlights children exploited in third-world countries, his personal story of abuse at the hands of adults who claimed the name of Jesus illustrates that children in all cultures and of all economic statuses can be victimized.

His concern for children is echoed by Roy Zuck, who sees many of the same attitudinal problems and lack of regard for children in western culture as well. In fact, Zuck says that children are “doomed to misfortune.” In *Precious in His Sight*, Zuck details many reasons for this (the rise in divorce rates, crime, moral relativity, abortion) and then offers a biblical view of childhood and its importance to God.⁷¹ His work provides great background information on the biblical view of children and how contemporary culture has strayed far from that view, but offers few practical solutions to the problem.

Similarly, Scottie May and coauthors explore the biblical view of children from a rather academic perspective in *Children Matter, Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*. Their book offers valuable information on the roots of children’s ministry and the role that children should play in their families and the church. However, it is a book written by academics for academics and not one that could be easily grasped by the general public. Like Zuck’s work, however, it provides few

⁷¹ Zuck, 23-37.

practical and comprehensive solutions to the problems facing children in the church today.

Some in children's ministry advocate programs that are church-based. In recent years, there has been a rebirth of sorts in children's ministry, leaving behind classroom-based Sunday school formats and focusing on fast-paced Nickelodeon-style kids' church instead. Towns, Stetzer, and Bird highlight this in *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, stressing the importance of reaching children in a relevant manner that engages them and keeps their attention in the same way that fast-paced video games and television shows keep their attention.⁷² Most churches today follow this type of program, and there is nothing inherently wrong with making the children's environment in church as engaging as possible. However, this approach runs the risk of missing the mark; what children need is more focused discipleship, not something that might cause them to equate church with weekend amusements. By itself, this method will fail because it is based only on a superficial, attractional model.

Larry Fowler offers a wonderful book about how to cultivate *Rock-Solid Kids*, but, like *11 Innovations*, it focuses more on how to get kids to church and keep them in church, an approach that places a Band-Aid on the problem rather than attacking it at its roots. To his credit, Fowler does discuss a Deuteronomy 6 approach to discipleship, but it is all in the context of programs and curriculums that the church can enact rather than an organic approach towards a paradigm change.⁷³

⁷²Elemer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2007), 165-184.

⁷³Larry Fowler, *Rock Solid Kids*, (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2004), 57-66.

Dr. Mike Sciarra, points out that the gap between parents and the church has existed for so long that it's awkward for both sides to partner and come together to provide children's ministry that works. In an article in a children's ministry handbook published by Group, he lists several changes that must take place to have meaningful reform in children's ministry: create a biblically solid, "family-friendly church orientation," set and support realistic parental partnering expectations, balance age level and multigenerational ministries, and communication.⁷⁴ Sciarra's ideas are definitely worthy of consideration and implementation.

In a similar vein, Ralph Neighbor, advocates integrating children into the life of the church. His book about cell group churches, published in 1990, *Where Do We Go From Here*, discusses the importance of intermingling children of all ages and children and adults in small group atmospheres, using the older children and adults to mentor younger ones. He stresses the importance of empowering children to pray for each other as well as the adults. Neighbor bases his approach on Jesus' admonition, "Whoever receives one little child like this in my name, receives Me."⁷⁵ In a sense, Neighbor was ahead of many in discerning this problem and suggesting solutions.⁷⁶

One book that offers solutions from a parenting standpoint is Tedd Tripp's *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, which is somewhat of a classic in this area. In fact, many churches offer a six-week small group version of his program. His view seems to be that if parents follow his recommended method of parenting and discipline designed to keep a child oriented toward God and away from idols that children will remain in God's "circle

⁷⁴Mike Sciarra, "Partnering with Parents," *Children's Ministry that Works*, (Loveland, CO: Group, 2002), 58-70.

⁷⁵Matt. 18:5.

⁷⁶Ralph Neighbor, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (Houston, TX: Touch Publishers, 1990), 267-329.

of trust.” Tripp’s book offers some worthy advice on biblical parenting, and his directives address the heart rather than superficially address behavior are spot-on. However, it is programmatic in its approach and may leave parents, who follow the program yet still have unsaved or rebellious kids, discouraged⁷⁷.

Approaching the subject from a parental point of view, Ray Comfort in *How to Bring Your Children to Christ, and Keep Them There*, advocates keeping the word of God in the forefront of child discipleship, which he assumes is done by parents. Comfort’s method of discipleship may seem harsh to many; he focuses extensively on the sinfulness of sin in an attempt to bring children to their knees before the Lord in repentance, reflecting his Calvinist perspective. His approach is also formulaic; the implication is that if parents follow his advice, their children won’t rebel, will trust in Christ, and not regress. However, there is much to like in his approach: Comfort recognizes that the parent is God’s agent for disciplining children; he advocates keeping God’s word as a central focus in the household, and he is sincerely concerned about the superficiality of many children’s ministries that may result in false conversions.⁷⁸

The recommendations in *Grace Based Parenting*, by Tim Kimmel, present a softer approach than the harsh discipline endorsed by Ray Comfort, one that is also more holistic and less legalistic than Ted Tripp’s point of view. Kimmel takes a position based on the grace with which God treats His children and advocates that readers nurture their children in the same firm but loving manner.⁷⁹

⁷⁷Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding Your Child’s Heart*, (Shepherd Press: Wapwallopen, PA: 1995).

⁷⁸Ray Comfort, *Leading Your Children to Christ, and Keeping Them There*, (Bartlesville, OK: Genesis Publishing, 2005), 139.

⁷⁹Tim Kimmel, *Grace Based Parenting*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson Publishers, 2004), 220.

In another of Kimmel's books, *Why Christian Kids Rebel*, the author offers hope to parents of rebellious children. The subtitle of this book is "*trading heartache for hope*," and it is a logical extension to the author's *Grace Based Parenting*. He stresses the dangers of comfortable Christianity and other less authentic modes of worship that will leave one's children vulnerable to enemy attack. He stresses mentoring, loving, and shepherding rebellious teens and focuses on ways to keep them in a positive relationship with parents and with Jesus.⁸⁰

Another book written to parents, *Family to Family*, aims to provide parents with a plan to leave a lasting spiritual legacy to their children and find true significance in God's plan.⁸¹ Unfortunately this book is currently out of print. Written in a workbook format, with fill-in-the-blank questions and assignments at the end of each chapter, this book is quite practical. Pipes and Lee focus on the importance of parents praying for and with children, waiting for cues that they are ready to embrace the gospel, then ministering to and evangelizing others as a family. This approach deserves a lot of merit, and the book is a valiant attempt to help parents reclaim their biblical role.

As parents seek to disciple their children, they must pray. Scripture is clear; we all wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities, spiritual forces that seek to distract us and our children from the Lord.⁸² Elmer Towns and Dave Earley, as part of their *How to Pray Series*, offer parents a comprehensive approach to praying for and with their children in *Praying for your Children*. The authors clearly set out

⁸⁰ _____ *Why Christian Kids Rebel*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 93-107.

⁸¹ Jerry Pipes and Victor Lee, *Family to Family*, (Alpharetta, GA: NAMB Publishing, 1999), front cover.

⁸² Eph. 6: 10-20.

biblical reasons for praying, provide examples from Scripture, and offer guidelines for parents who want the spiritual best for their children. They remind parents that, because of the unique love they have for their own children, they can pray for them like no one else.⁸³ While this book does not deal directly with child discipleship, its importance for child discipleship cannot be underestimated. Prayer moves God and paves the way for the Holy Spirit to act in our lives and in the lives of our children.

Author Cindy Jacobs not only focuses on prayer but also delves deeper into the topic of spiritual warfare, warning parents of the dangers of many modern-day activities that are actually occult-oriented and open doorways to demonic activity and strongholds in the lives of children. *In Deliver Us from Evil*, Jacobs systematically discusses contemporary games, activities, and beliefs that have their roots in the occult.⁸⁴ While this is somewhat tangential to the issue of discipleship, it highlights the forces and entanglements that can distract both children and adults from focusing on the Lord and living a life that is pleasing to him. To be forewarned is to be forearmed, and Jacobs relates several modern day activities to the biblical admonitions against idolatry and occult practices, and warns parents to guard the hearts of their children.

For parents who fear that their children may have already developed strongholds that hinder them from coming to Christ and living godly lives, Neil Anderson has written *The Bondage Breaker*. This manual guides older children and teens to recognize occult practices in which they may have been participating and offers several prayers to assist

⁸³ Elmer Towns and Dave Earley. *Praying for Your Children*. (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2010), 19.

⁸⁴ Cindy Jacobs, *Deliver Us from Evil*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 1-27.

them in renouncing their ungodly behavior and embracing Jesus as both their Savior and Lord.⁸⁵

Each of these books makes a unique contribution to the discussion on child discipleship: biblical admonitions, hindrances, helps, and challenges. The authors are all deeply concerned with the welfare of children and with ensuring that children are afforded the opportunity to come to Christ and are mentored and disciplined in a manner that keeps Him in the forefront of their lives. They, like many Christian leaders before them, are committed to equipping parents to pass on the baton of faith to their children so that a first generation faith can be perpetuated in this and subsequent generations of children.

⁸⁵Neil T. Anderson and Dave Park, *The Bondage Breaker, Youth Edition*, (Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House Publishers, 2001), 283-84.

Chapter Two

Where Did We Go Wrong? The Evolution of Children's Ministry and Parental Outsourcing of Spiritual Authority

Devoted Christian leaders throughout history certainly have been concerned with perpetuating the faith; their motivation in developing discipleship plans for children has been pure. Yet, something has gone desperately wrong with the church's discipleship efforts, otherwise the faith of the next generation would not be imperiled. The mistakes may have seemed imperceptible over time but have culminated into a harvest of moral relativism, undefined truth, and lack of faith, even among church kids.

In his book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell describes a world that follows the rules of epidemics, one that is quite different from the one we think we inhabit. He postulates that the same principles that affect how diseases travel and multiply also govern how ideas, trends, and paradigms rise and fall. He defines three characteristics: contagiousness, the fact that small causes can have large effects, and that change happens in one dramatic movement rather than gradually.¹ The way he describes it, the first two elements of change happen almost imperceptibly, which leads to the rapid appearance of the new paradigm.

We see the erosion of morality and faith, and a lack of respect for the unborn and vulnerable. As a society, we are at the tipping point in so many areas. It used to be that

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2000), 9.

the church was a safe harbor, immune from cultural decline--or so we thought. But we are nearing a tipping point in the church; at risk is the next generation, and if the next generation falls, Christianity is all but lost in America.

Josh McDowell puts it this way: "If I hear one dominating and recurring theme among the many church leaders and families I come in contact with, it's fear...the fear that they are the last Christian generation and that their children will depart from the true faith."² Unfortunately, that fear is becoming a reality. McDowell contrasts past generations of church young people, in which 55% to 66% declared that the church would remain an important part of their lives once they left home, to church young people today, of which a mere 33% intend to stay in the church.³ Something is seriously wrong. This concern is amplified by Ken Ham, who laments that by the time many children reach their teenage years, it is too late; they are already gone; the church has become irrelevant to them.⁴

How have we arrived at this point? No doubt, the causes are many, and like an epidemic, the contagions of doubt, unbelief, and irrelevance have silently crept into the church and stand to envelope and eradicate an entire generation of Christian youth. Understanding how we have reached the tipping point can help point us in the right direction to reclaim our youth for the Lord Jesus and creating a new tipping point, a revival.

²McDowell, 13.

³Ibid., 13.

⁴Ham, 21.

Historical Roots of Children's Ministry

Ministry to children is and has always been essential to the church and the perpetuation of the faith. "Children are essential to the life of the church—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Throughout the Scriptures we see again and again that survival of the faith community is dependent upon each new generation of children."⁵ The implementation of children's ministry has varied, however, based on changes in sociological, educational, political, and religious mores. "The challenge is to be discerning about what is right and good and true and not to be blown away by the 'wisdom' of the day."⁶ This challenge was present in the early church, and it is relevant today.

Early church (A.D. 1-500)

Information about children in the early church is limited and comes largely from accounts sprinkled throughout the New Testament as well as other contemporaneous writings. The gospels include references to the childhoods of Jesus and John the Baptist. There are indications that children were present along with their parents in the crowds that came to listen to Jesus teach (Matthew 14:21; John 6:9). He healed and cast demons from children; He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead and healed the nobleman's son (Mark 5:21-34; John 4:46-51). Jesus consistently welcomed children, used children as reference points in His teachings about the Kingdom of God, and issued dire warnings to those who would seek to harm them (Matthew 18:6).

⁵May, 88.

⁶Ibid., 89.

Early Christ-followers generally retained Jesus' positive attitude towards children. Children in Christian homes, like children in Jewish households of the time, were protected from infanticide, which was a common practice in the ancient world. In fact, in A.D. 374, the Christian Roman emperors Valentinian, Valens, and Gratian made infanticide a crime punishable by death.⁷ One aspect of the consolidation of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire was to extend the protection of the law over children.⁸

One can assume that children were part of early church gatherings. Since the early church met in homes and children were part of households, it can be inferred that children were present together with their parents when they met for "church." Paul's letters support this assertion. He addresses parts of his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians to children in addition to providing admonitions to their parents.⁹

In New Testament times as in modern times, childhood was a time to prepare for the responsibilities they would bear as adults. Girls learned how to manage the household; boys learned the work of their fathers.¹⁰ In the Jewish community, from which much of the early church originated, boys also learned to read and write and were expected to memorize and study the Scriptures. Faith was passed down through the family, "as successive generations accepted the faith of Christ. Justin Martyr, writing a defense of Christianity around 155 A.D., could point to 'many men and women of sixty and seventy years of age, who became disciples of Christ from their childhood' (*1 Apology 1.15*)."¹¹

⁷ W. A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 74.

⁸ May, 91.

⁹ Eph 6:1-4; Col. 3:20.

¹⁰ Strange, 112.

¹¹ Ibid., 83.

This is also affirmed in Paul's second letter to Timothy, when he discusses the younger man's formative years in the faith at the hands of his mother and grandmother.¹² The next two generations after Jesus' time on earth included many followers who had been brought up in the faith and disciplined from their youth.

As the church grew, discipleship became more formalized. Catechumenal schools came into being that taught doctrine and Christian practice to adults desiring to become Christ-followers. There is no evidence that children were included or excluded from these classes, but it is assumed that older children may have taken part. This type of discipleship training reached its peak around A.D. 325-450.¹³

In the first centuries after Christ's birth, many Christian boys attended secular, Roman schools. A great challenge facing Christian leaders and parents was the pagan and Hellenistic environment of these schools. "It was an education that emphasized human existence over the supernatural and was in many respects in direct opposition to ...biblical truths."¹⁴ As parents became concerned that their sons were learning heretical doctrine, catechetical schools for boys came into being. Here, young Christian boys learned Bible and theology, along with literature, mathematics, philosophy, and science. The most renowned of these catechetical schools was located in Alexandria, Egypt, but others were eventually established in Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople, and other cities.¹⁵

¹²2 Tim. 1:3-7.

¹³May, 92.

¹⁴Michael J. Anthony and Warren S. Benson, *Exploring the History and Philosophy of Christian Education; Principles for the Twenty-first Century*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003), 119.

¹⁵May., 93.

By the end of the fourth century, the debate over the fate of infants who died prior to baptism caused intense controversy in the church and, once again, altered the church's view of children. Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430) wrestled with the doctrines of original sin, baptism, and heaven and hell as it related to infants and young children who died before the age of accountability. His writings and conclusions greatly influenced the church's attitudes toward children, discipleship, and infant baptism for centuries.¹⁶

Medieval church (500-1500)

Infant baptism continued in practice during medieval times, due to the beliefs that salvation was conferred upon baptism and that infants or young children who died without having been baptized would be eternally condemned. Along with parents, godparents were admonished to carry out Christian instruction of children in the home. In fact, "the role of godparents began to take on more significance. It was thought that the responsibility of raising a child ought to extend beyond the immediate family.... One particular responsibility of the godparents was to make certain that the parents of the child were living godly lives. Essentially, they took on a role of lifelong responsibility for both the parent and the child."¹⁷ Children in medieval times were held to rigid standards of behavior, and social problems were blamed on parents who had not properly raised their children to respect God and his laws.¹⁸

Monasteries also emerged during this time period. Children of wealthy Christians and occasionally poor children were educated alongside monks and clerics. "Monastic

¹⁶Ibid., 93.

¹⁷Ibid., 95.

¹⁸Ibid., 96.

instruction was guided by moral and religious purposes and included reading, writing, arithmetic, singing, and elements of Christian doctrine.”¹⁹

Since most people could not read or write, oral traditions were the primary means by which children learned the Apostles’ Creed, Lord’s Prayer, and Ten Commandments. Children were also taught to observe common practices of piety, such as observing holy days, pilgrimages, visiting shrines, and adoration of the saints. In addition, most of the cathedrals built during this time contained rich visual representations of Christianity such as stained glass windows, statues, and carvings that illustrated biblical scenes. Children afforded the opportunity to attend these churches were surrounded by these visual images of the Christian faith. It wasn’t until Charlemagne was crowned emperor in A.D. 800 that Mass was celebrated in the vernacular, making prayer and Scripture accessible to commoners.²⁰

Reformation and Renaissance (1500-1700)

Scripture became even more accessible to the masses with the invention of the movable type printing press by Johann Gutenberg in the mid-1400s. This invention marked a dramatic change in the availability and affordability of literature and the Scriptures and set the stage for the Reformation.²¹ The printing press paved the way for change within the church and society in general. “Through the leadership of the Reformers, the whole educational system across Europe [changed].”²²

¹⁹Ibid., 94.

²⁰Ibid., 94.

²¹Ibid., 96.

²²Ibid., 98.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) played an important role in bringing Christian education to children as well. Like many before him, Luther supported infant baptism, but qualified this by recognizing “that what makes it saving is the ongoing reorientation of human life that it effects....To use baptism aright is to immerse oneself in the various means of grace—worship, prayer, proclamation, sacraments—so that one is constantly exposed to the working of the Spirit.”²³

Some have also said that Reformation Europe was the time in which parental authority and parenting were most highly respected. Luther also put responsibility for a child’s spiritual well-being on parents and the community. He acknowledged that the hearts and minds of children are impressionable and the ideal soil in which to plant seeds to faith. Luther’s *Shorter Catechism* was written to provide parents with guidelines for teaching Christian truths to their children; he placed much value on continual study of and reflection on Scripture and his catechetical texts. He recommended daily review of the Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, Lord’s Prayer, Psalms, and other readings; and not just for children, but for adults as well. He placed a high value on the education of all children, rich or poor, boys and girls, believing that those who were educated could better serve God.²⁴

Many of Luther’s contemporaries also valued children. One Moravian bishop, John Amos Cormenius (1592-1670), an influential educational theorist, advocated new ways of thinking about children, child development, and effective methods of educating children. He advocated, not the rote learning, memorization, and recitation that was

²³Jan Strohl, “The Child in Luther’s Theology,” *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 143.

²⁴May, 97-98.

common at that time, but education in a gentler manner that progressed from easily understood concepts to those that were more complicated, allowing children to learn in a progressive manner. He is remembered for producing the first picture book for children. Cormenius advocated that children of both sexes be given a solid education that included instruction in morals, theology, languages, as well as arts and sciences.²⁵

This way of thinking shifted during the Enlightenment. Respect for religion waned, and intellectual skepticism abounded. While the Reformers had concern for the eternal security of children and advocated nurture and discipline to point children to the straight and narrow path, leaders of the Enlightenment seriously challenged the views of theologians and Christian educators. A greater emphasis was placed on reason and scientific inquiry, as well as openness to free thinking.²⁶

The traditional view of children was also challenged. Philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) rejected theological notions of innate depravity and innate goodness and proposed instead that “a child [was] born as a *tabula rasa* or blank slate on which the experiences of life, school, home, church, community, and nature [would] write the life story. Locke considered that thought [came] from reflecting on the sensations [that arose] from interaction with the world.”²⁷

Early modern period (1700-1900)

Thoughts like this about the nature and education of children continued to evolve during the ensuing two centuries; Jean-Jaques Rousseau’s (1712-1778) teachings about

²⁵Ibid., 99.

²⁶Ibid., 100.

²⁷Ibid., 100.

children were especially influential. In contrast to Locke's blank slate and the church's view of innate depravity, Rousseau held to the innate goodness of children. Any depravity came as a result of contamination from living in a morally bankrupt society.²⁸ As he stated in the opening to his novel, *Emile*, "Everything is good when it leaves the hands of the Author of Things; everything degenerates in the hands of man."²⁹ Rousseau's teachings fit well in a society open to a Romantic view of children and the family. His ideas contributed to significant changes in educational practice, including the establishment of what we now call kindergarten.³⁰

Although society as a whole held to a Romantic notion of childhood, the advent of the Industrial Revolution brought some harsh realities to light. Parents were frequently working away from home; families lived in crowded, unsanitary conditions, and children were also in the workforce. Because of these changes in society, children or families in need could no longer depend upon extended family or the community to respond with help in a crisis. As a result, many children lacked a proper home and care; they lived on the streets and did not attend school. Deep divisions existed between the rich and poor; a fear existed that allowing disadvantaged children to attend school might encourage them to become scholars or entrepreneurs and disrupt the societal hierarchy that had developed.³¹

²⁸Ibid., 100.

²⁹Quoted in Anthony, 242.

³⁰ May 101.

³¹Ibid., 101.

“Christian leaders began to pay new attention to the plight of disadvantaged children—the poor, the illiterate, the orphan.”³² Schools for street children, known as Ragged Schools, developed during this time with the support of philanthropists. Those who started these schools did so, in part, to stem the rise of crime among those raised on the streets, to “counteract the mischief and arrest the progress of this moral pestilence.”³³

Sunday schools also had their genesis in response to the plight of working poor children. Robert Raikes (1735-1811), known as the father of Sunday School, had spent much time working with adult prisoners and street people. Frustrated by his lack of progress working with adults, Raikes decided to shift his focus to the younger generation.³⁴

Poor children in eighteenth century England spent six days each week working in factories. “On Sundays, when they were free from their responsibilities of work, lower-class children tended to roam the streets, causing trouble and disturbing local businesses.”³⁵ Raikes, a member of the Church of England, blamed the children’s behavior on the ignorance of society toward their needs, and saw this as an opportunity to prevent their disruptive behavior. In 1780 or 1781, Raikes began his first Sunday School. “His intent was to train the factory children to read the Scriptures and, in doing so, to impress upon them values of morality and good behavior.”³⁶

³²Ibid., 101.

³³Caroline Frances Cornwallis, *The Philosophy of Ragged Schools*, (London, England: William Pickering, 1851, google ebook), 10.

³⁴May, 101.

³⁵Ibid., 101.

³⁶May, 102.

Although these Sunday schools encountered difficulty at first, trying to tame unruly boys, Raikes's Sunday school experiment proved successful, and soon spread from Raikes's city of Gloucester to other cities in England. Other proponents emerged as well. William Fox (1736-1826), a Baptist, was discouraged by the lack of literacy among English children and saw Sunday school as a way to promote reading among English poor. He began what became known as The Sunday School Society in 1785 to promote the spread of Sunday schools. This society raised funds to pay Sunday school teachers and provide supplies for the classes³⁷.

Fox's group was eventually replaced by the London Sunday-School Union, whose aims were consistent with those of its predecessor. In 1841, it began publishing Sunday school curricula that were inexpensive and broadly used. By 1880, the number of children and adults attending Sunday school was reported in excess of six million.

Other important influences in the Sunday school movement were John Wesley (1703-1791) and the Methodist movement. Wesley believed that many children held a genuine faith and experienced valid conversions during their formative years. Thus, he exhorted preachers to place an emphasis on teaching children, believing that this was a responsibility of ordained ministry. Wesley also encouraged mothers and fathers to take seriously the responsibility of teaching biblical truths to their children.³⁸ Wesley's views influenced the Christian education of children and development of Sunday schools in England as well as America.

³⁷Ibid., 102.

³⁸Richard Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Bunge, 298.

The Sunday school movement began to take root in America by 1790 and soon grew to be recognized by churches as a primary vehicle for the religious instruction of young people. At first, as in England, Sunday schools were established to serve poor children and adults who had no access to education elsewhere. Soon, due to the influence of Presbyterian minister, Lyman Beecher (1775-1863), the rich also began to send their children to Sunday school for religious instruction, and Sunday school evolved into an institution for everyone, not just those needing charity.³⁹ By the 1830s, when public schools became prominent in America, Sunday schools no longer needed to focus on general education. So they “refocused on evangelical training and functioned as the religious complement to the public schools.”⁴⁰

Although divergent opinions on the salvation of children had existed since the Reformation, the groups on both sides of the conversion/nurture debate became substantially polarized during the Second Great Awakening. Revivals and camp meetings, such as those presided over by Charles Finney (1792-1875), advocated a crisis conversion, personal repentance, and acceptance by God through Christ, and left a lasting mark on evangelical children’s ministry. The revivalists rejected infant baptism as the means by which children came to the faith and viewed children spiritually as no different from adults. They placed great emphasis on childhood conversions, stressing that children who were converted were less likely to become ensnared by sinful habits that

³⁹May, 104.

⁴⁰Ibid., 104.

trapped many adults and had their whole lives to serve God. Children were urged, as were adults, to undergo an emotional repentance and conversion to faith in Christ.⁴¹

This approach was rejected by some, like American preacher, Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), who believed that children could be nurtured and raised under the canopy of God's grace and grow up as a Christian, never thinking of themselves as otherwise. His writings challenged those who taught children and prompted new ways of thinking about Christian education for children. "Bushnell's ideas also served to challenge the commonly held notion that the church had the primary responsibility for teaching children of the faith. Bushnell said that the family was the critical component in faith education and encouraged parents to take seriously this responsibility."⁴² His views were rejected by theologically conservative revivalists and embraced by more liberal segments of the church. Despite the opposition of conservative factions of the church, Bushnell's views on nurture became imbedded in the foundation of modern Christian education for children.⁴³

Modern period (1900-present)

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) made important marks on childhood education, both within and outside of the church. An Italian physician and a devout Catholic, she developed a unique educational approach that placed the child at its center.⁴⁴ She believed that children possessed an inquisitive and creative spirit and had a natural

⁴¹Ibid., 104-105.

⁴²Ibid., 105.

⁴³Ibid., 105.

⁴⁴Ibid., 106.

inclination towards learning. Montessori's classrooms included child-sized furniture and activity centers specially designed to facilitate children's learning, while her methods allowed children to explore and learn on their own, under the guidance of teachers whose role was to facilitate the child's self-discovery.⁴⁵

Many child-focused Christian curricula and clubs developed during the early twentieth century. Child Evangelism Fellowship, Awana, Pioneer Girls, Girl Scouts, and Boy Scouts all had their origin in what some have called the century of the child. Vacation Bible schools, summer day camps, after school programs, and programs for children in crisis rose up, many with a clear Christian focus. These were designed to serve children from both Protestant and Catholic traditions.⁴⁶

Not all developments in child-rearing and child education focused positively on nurture, however. The twentieth century also gave rise to the influence of physical and social sciences. Large-scale psychological and social analyses were done, "examining countless variables of human existence and making claims of authority based on scientific emphasis."⁴⁷ Control and routine were emphasized as were strict scheduling of feeding and elimination. One behavioral psychologist, John Watson (1878-1958), echoing shades of Locke and Rousseau, asserted that children and infants were malleable and that, with proper control and direction, their natures could be reformed. Watson actually asserted that there might be better and more scientific means of raising children

⁴⁵Anthony, 351.

⁴⁶May 107.

⁴⁷Ibid., 107.

than in a family, at home, with their parents. He advocated treating children as small adults and avoiding any type of physical affection towards children.⁴⁸

This remained the prevailing wisdom until 1946 when Dr. Benjamin Spock (1903-1998) published *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Childcare*. In contrast to those who condemned the sentimentality with which many parents approached childrearing, Spock advocated cuddling and nurturing babies and young children, insisting that bestowing affection would make children more secure and happier. Rather than advocating a one-size-fits-all approach to childrearing, he urged parents to view their children as individuals and to be flexible in their parenting approach.⁴⁹

Societal views on parenting and childrearing spilled over into the way that Christian education was approached. Publishing houses began to publish curriculum material that was geared specifically for children. Gospel Light Publications came into being in 1933 with the motto, “Planned, Christ-Centered, and graded to meet the needs of each age.”⁵⁰

During the latter part of the twentieth century, Nickelodeon-style Sunday schools also gained prominence with attractional programs geared to popular children’s culture. This type of Sunday school is designed to appeal to an experience-driven generation of children who are highly visually oriented; these churches recognize that there is an advantage in designing Sunday school experiences in the same way that children experience life. It is contextualized to today’s child. “Perhaps the greatest advantage of the Nickelodeon Sunday School is its evangelistic appeal. Because salvation appeals to the intellect, emotion, and will of the convert, so the Nickelodeon Sunday School informs

⁴⁸Ibid., 108.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁰Illadel Sherwood, *200 Years of Sunday School in America*, (Nashville, TN: Dynamic Manuscripts, 1976), 67.

the child's mind with the gospel message, motivates the child's emotions to respond, and persuades his or her will to decide for Jesus Christ."⁵¹

Clearly, there is much to like about the contemporary Sunday school and Children's Church emphasis on contextualizing the gospel message to the current culture. But churches and parents make a mistake if they think that this provides a catch-all solution to educating children in the ways of God. Today's child is in a uniquely vulnerable position. "Society has never had so many inroads to indoctrinate the hearts of children as they have today....and society has never provided so much corruption for consumption by the masses as it does today. A plethora of competing worldviews and warped values flow freely throughout society—directly into the minds of children, where they stay for a lifetime."⁵²

Once parents gave responsibility for teaching biblical truths to children and gave up their biblically mandated role, the door was open for cultural and religious heresies to infiltrate the children's minds and hearts. Regardless of the good motivation behind Sunday schools, both in their genesis and in their present form, things are out of balance when the church is the primary teacher of spiritual truths to children rather than the parents. This imbalance puts children at risk.

The Darwin Effect

One of the things that chips away at the faith of children is society's acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution as scientific fact. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the idea that the earth is millions or billions of years old began to creep into

⁵¹Towns, Stezer, and Bird, 178.

⁵²Jack Eggar, in the foreword to Larry Fowler, *Rock Solid Kids*, (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2004).

scientific thought. The church, rather than countering this postulation with facts from Genesis, compromised to fit biblical revelation into a scientific framework rather than evaluating the scientific theories through a biblical lens. This resulted in some reinterpreting the days of creation into long periods of time rather than literal twenty-four hour days. Others developed what became known as the Gap Theory, the postulation that millions or billions of years passed between the first two verses of Genesis. This was a calculated shift by deists who sought to reject the biblical account of the Flood as an explanation for fossil-laden sediments and for rejecting biblical authority as a whole.⁵³

Charles Darwin, who was never a believer in Jesus, readily accepted this premise, which paved the way for him to present his ideas on the evolution rather than the creation of man. Time was all that was needed to support his postulation that over millions and billions of years, one species evolved into another, which evolved into another, and so on. “Not only did the old-earth idea contradict what the Bible says, but because it is ultimately an attack on biblical authority, it paved the way for the conclusion that the Bible cannot be trusted, and our existence is the result of a natural process.”⁵⁴ As the church compromised on the issue of millions of years, future generations were put on a slippery slope toward unbelief. Soon, not only the age of the earth was questioned but also the magnitude of Noah’s flood; the idea of a local rather than global flood was accepted.

In 1859, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* and twelve years later, *The Descent of Man*, which popularized the evolution of ape-like animals into humans. In England, much of the church adopted Darwin’s ideas, and his views soon spread to

⁵³Ham, 74.

⁵⁴Ibid., 75.

America. Many liberal church leaders adopted positions such as the day-age view or gap theory that added millions of years and evolutionary ideas to the Bible's account of origins. Even some conservative churches adopted the gap theory, which, they thought, melded well with science while rejecting evolution.⁵⁵

Other conservative churches, rather than standing firmly on scriptural foundations, side-stepped the issues and taught Genesis as true while ignoring teachings of the secular world that contradicted the Bible. The result was that children began to accept biblical stories as just that--stories, not fact. It was at this point, according to Ken Ham, that the church began to make a disconnection. "It was the beginning of the road to irrelevancy: the church gave up the *earthly* things (e.g. biological, anthropological, astronomical, and geological history as recorded in Genesis 1-11) and focused on *heavenly* things (spiritual matters, relationships, the gospel)."⁵⁶

In the past, many notable scientists were also highly trained theologians (Pascal, Newton, and Galileo among them). They helped to maintain a connection between the Bible and science. The church relegated historical or origins science to the world—"and thus disconnected the Bible from the real world."⁵⁷

Today one goes not to the church to learn science, but to school. Children perceive that important, relevant truths are learned in school; they learn scientific facts in school and Bible "stories" in church. The Bible has become irrelevant to today's culture that many liken it to a collection of spiritual fairy tales rather than truths. Charles Darwin's evolutionary ideas and beliefs are embraced and honored by those charged with educating

⁵⁵Ibid., 75.

⁵⁶Ibid., 76.

⁵⁷Ibid., 77.

our children, and the Bible has largely become irrelevant to real-world issues. Spirituality has become compartmentalized: people get their spiritual nourishment in church and then step outside into the real world.

A slow and steady decay of belief has taken and continues to take place. Most students in America attend public schools where they are routinely taught information that erodes the foundations of biblical faith. Surveys have shown that only twenty percent of young people believe that the earth is less than ten-thousand years old, and many believe that science has disproven the creation story of Genesis 1. By and large, the church has given in or not addressed these issues. Once the door to biblical compromise opened, it will swing open wider and wider and touch more and more issues. Believing that the earth was created over millions or billions of years does not affect one's salvation, but it does alter how one views Scripture and can place the next generation on the slippery slope of unbelief. A perception of mistrust is prevalent: *"If I can't trust the Bible in the earthly things, why should I trust it in the spiritual things?"*⁵⁸

The Abortion Debate

Evidence of this slippery slope in culture is the debate that rages about abortion. After all, if the Bible cannot be trusted, and humans are simply a product of evolution, why place value on babies in the womb?

The abortion debate is not new; it has been around since ancient times and present in different cultures. The Assyrians, for example, considered abortion to be a crime whose penalty was death for the mother. The ancient Sumerians, Hittites, and Babylonians punished anyone who dealt a blow to a woman that resulted in the death of her fetus. In

⁵⁸Ibid., 78.

contrast, the ancient Greeks, though they believed the fetus to be a living being, allowed abortions for the purpose of population control.⁵⁹ In the Roman Empire, abortions occurred for many reasons that sound quite contemporary. Abortion occurred if “the parents felt they could not afford another child, or a pregnancy resulting from wanton conduct was unwanted, or the rich did not want to be bothered with the responsibility of another child.”⁶⁰

Even among ancient Jews the topic of abortion was debated. Philo (25 B.C.-A.D. 41) wrote that abortion of an early, unformed fetus was allowed, but anyone who aborted a fetus with visible arms and legs (a formed fetus) was guilty of murder and deserving of death. Josephus (A.D. 37-100) wrote against abortion, citing the Mosaic Law as prohibiting women from aborting fetuses of any gestational age.⁶¹

The early church opposed abortion as well, and although some would say that the Bible does not specifically prohibit abortion by name, an argument can be made that Scripture values life in the womb and condemns abortion. In Psalm 139: 13-16, David wrote that God created him in his mother’s womb and that he was fearfully and wonderfully made. Isaiah also said that God formed him in the womb, and God told Jeremiah the same. Both of those prophets also wrote that God called them to ministry while they were still in the womb.⁶²

In addition to God forming and calling individuals from the womb, Scripture indicates that the sin nature is transmitted at conception rather than birth, and the Hebrew words

⁵⁹Zuck, 72.

⁶⁰Ibid., 73.

⁶¹Ibid., 73.

⁶²Isaiah 49:1-5; Jeremiah 1:5.

used for babies in and out of the womb are interchangeable.⁶³ When Elizabeth saw the pregnant Mary for the first time, she stated, while Jesus was still in Mary's womb, "But why is this *granted* to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy."⁶⁴ In this greeting, Elizabeth acknowledges the personhood of John the Baptist, who was near term and Jesus, who was early in his gestational development. Since Jesus took on human nature in the "incarnation (Gal. 4:4; Heb. 2:17), and since he was a person in the womb, it follows that all humans have personhood in their prenatal state."⁶⁵

Regardless of the arguments that can be made from Scripture for personhood of fetuses, once the foundations of scriptural authority have cracked, the door is open to doubt all assertions of Scripture. So, although the debate has raged for centuries, we are much further down the slippery slope of unbelief in modern times. Even with advances in science and technology, where parents can see the baby in the womb and watch as it sucks its thumb or responds to noise, abortion has increased dramatically in modern times, while respect for life has decreased.

Although the abortion issue and the debate over origins are separate and apart from the issue of children's ministry, the cultural mores that they exemplify flow through society and affect the way that society views babies, children, and personhood. They also alter people's trust in the authority of Scripture, including those passages that discuss parenting and child-training. These societal vices serve to continually erode biblical

⁶³Zuck, 76.

⁶⁴Luke 1:43-44.

⁶⁵Zuck, 77.

worldviews and move each generation further down the slope of unbelief, which makes ministry to children and families increasingly difficult.

The Problem of Busyness

As if the worldviews to which children are exposed were not enough of a challenge, modern-day families in America live during one of the most time challenged eras in history. Parents are busy. According the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2010 (the last year surveyed), parents in nearly 50 percent of married-couple households were both employed outside of the home. Additionally, the labor force participation rate for all mothers with children under 18 (including single moms) was 70.8 percent in 2010.⁶⁶

Children are busy too. Most spend many hours each week in a public school classroom. Ever-increasing numbers of young children spend a large amount of their week in school; more than half of all three and four year olds are enrolled in school, and nearly two-thirds of five year-olds attend all-day kindergarten programs.⁶⁷ “If it’s not the crunch of homework, then it’s the frenetic involvement in after-school and extracurricular activities. Even during the summer, two-thirds of adolescents (64% percent) are booked into a full slate of activities.”⁶⁸

So many activities clutter the lives of parents and children that there is little time left for deep spiritual discussions. Parents may dutifully take their children to church, youth group, or Awana, but these are simply more activities added to the many in which they participate each week. Somehow, in striving to give children all the advantages the world

⁶⁶<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.nr0.htm>.

⁶⁷Barna, 19.

⁶⁸Ibid., 24.

has to offer, to motivate them to become high achievers in school, sports, and employment, many parents have neglected their most basic role: prioritizing and nurturing their children's spirituality and pointing them on the straight and narrow path that leads to God. Sadly, these parents and children will miss out on the abundant life that Jesus promises to those who follow Him and place Him first in their lives. Wess Stafford puts it succinctly,

If we are not attuned to the divine rhythm as we move through our lives, we will miss the richness of *today* as well as the potential of tomorrow. If hurry dominates our lives today, we and our children will simply flail along on the whirlwind. We will arrive at *tomorrow* all out of breath, frightened and disoriented, anxious and feeling fearful of what's coming around the bend. God will be saying, "Just trust me with your future," but we will lack ears to hear his words.⁶⁹

Parents must take a deep breath and retreat from the harried nature of life in America in order to reclaim their role as spiritual nurturers of their children.

The Problems of Idolatry and High Places

Busyness, less time spent as a family studying God's word, a lack of biblical knowledge, and erosion in biblical authority have led us to a place where idols and high places are not easily recognizable or distinguishable from godly things. Scripture warns us to beware of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life because they are from the devil, yet many of the things we pursue and desire for our children (even those that seem worthy) relate to the enemy's purposes for our and our children's lives rather than the Lord's purposes.

In addition, we live in a society fascinated by the occult. Ironically, while the world rejects the notion of God, it embraces spirituality in the form of ghosts, New Age, and the

⁶⁹Stafford, 89.

occult. Television shows about real-life ghost hunters abound. New Age practitioners and spiritual mediums are given credence by the media. People make decisions based on their horoscopes, numerology, or psychic readings. Violent movies and music that glorify the devil and evil abound. Even many who claim the name of Jesus follow these shows, listen to this music, or read their daily horoscope. They have relegated God to church, separate and independent from these occult activities.

Even books like Harry Potter and Twilight romanticize witches and vampires, while Scripture condemns them. While there may be nothing inherently wrong with a Christian reading or viewing either of these fictional works, they should be viewed through biblical rather than worldly lenses. Viewed in this manner, these stories can actually offer opportunities to share the gospel message and truth. Far too often, however, parents allow their children to take the stories' meanings at face value, which once again competes with a biblical worldview and nudges children down that slippery slope of unbelief.

Everything we do either affords the opportunity to grow closer to God or creates distance between us and our Creator. Nothing is neutral. As Christian parents, the primary spiritual disciplers of our children, we should be aware of this and set up opportunities for our children to grow in their relationship with the Lord, while avoiding the high places. Many of the things the world accepts and promotes are contrary to the word of God. If we assume that our culture is right, then the culture, rather than God, defines reality to us and our children.⁷⁰

⁷⁰Alan Hirsch and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 25.

The State of American Children

The spiritual state of America's children is not pretty; their spiritual health has been hijacked by the enemy. Parents are no longer operating under the guidance of the Shema, loving God with all of their heart, mind, and strength, and teaching His precepts diligently to their children. God's word no longer permeates every aspect of family life. Daily opportunities to share from God's word have been minimized as parents and children spend less and less time together. Worldly pursuits-- academic and athletic excellence, the best houses in the best neighborhoods, the finest clothes and accessories-- have all combined to distract parents and children from the important things in life.

Christian couples divorce at nearly the same rate as non-Christian couples. Families that claim the name of Christ behave no differently than those who do not. Our children drink, engage in premarital sex, and participate in occult-like activities just like their secular counterparts. Biblical beliefs of the Genesis account of creation and pro-life worldviews are continually mocked. Church and Christian education has just become another activity in the cacophony of activities that surround children and families.

The foundations of biblical faith have been chipped away by cultural norms. It almost harkens back to the Garden of Eden when the serpent questioned Eve, "Did God really say...?"⁷¹ This question continually challenges our children and, in reality, continually challenges parents as well. Without a solid spiritual grounding and faith, they and we are at risk of moving further down the slippery slope away from God. It's not too late for parents to reclaim their biblical mandate and raise their children to love and serve the Lord, but we are at a tipping point, and the time for action is now.

⁷¹Gen. 3:1.

Chapter Three

Reclaiming our Kids: A Biblical View of Passing on the Baton of Faith

Many years ago, I heard a sermon on the importance of maintaining and perpetuating a first generation faith within one's household and the pitfalls of failing to do so. A strong, vibrant faith in parents does not automatically translate to an equally strong, vibrant faith in children. Parents who do not intentionally cultivate a household environment that is conducive to prayer, meditating on God's word, and worshiping Him in their daily lives risk raising children who are lukewarm in their faith, who may in turn raise children who are faithless. There is a rather pessimistic, but true, saying that Christianity is only one generation away from extinction. Yet the Bible provides the perfect roadmap to guide Christian parents in the ways that cultivate a strong personal and familial faith. Concerned godly parents need to trust in the Lord's directives on this matter, in the power of prayer, and the Holy Spirit's ability to move in their children's lives. The Bible tells parents, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it."¹ *The Message* puts this in an interesting way: "Point your kids in the right direction-when they're old, they won't be lost."² Scripture contains all the wisdom needed to point one's kids on the path to righteousness and trust in God's plan for them; one only has to take God's word to heart and put it into action.³

¹Prov. 22:6, NKJV.

² Prov. 22:6, *The Message*.

³Jer. 29:11-13.

Faith Begins in the Home

The relevance of family is stressed from the beginning of the Bible, where God created Eve as a companion and helpmate for Adam and then told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply.¹ After the flood, He repeated this command to Noah and his sons, and He promised Abraham more descendants than there are stars in the sky.² The Lord also said, “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord.”³ Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, guidelines for raising families are presented, although not every cultural practice displayed in the lives of biblical figures was necessarily ordained by God. Examples such as polygamy or intermarriage within families, though typical, were based more on cultural mores than principles. “The biblical teaching for family life includes instructions for children, mothers, and fathers [and shows] examples of families that followed God’s wishes [who] were greatly blessed; [while] families that disobeyed God...reaped the consequences.”⁴

Every Jewish couple married with thoughts of having children. Male children were particularly prized. The Jewish father took on the role of spiritual leader of the family, functioning as the family priest. The Jewish wife willingly took a place of submission to her husband, and her primary goal was to bear children to her husband. The wife’s main

¹Gen. 1:22.

²Gen 15:7.

³Gen 18:19, NIV.

⁴J.I. Packer and M.C. Tenny, eds, *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1980), 411.

responsibilities revolved around the household and children. Together, the husband and wife were to train their children to know and serve the Lord.⁵

The Great Commandment

Prior to gathering the second generation of Hebrews in the wilderness to be reminded of God's commandments, the Lord told Moses, "Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, *and that they may teach their children*" (italics added).⁶ After he reiterated the Ten Commandments to the people, Moses reminded them to fear the Lord God and to keep His statutes and commandments which were for them, their sons, and their grandsons.⁷ It was expected that father would teach son; son would teach grandson, and so on.

Immediately after this, Moses commanded them, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."⁸ The implication is that fathers not only should do this themselves, but that they are responsible for training their sons and daughters to do the same. This is clarified in the next few Scripture verses.

The Shema

"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them

⁵Ibid., 412-13.

⁶Deut. 4:10, NKJV.

⁷Deut. 6:2.

⁸Deut. 6:4, NKJV.

on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”⁹ These were very clear-cut instructions to parents in biblical times and are no less relevant to parents today.

One can make several observations about these commandments. First (verse 6), God’s commandments and words must be in the parents’ hearts. Parents cannot expect their children to become what they, themselves, are not. Parents must first love God with all of *their* hearts, souls, and strength. In contemporary terms, one might say that parents must practice what they preach. Children generally have keen hypocrisy detectors and can spot contradictory words and actions from a far distance. Children who do not see a genuine and growing relationship with God in their parents will not likely travel the path of righteousness themselves. “Research consistently affirms the declining biblical worldview of our young people...nothing short of a crisis, even among committed Christian families.”¹⁰ The first place where parents in search of a solution need to look is the mirror.

The next directive given to parents is that they must teach God’s words, ways, and commands *diligently* to their children (verse seven). The Hebrew term, *shanan*, means “teach diligently, sharpen, or whet.”¹¹ Webster defines “diligently” as “something characterized by steady, earnest, and energetic effort or something done painstakingly.”¹² Clearly parents are commanded to teach their children wholeheartedly--not halfway, not on occasion, not under someone else’s direction, but personally and persistently.

⁹Deut. 6: 6-9, NKJV.

¹⁰Fowler, 25.

¹¹<http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H8150&t=KJV>.

¹²<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diligently>.

Subsequent verses of the Shema confirm that the center of biblical discipleship is the home. Parents are commanded to talk of the Lord and His word in their home and as they go about their daily business. “The moral and biblical education of children was accomplished best not in a formal teaching period each day but when the parents, out of concern for their own lives as well as their children’s, made God and His word the natural topic of conversation which might occur anywhere and everywhere during the day.”¹³ God’s word was commanded to be such an integral part of family life, it would be as if it were written on their foreheads, bound to their wrists, and displayed prominently on their doorposts.

Many, if not most, families claiming the name of Christ, fall far short of these directives. If the current generation has any chance of successfully passing on the baton of faith, a paradigm shift is needed, a refocusing and a return to a biblical view of discipleship. The time to start is now.

Additional Old Testament Guidance

God promises blessings to those who obey his commands and stern retribution to those who do not. In Exodus, the Lord admonished the first generation of those rescued from slavery: “For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”¹⁴ A perpetuation of the faith and an abiding awe of the Lord and His power and mercy are some of the direct benefits of obeying these commands:

¹³Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1985), 275.

¹⁴Ex. 20:5-6.

When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments which the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders before our eyes, great and severe, against Egypt, Pharaoh, and all his household. Then He brought us out from there that He might bring us in, to give us the land of which He swore to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day. Then it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the Lord our God, as He has commanded us.’¹⁵

This is also aptly illustrated by Psalm 78, in which the psalmist recounts the Lord’s mighty acts for the purpose of inspiring the current and future generation to the praises of the Lord, His strength, and the wonderful works that He has done.¹⁶ Asaph further states “that they should make [the laws, statutes, and works] known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments.”¹⁷ This psalm provides the perfect blueprint for perpetuating the faith from generation to generation.

New Testament Directives

A few places in the New Testament also provide specific guidance for parents. One first sees the example of Jesus being raised by Mary and Joseph. Based on their faith, one can assume that the parents of Mary’s and Joseph’s had followed the dictates of the Shema and raised their children to love and serve the Lord. They obeyed the Old

¹⁵Deut. 6:20-25.

¹⁶Psalm 78:4.

¹⁷Psalm 78:6-7.

Testament dictates and customs of their ancestors by having the baby Jesus circumcised on the eighth day and dedicating him at the temple.¹⁸

Subsequent to this, the next mention of the boy, Jesus, and his parents is when they are making their annual trip to Jerusalem for Passover together with their relatives. The implication is that they did this every year as was their custom and that Jesus accompanied them each time. The ease with which he sat in the temple discussing Scripture and theology with the rabbis suggests that the synagogue environment was not new to him, that He had been raised going to the temple and learning Scriptures. He recognized, even as a boy, that He “must be about His Father’s business.” When they came to Him and rebuked Him for staying behind, He submitted to them and, Scripture says, grew not only in wisdom and stature, but in favor with God and man.¹⁹ Granted, Jesus was God, but this passage of Scripture has implications that are relevant to Christians today. It demonstrates some of God’s blessings toward those who obey Him, both parents and children.

In this same vein, Ephesians, chapter six, offers copious wisdom for parents and children. It reminds children of their responsibility to obey their parents and parents of their responsibilities to bring their children up in the Lord’s training and admonition.²⁰ One can also make the argument that raising one’s children in the training and admonition of the Lord is part of contending earnestly for the faith, as directed in Jude.²¹

¹⁸Luke 2:21-24.

¹⁹Luke 2:41-52.

²⁰Eph. 6:1-4.

²¹Jude 1:3.

This is wonderfully illustrated by Paul when he details Timothy's spiritual upbringing at the hands of his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice.²² Although the father was commanded to be the spiritual head of the household, Scripture implies that Timothy's father, being a Greek, was not a believer, so apparently his mother and grandmother took the responsibility of passing on the baton of faith in their household.²³ Their faithfulness was rewarded with a child who grew up to love and serve the Lord, making an impact upon countless generations.

Special Considerations

Paul offers some timeless warnings to Christians and parents in his letter to the Ephesians. In chapter five, the apostle reminds parents and others that they are no longer walking in darkness but rather in the light of Jesus Christ. He urges them to behave as children of that light and have no intermingling with works of darkness but rather to expose them.²⁴ He calls those who do not heed his wisdom "fools." Apparently, the Ephesians, like many Christians today, gravitate toward darkness unwittingly. Paul exhorts them, and he exhorts Christians today, "Awake you who sleep, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light!"²⁵ The fact that Paul was writing his letter to those who were professed believers and telling them to rise from the dead (a term normally reserved for those who are physically dead or unbelievers who are spiritually dead) should give one pause. He addressed his letter to the saints at Ephesus; in what way were they then dead?

²²2 Tim. 1:4-5.

²³Acts 16:1-3.

²⁴Eph. 5:8-10.

²⁵Eph. 5:14.

Blissfully Unaware

Paul seems to be shouting to the Ephesian believers, “WAKE UP!” The Ephesians seemed not to realize the intentions that the enemy had in their lives; shameful things done in secret were still shameful, and dabbling in darkness meant turning away from Light.

Believers and Christian parents today need to heed God’s wakeup call as well. While parents sleep, the enemy is actively trying to lure them and their children away from the Lord. Left unchecked, the baseness of society infiltrates their homes and unbiblical doctrines influence both parents and children. The enemy uses the lures of the world and the flesh to lead people astray. Fascination with the occult has also become a preoccupation in today’s society. In virtually every small town and big city, fortune-tellers, spiritualists, and New-Age stores thrive. A local newspaper recently ran an article on a local spiritual adviser who gives clients regular “readings” to help them know what will happen in their lives and how to deal with the future.²⁶ The article was juxtaposed with church advertisements and articles about local churches. “It is sad to say that most believers have no idea what the Bible declares in its admonitions against magic, soul hunting, astrology, soothsaying, and the like.”²⁷

Before one realizes it, the lines between light and darkness have blurred, something that can have disastrous consequences for Christians today as well as for future generations. “The major ways we give claim to the Enemy in our lives are through sin and making agreements with him. “Most of our sins fall under the category of pride

²⁶*The Bull Run Observer*, March 2, 2012, 25-26.

²⁷Jacobs, 29.

(independence from God), self-sufficiency and idolatry (giving our devotion or fear or any part of the heart to something other than God).²⁸ Parents must intentionally walk in the light and protect themselves and their children from the evil one. A game plan for those wanting to protect themselves and their children is found in Ephesians.

Arming Ourselves and Our Children

The first thing that parents can do for themselves and their children is to put on the full armor of God. Paul reminds us that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but rather against powers and principalities, spiritual entities in the high places, and evil rulers of this dark age.²⁹ Successfully donning the full armor of God is the key to victory against the enemy, abiding in the protection of God's Spirit and power. Parents first must get right with God and protect themselves from succumbing to the enemy's schemes before they are in the position to equip and disciple their children to do so.

There is a wonderful interrelatedness among all the elements of the "armor of God" as delineated by Paul. One facet of the armor lacks full power in the life of a believer without the other pieces. All aspects of the armor of God find their source in Jesus Christ, His gospel message, and His command to make disciples.

The Belt of Truth

What is the belt of truth? In the Psalms, the word "truth" is frequently used of God. The Hebrew, '*emeth*, indicates stability, firmness, sureness.³⁰ Psalm 100 claims that God's truth is everlasting, to all generations. Psalm 108 states that the Lord's truth is so

²⁸John Eldredge, *Waking the Dead*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2003), 175.

²⁹Eph. 6:10-11.

³⁰<http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H571&t=KJV>.

great, it reaches to the clouds. In praying for His disciples, Jesus said, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.”³¹

If the truth, God’s word, is sanctifying, firm, stable, and everlasting, and believers are commanded to “put on” the belt of truth,” then the way for one to put on the belt of truth and be sanctified is through reading Scripture. The belt of truth directs us away from sin: “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.”³² Elsewhere the psalmist says, “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.”³³ The belt of truth can be trusted; it is firm, sure, and eternal. Children should be schooled in the truth, not simply for the sake of rote memorization, but because God’s word has the power to transform, direct, and sanctify.

The Breastplate of Righteousness

Righteousness is another of God’s attributes; He is just and always in the right. How does this attribute of righteousness apply to people? In the Old Testament, when Abraham covenanted with God, Scripture states that “he believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”³⁴ David asked God to judge him according to his righteousness, and in the twenty-third psalm, he asks God to lead him in paths of

³¹John 17:17-19, NKJV.

³²Psalms 119:11, NKJV.

³³Psalms 19:7.

³⁴Gen. 15:16.

righteousness.³⁵ From these few passages, we can glean that people can indeed be counted righteous by believing and trusting in God and allowing Him to guide their ways; we can also trust that everyone will be judged based on their righteousness or lack thereof.

Another usage of the word for righteousness is justification, to be made righteous. The source of this righteousness is prophesied by Malachi: “But to you who fear My name, the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings.”³⁶ Paul, in his letter to the Romans, states that our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God and that true righteousness comes from faith in Jesus Christ.³⁷ Romans 10:10 affirms that “with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”³⁸ Children need to be taught not only that God’s word is truth but that God is righteous and that by believing and trusting in Jesus, we also can be deemed righteous and justified by God.

The Shoes of the Gospel Message

Followers of Jesus are told to be prepared to share the gospel of peace.³⁹ Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples of others, teaching others all the things that He had taught them.⁴⁰ Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that they were ambassadors

³⁵Psalm 7:8; 23:3.

³⁶Mal. 4:2.

³⁷Rom. 3:5,22.

³⁸Rom. 10:10, NKJV.

³⁹Eph. 6:15.

⁴⁰Matt. 28:16-20.

for Christ, beseeching others to be reconciled to God.⁴¹ Elsewhere in the New Testament, believers are told to always be able to give a reason for the hope that they have.⁴²

Children not only need to be taught God's word and the gospel message; they also need to be taught to share that message with others in the course of their daily lives.

The Shield of Faith

All of this requires faith, which is essential to pleasing God.⁴³ Interestingly, Paul states that the shield of faith will stop and render ineffective *all* the attacks of the evil one: not some, not most, but *all* of Satan's attacks. This cannot be overemphasized; faith can halt all the attacks of the enemy. Faith, therefore, is a very powerful defensive weapon.

Throughout Scripture, there are countless examples of God demonstrating His power in response to an act of faith by an individual. The Red Sea parted as Moses lifted his staff over it, having faith in God's promise.⁴⁴ Hannah conceived Samuel after pouring out her heart to the Lord and having faith that he would answer.⁴⁵ Jesus healed many in response to their faith: the centurion's servant, the woman afflicted with blood flow, the blind man.⁴⁶

Faith is an attribute that needs to be cultivated in our children. They need to see their parents acting in faith and resting in God's promises. They need to know the many

⁴¹1 Cor. 5:20.

⁴²1 Pet. 3:15.

⁴³Heb. 11:6.

⁴⁴Ex. 14:21.

⁴⁵1 Sam. 1:9-18.

⁴⁶Matt. 8:5; 9:19-21; 9:28.

examples of faithful servants in the Bible, and they need to be affirmed each and every time they make a move of faith towards the Lord.

The Helmet of Salvation

Once one is saved, he belongs to God and is no longer a child of wrath.⁴⁷ The free gift of salvation includes eternal life rather than condemnation.⁴⁸ Along with salvation comes the assurance of the indwelling Holy Spirit, God's seal of promise until the day of redemption.⁴⁹ Salvation not only assures our redemption and justification but also provides us with the promised Helper, Who will teach us all things and enable us to understand God's will.⁵⁰ With salvation, we are equipped to be God's hands and feet on earth, sharing His love and His truth with others.⁵¹

The Bible says that salvation (through faith) comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.⁵² This further demonstrates the interconnectedness among all aspects of the full armor of God. Salvation and faith only come by hearing the words of the gospel of peace and trusting in God's word and His righteousness.

Parents' chief concern should be their children's spiritual health: their salvation and growth in the Lord. Although the Lord does not guarantee that children disciplined in believing homes will be saved, He promises that He will show love to those who love Him (which would include raising their children in His ways) and tells children who obey

⁴⁷John 17:9-11; Eph. 2:3.

⁴⁸John 5:24.

⁴⁹Eph. 1:13, 4:30.

⁵⁰John 14:26.

⁵¹John 20:21.

⁵²Rom. 10:17.

their parents that this is the first commandment with promise that things will go well for them, which is consistent with being saved and walking as a child of the Lord.⁵³

The Sword of the Spirit

The sword of the Spirit, the word of God, is the primary offensive weapon in Paul's list of the full armor of God. Scripture says, "The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."⁵⁴

Even Jesus used the word of God to rebuke the enemy. When He was led into the wilderness by the Spirit, at the end of a long and hard fast, the enemy came to tempt Him. Each time Satan approached Him, Jesus used Scripture to send him on his way.⁵⁵

If following Jesus' example is not enough reason to have a good working knowledge of Scripture, here's another: the enemy knows the word of God quite well. In the above example of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, Satan used a perversion of Scripture each time he tempted Jesus. He used the same tactic when he tempted Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; however, unlike Jesus, they fell prey to Satan's evil devices.⁵⁶ To be ignorant of Scripture is to be vulnerable to the enemy. The Bible tells us to be careful because Satan and his minions wander around the earth seeking those they can devour. Scripture promises that when we resist the enemy, he will

⁵³Ex. 20:6; Eph. 6:2.

⁵⁴Heb. 4:12.

⁵⁵Matt. 4:1-11.

⁵⁶Gen.3.

flee from us.⁵⁷ A solid working knowledge of the word of God goes a long way in strengthening our and our children's immunity to the enemy's schemes. Parents have a responsibility to train their children to resist the devil.

The Abiding Weapon of Prayer

Although prayer is not specifically enumerated among the armor of God, it is the first thing that Paul mentions after he lists the pieces of armor. He reminds his readers to pray always.⁵⁸ Jesus prayed regularly, and he taught His disciples to pray. Throughout the Bible, we see God respond to those who seek Him through prayer. People were saved as a result of prayer; babies were conceived as a result of prayer; many were healed as a result of prayer; demons were cast out as a result of prayer. God answered and answers prayer.

Prayer is the catalyst that allows the other aspects of the armor to work effectively. Jesus said, "Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."⁵⁹ He told his followers to ask, seek, and knock, persisting in approaching God, and promised that He would answer.⁶⁰

There are few things as exciting to a child as praying for something and then seeing God answer that prayer. Young children, especially, find it difficult to understand abstract concepts, things that they cannot experience with their senses. Answered prayers demonstrate to children the reality of a God they cannot see, feel, touch, hear, or smell. Parents must pray for their children and with their children and teach them to seek Him

⁵⁷ 1 Pet. 5:8; James 4:7.

⁵⁸ Eph. 6:19.

⁵⁹ Matt. 21:22.

⁶⁰ Matt. 7:7.

not only for their needs but for the sake of communing with Him. Scripture promises that when they do, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard [their] hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”⁶¹ What better guardian of hearts and minds than Jesus?

The Consequences of Chinks in the Christian’s Armor

The consequences to Christians who fail to recognize and proactively guard against the enemy can be heartbreaking. While an in depth discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief mention is warranted and necessary. Children and parents who are not clad in the armor of God and who do not have Jesus as the guardian of their hearts and minds are at great risk.

The topic of whether or not Christians can be overtly attacked and influenced by the enemy is quite controversial. The traditional view of most evangelicals is that once a person has come to Jesus in faith and is saved, he or she is off-limits to the enemy and cannot be harassed by or harbor demons. It is true that once a person has put faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior that the enemy cannot steal them back. However, if we hold firm to the notion that a Christian--child or adult--cannot fall prey to demons and be influenced or tormented by them, we then let down our guard and become more vulnerable to attack.

If we hold that Christians [cannot] be demonized, then we have to acknowledge that there is not remedy for believers who experience seeming uncontrollable battering by powerful forces that daily influence their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. We find ourselves in the strange position of being able to offer effective spiritual solutions to those who are demonized but not Christians while being able to do nothing for those with the same symptoms who have given their

⁶¹Phil.. 4:7.

hearts, minds, and their lives to the Lord. We condemn believers who remain in bondage but offer relief to those who reject our Lord.⁶²

Only a handful of ministries in the United States exist to help Christians who have spiritual issues of this nature. The goal of this paper and my EPIC Families ministry is not to promote these ministries or stir up a controversial topic, but rather to acknowledge the truth that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against spiritual enemies of the Lord who seek to destroy us and our testimonies. My goal is to draw parents and their families into a biblical model of discipleship, one that encourages them to put on the full armor of God and protect themselves from the enemy and his minions.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Scripture warns us of the dangers of idolatry, sin, and straying from God's way of living life. If we believe the problem of Satan's allies attacking Christians does not and cannot exist, then we blindly put ourselves and our families in a position to be attacked. My goal is prevention. Parents and children who closely walk with the Lord and put on His armor are much less likely to fall victim to the enemy, suffer the consequences in their own lives, and ruin their Christian testimony.

Summary

A biblical model of child discipleship is centered on the home and parents. Parents bear the responsibility of raising their children to know and love the Lord; they will have to answer to God for their action or inaction. Faith nurturing must also begin in the home and should primarily be done by mothers and fathers. The church's role in child discipleship should only be relevant as the family, and thus the children, are a part of a broader faith community. That will be explored in the following chapter.

⁶²Dave Appleby, *It's Only a Demon, A Model of Christian Deliverance*, (Winona Lakes, IN: BMH Books, 2009), 54.

Chapter Four

Helping Parents Reclaim their Biblical Mandate: The Church's Role

While parents bear the primary responsibility for faith formation in their children, the church has a role in discipleship as well. Children do not grow up in a vacuum but are part of the broader faith community. After all, from the beginning of Scripture, family and community are the two means that God ordained for the perpetuation of the faith. In Adam and Eve, God created a family unit and told them to be fruitful and multiply.¹ As humanity progressed, God called the people of Israel into a relationship with Him and worked to develop them as His people.² Faith-nurturing should take place both in the nuclear family as well as in the church family. The church can and should facilitate opportunities for spiritual growth, for parents as well as children.

The challenge arises when the church takes on the role of *primary* spiritual mentor for children with the parents playing a secondary role. There will always be parents who, for many reasons (ignorance, spiritual immaturity, and others), abrogate their responsibilities to the church. The church needs to walk the fine line between providing spiritual support and nurture for those children who would otherwise fall through the cracks and becoming the spiritual authority and guide for all children. The church must work closely with parents, discerning what parents are seeking to accomplish in the lives of their children

¹Gen. 1:28).

²May, 129.

and the areas in which they struggle. “The church [must then try] to figure out how to add value to the process that is already in motion.”³

Faith Communities in Biblical Times

Children were a vital part of the faith community in ancient times. When God called the Israelites out of Egypt and instituted the Passover, He called men, women, and children. As the Hebrews followed the cloud pillar by day and the pillar of fire by night, whole families, including children, formed the broader faith community. As they prepared to enter into the Promised Land, Moses challenged the entire group to obey God’s laws and statutes for their children’s sake.⁴ “God intended that the life of a God-honoring community and nation would nurture the faith of children.”⁵

Each year as families gathered to celebrate the Passover and other feasts, their children learned about God and what He had done for His people. They learned about God’s deliverance from slavery, to give thanks for his provisions, and to seek atonement for their sins.⁶ “Children had the great privilege of learning the stories of God’s goodness as they worshiped with the whole faith community. They knew who they were in that community through its stories and reenactment of them.”⁷ Then and now, at a traditional Passover Seder, children asked questions about the unleavened bread or the bitter herbs, giving the elders the opportunity to explain God’s deliverance and provision.

³Barna, 99.

⁴Deut. 6:1-25.

⁵May, 130.

⁶Deut. 16:1-7; Num. 29:7-11.

⁷May 130.

Throughout the Old Testament, children are present when the larger faith community convenes before the Lord. When Joshua renews the nations' covenant with the Lord and reiterates the Ten Commandments, he does so "before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, *the little ones*, and the strangers who were living among them [italics added]."⁸ When Jehoshaphat pleaded with the Lord for deliverance from the Ammonites and their allies, proclaimed a national fast, and addressed the people, "... all Judah, with their *little ones*, their wives, and their *children*, stood before the Lord [italics added]".⁹ On the day that Nehemiah dedicated the newly built wall around Jerusalem to the Lord, the people "offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and *the children also rejoiced*, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off [italics added]."¹⁰

In the New Testament accounts of Jesus and His ministry, this pattern continues. When Jesus and His parents journeyed to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, they did so with a large company of people. The group was large enough that when Mary and Joseph could not find Jesus, they simply assumed He was walking with another contingent of their group.¹¹ Whenever crowds gathered around Jesus, children seem to have been present in numbers large enough for the disciples to take notice and want to shoo them away from Him, prompting Jesus to rebuke them as He welcomed the children. When He fed the 5000 men, a *lad* provided the five fish and two loaves that he multiplied to feed

⁸Joshua 8:35.

⁹2 Chron. 20:13.

¹⁰Neh. 20:43.

¹¹Luke 2:41-52.

the masses.¹² Clearly, children were present along with adults and were accepted as part of the faith community.

Children as Part of Faith Communities Today

Children need to be accepted and integrated as part of the broader faith community today. In most churches (mine included) children, while considered part of the faith community, are kept segregated from the adults. Cooing babies cooing, nursing mothers, and young children are discouraged from attending the main service. Our hesitancy to readily accept them into the main teaching service stems in part from cultural norms, and in part from not wanting to disrupt the important business of teaching. Children are often seen as a “nuisance.” But is that not what Jesus rebuked His disciples for?

The purpose of this study is not to advocate the overthrow of existing church structure in the United States, but rather to promote a way to integrate children into the adult activities and adults into the children’s activities so that they learn from each other, and view themselves as a single faith community. After all, children and adults together form the body of Christ. While a paradigm change is necessary, the outcome still must fit into the way in which society functions.

Venues for Integration

There are many possibilities for inclusion of children even within existing church structure. Small groups or cell groups perhaps offer the most readily available opportunity for intergenerational integration. Structured family events both in “big” church or kids’ church can also be orchestrated to allow children to experience church

¹²John 6:9.

with the grown-ups and to allow parents to worship with their children. There are also many service opportunities in which children and adults can participate together.

Small Groups

Small group meetings provide a logical gathering point for children and adults. Typically, children present at small group gatherings are sent into another room to play while the adults learn about Scripture and Jesus. What about a small group gathering where the children and their parents learn and fellowship side-by-side? Together, a group of families, parents and children, could form a mini-faith community and support each other, learn together, pray together, and serve together. Children like doing what adults do. Anyone who has ever watched a four-year-old “mow” the lawn or “wash” the dishes can attest to that.

There are many activities within small groups in which children and adults can find common ground: eating, praying, worshiping, storytelling, and sharing, to name a few.

A meal is a cohesive action among people. It is a place of trust and acceptance. Children who eat with adults learn adult patterns of eating behavior. Older children, teens, or other adults, can assist the little ones to give their mothers a rest. It is not accident that in both the Old and New Testaments the central act of worship was in the form of a meal. At meal time, children can learn to serve others.¹³

Children have an innate ability to pray with a simple faith and fervor that many adults lack. Children of almost any age can lead group prayer by praying for things that are near and dear to their hearts. Adults in the group can bolster the faith and confidence of children by inviting them to pray. The group could even keep a prayer diary that records answers to the prayers of both children and adults.

¹³Neighbor, 305.

Music and storytelling also provide ways that adults and children can experience God together. “It is amazing how children sense the awe of being in the presence of God. If worship and praise is genuine, they will be able to appreciate it even when they cannot comprehend it.”¹⁴ Storytelling is an intergenerational activity that has occurred since the beginning of time. The Bible, God’s Great Story, offers wonderful opportunities for families to learn together. Biblical accounts can be read expressively by adults, acted out, or read by older children. A small group venue offers opportunities for intergenerational sharing and fellowship.

Monthly Family Gatherings

Many churches concerned about divisions between children and adults have facilitated monthly events where children and their parents can come together to learn and worship. Northpoint Community Church’s Kidstuf is one of these events that is integrated into the curriculum produced and sold by the church. According to the Northpoint website, Kidstuf exists to partner with parents and to equip them to fulfill their mandate as directed in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. The Kidstuf program, a 45 minute event, for parents and children focuses on the one “big idea” that is in the monthly curriculum. Parents and children learn about the concept together, and then parents take home a “Virtue Packet” that provides them with ideas on how to reinforce and teach the idea at home during the month.¹⁵

This idea has a lot of merit. The program brings families together and seeks to provide parents with the tools they need to disciple their children at home. However, it also has

¹⁴Ibid., 305.

¹⁵<http://kidstuf.com/about/faqs/#q2> .

some drawbacks; primarily that it is still program-related and church-driven. An additional staff is required to implement the program, which requires extensive preparation. It also operates under the assumption that parents will do the required follow-up at home. From personal experience with parents and even in my own household, I can confirm that it is sometimes difficult to fit the prescribed activities into weekly activities, and they often just stay on the refrigerator without being implemented. Still, this type of monthly gathering is a step in the right direction since it brings parents and children together and it seeks to empower parents to disciple their children, albeit under the instruction of the “expert” church leaders.

Kids in “Big Church”

Just as parents can attend a children’s program with their kids, children can also attend the main church service. Many of us grew up this way and remember sitting in big church even from a young age. Whether or not children in church understand and can apply the sermon to their own lives is an open question. In fact, one of the primary reasons for kids’ church is so that the children can learn Scripture and its application in a way that is relevant to their lives. Never-the-less, children will benefit from periodically sitting in church with their parents. Many churches routinely do this at Christmas and Easter and also have special Sundays when the children come in to sing or to present a Bible verse that they have memorized. Children in big church can be a good thing; it reinforces the concept that kids are part of the broader faith community, both in the minds of the children and the adults.

Mission and Service Opportunities

Many opportunities exist for children and parents to serve together. Locally, children and their parents can visit assisted living facilities to play Bingo with residents. They can also gather canned food to donate to a local food bank or bring freshly baked cookies to neighbors as ways of showing Jesus' love to others. At Christmas, children can fill a shoebox with toys and supplies for a child in another country. Activities like these not only teach children that they are part of the larger faith community but that the world is much broader than their little realm of home and church.

Serving others as a family in the name of Jesus firmly embeds the practice of Christian service in the lives of even young children. The baton of faith is passed on through the activities of everyday life, when those activities include purposeful service and evangelism. Families can do this on their own; small groups can band together, or the church can organize a day in which children and adults all serve together as part of the body of Christ.

Positive Results of Kids in the Faith Community

Viewing and treating children as a vital part of the body of Christ can only have positive long-term results. The same principles applied by Paul to members of the body of Christ who have different complementary spiritual gifts can also be applied to the diverse mixture of adults and children that make up Jesus' kingdom.¹⁶ Along the lines of Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts, one could also say, "there is neither adult nor child, teen nor toddler; we are all part of one body." After all, Jesus commanded His disciples to let the children come to Him and stated that they played an important role in His kingdom.

¹⁶1 Cor. 12:12.

Children are important to Jesus and an integral part of His kingdom; they must be important to us, too.

Children's Church

Since children are important to Jesus, churches should take great care, not only to integrate them into the large church community, but also to ensure that, when they are at church, they are being taught in a way that will facilitate their relationship with the Savior. During the one hour each week that the children are in church, they should come to see how they fit into God's big plan. They need to be taught a curriculum that is scriptural, transformative, and focuses on the big picture.

Curriculum Matters

It is so easy to get caught up in teaching minutia that may be biblical but does nothing to move a child further down the path of discipleship. Many curricula fall into this category, so children's pastors must use great discernment when choosing a curriculum to ensure that it is teaching the whole word of God and pointing children toward Jesus as the author and finisher of their faith.¹⁷

A solid curriculum also should be one that recognizes the parents as the primary spiritual leaders of their children. There should be an expectation that parents regularly discuss the word of God at home with their children, and supplemental materials should be made available to the parents for use at home. An environment that fosters a partnership between the church and parents should be demonstrated by both teaching and take-home materials. An ideal curriculum will offer a both/and approach, one that

¹⁷Heb. 12:2.

acknowledges the biblical role of parents in discipleship but that also presents solid biblical teaching to children.

Scriptural

A solid curriculum must focus on the big picture and provide children and their families with a biblical world view; it must be scriptural and teach the whole truth of the Bible. The Bible presents God's truths for daily living and holds instruction for children to interpret their lives through the lens of God's character and will. Because the Bible is a story about God's love and redemption, a solid curriculum will be God-focused. Events in the Bible should primarily be presented in light of what they reveal about God's character rather than exclusively focusing on the people God used to demonstrate his power. While there is much to be learned from studying the responses of biblical figures to the Lord's entreaties, a solid curriculum should ultimately point toward God, His love, His power, His holiness, and His glory.

A good curriculum will be true to the content and context of the Bible. It will present the big picture; Old Testament events can be presented in light of New Testament truths. Rather than presenting a series of disjointed stories, a solid curriculum will accurately show God's plan of redemption that has been woven through the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

Transformative

Jesus' parting words instructed His followers to make disciples; therefore, the material that is taught must have the goal of disciple-making.¹⁸ What is a disciple of Jesus? Jesus

¹⁸Matt. 28:18-20.

said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”¹⁹ He told his followers that He would make them fishers of men and that what they saw Him do, they also would do.²⁰ Jesus told Nicodemus that one must be born again.²¹ Paul confirms that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old is gone; all things have become new.²²

A curriculum that makes disciples must be transformative. Romans 12: 2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” The material that is taught in church should be transformative in its application to the lives of children. It should lead them to the cross and the message of the gospel.

Recognizing that the Holy Spirit is the primary conveyer of conviction and spiritual formation, a solid curriculum will guide children to explore and investigate Scripture on their own. Those who serve in children’s ministry will have the privilege of coming alongside the Holy Spirit and partnering with Him as He directs and guides children.

Must Partner with Parents

A curriculum that is scriptural and transformative must also engage parents in the discipling process of their children. In today’s society, the biblical responsibility of parents has largely been ceded to the church; this paradigm must change. The church needs to give up the role of “expert” and encourage parents to be the discipling experts of their own children. This will not be easy for either the parents or the church. The church

¹⁹Matt. 16:24.

²⁰Mark 1:17; John 14:12.

²¹John 3.

²²2 Cor. 5:17.

has failed to act as the equipper and mentor of parents for so long that it seems awkward to take on that role and relinquish the role of expert. Recognizing that it is not enough to simply inform parents that it is their biblical responsibility to mentor and disciple their children, those in charge of children's ministries must develop a good curriculum that will find ways to involve parents in the daily and weekly mentoring of their children. It will intentionally and purposefully orchestrate activities, readings, and service that parents and children can do together, tilting the scales back toward a biblical mode of child discipleship.

I was once asked by my pastor how much of my time as a children's pastor should be spent teaching the Bible to kids and how much should be allocated for developing processes to return children's discipleship to parents. The answer upon which we agreed upon was that there have to be two parallel processes: one to mentor and teach children, the other to encourage and equip parents to reclaim that role.

The change cannot happen overnight, but happen it must. "What's needed is a Deuteronomy 6 approach to discipling: for families to talk about and live the reality of God's presence and truth as they walk, talk, sit, stand, and lie down. [The church needs] to help parents discover that following Jesus alongside their children is a daily thing, not a Sunday-at-church thing."²³ Many publishers of children's curricula now recognize this and incorporate family activities into their programs.

Kidstuf Kidstuf is a part of Northpoint's 252 children's church curriculum and includes a monthly "show" for parents to attend with their children. Here, the monthly virtue (the cornerstone of this curriculum) is presented through song and skits. The curriculum also

²³Sciarra, 63-4.

makes available refrigerator sheets that include each week's lesson with daily suggestions for home discussions and an optional monthly "virtue pack" that includes music and other lessons on CD so that parents can reinforce each month's lesson at home. The process is still guided by the "experts," but it is a step in the right direction.²⁴

Tru Homefront Tru, a curriculum from David C Cook Publishers offers a weekly and monthly take-home resource for parents. The weekly "Homefront" provides information about upcoming lessons so that children can first hear the Bible story and verse at home with their parents before having it presented at church. This provides an excellent way for the church to partner with parents while allowing parents to retain the role of primary spiritual mentor to their children.²⁵

Epic Families Epic (Equipping Parents, Inspiring Children) Families is a ministry that I have started. The goal of this ministry is to simultaneously equip parents to fulfill their biblical role by providing activities and Bible studies that parents can do with their children and that children will find interesting and engaging. The basic processes of Epic modules include parents praying for and with their children; families reading and memorizing Scripture together each week, and parents and children praying for and serving others together. We have recently begun to formulate a weekly gathering called Epic Preschoolers that will consist of moms and their young children coming together each week for a different activity (music, craft, Bible story, games). Each weekly meeting will begin and end with prayer but will not always include explicit Bible teaching. Not only will this be an activity for them to do together, but it will also foster a safe

²⁴www.252basics.org

²⁵ <http://tru.davidccook.com/Pages/Features.aspx#homefront>

environment where Christian moms and their children can intermingle with families from the community. Similarly, Epic Kids will be launched in fall of 2012 and will be geared toward elementary-aged children. It will run concurrently with the church's youth group and provide a venue for younger siblings and parents to learn and grow together while the teens have their weekly service. While the Epic programs are still related to church activities and centered at the church (for now), they are designed to help parents and children transition back to the roles that God has planned for them. Each of the curricula is meant to be a fun as well as meaningful process that allow parents to be the greatest influencers in their children's faith formation, with the church in a secondary and supportive role.

Razzle Dazzle

Even among churches that seek to restore parents as the primary spiritual mentor to their own children, there is an emphasis on excitement, bling, and over-the-top settings and productions. North point Community Church is one of the pioneers of razzle-dazzle ministry to kids. Kidstuf is described as

a 45 minute children's church conglomeration that is led by two mismatched hosts, several wacky actors, cool captivating videos, and compelling storytellers so that kids [will] attend and learn the Bible in a fast, noisy, multimedia programmed, kid-focused, parent-centered, nurture-centered extravaganza each Sunday morning. Following the rule of "fun-fun-fun," the church attempts to teach in a profound way the one truth-what they call the bottom line-each Sunday.²⁶

Is this necessary or even helpful? Does the church need to go to such lengths in order to compete with the world's attractions? This has become a trend in children's ministry; many are described as better than a Christian Disneyland or more fun than a McDonald's

²⁶Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2007), 166.

play land. Even proponents of this style of ministry argue that without solid Bible teaching and emphasis on the life-changing power of the gospel they would be meaningless. I wonder, however, if all the glitz and glamor distract and detract from the gospel instead.

How much is too much? While there is nothing wrong with an attractive, engaging, and interesting children's area, is it possible to go too far? How much is too much? Children are so used to television shows, video games, and fast-paced activities that churches which run their children's church in this manner run the risk of having it be like every other activity. There has to be a balance between exciting productions and calm but meaningful activities.

I have intentionally experimented with simple Bible and gospel presentations and have seen children enthralled by several small items in a dish pan. The simplicity of a teacher sitting on a rug with some simple object lessons attracted them far more than the busy setting around them. Just recently, I had the same reaction when I led a group of children through the story of Easter using a set of Resurrection Eggs. The kids waited with anticipation as each egg was opened and its contents passed around as they tried to guess its significance in the Easter story. They sat quietly and responded with questions that indicated they understood the lesson I was presenting.

I have also been a part of bigger productions. I think they have merit from time to time. However, I see two dangers in this type of children's church. When a church consistently does this type of programming, it can quickly come to idolize the production. It can begin to place too much emphasis on the production's quality and focus and too little emphasis on the message that the production is attempting to share. I have been

involved with children's ministry leaders who deem a production (or worse, a person) a failure because the production did not live up to expectations. We need to remember that God, even in His grandeur, is not ostentatious. When God revealed Himself to Elijah, He was not in the strong wind; He was not in the earthquake; nor was He in the fire. Instead, the Lord, the Creator of the universe, spoke to Elijah in a still, small voice.²⁷ Sometimes in children's ministry, we focus on the strong wind, the earthquake, or the fire, and the quiet voice of God is overlooked.

My experience has also taught me that children respond with much more understanding when they are part of a production as opposed to when they are spectators. By clothing children in a simple biblical costume and having them act out a Bible story, leaders can make the story meaningful to them. By playing fun games to reinforce Bible verses, children tend to remember them. The activities do not need to be costly or slick productions in order for them to be meaningful to the children. Sometimes less is more.

ADD Children's Churches Yes; the church needs to offer activities that are interesting and meaningful to all students. In my ministry, I consistently need to come up with ways to attract those to whom the pastor refers as "the lost boys," those boys with ADHD or who just have a good case of "boy." They need activities that engage and involve them. While we need to address children with attention issues, we do not need to create a paradigm in children's ministry that is so razzle-dazzle, so over the top, that our programming becomes disjointed and so focused on doing and being more, that we become ADHD ourselves, institutionally.

²⁷1 Kings 19:11-12.

We must walk a fine line between conducting attractional ministry and meaningful, memorable ministry. Children's areas can and should be attractive and engaging, but the focus still must be on sharing the word of God with children while they are in our care. We need to make sure that our environment is such that the still, small voice of God, and His message of the gospel can get through.

Faith Community Outreach

In addition to offering services to children and families who attend church, there are several things that churches can do to engage unchurched children and families in their communities. Formal outreach activities like vacation bible schools, trunk or treats, and living nativities are some of the special events that can be held each year to reach members of the community who would not normally attend church. Churches can also offer activities that meet specific needs of families in the community.

Preschool Programs

A church can offer organized activities for preschoolers and their moms during the week; one need not go the route of offering a complete preschool program. There are several things the church can offer without blurring its mission by venturing into a formal preschool.

A support group for mothers of preschoolers such as MOPS can be offered at the church facility. MOPS defines itself as "a place to find friendship, community, resources and support for you as a woman and mother so you're not alone. Moms have found

community through MOPS for almost 40 years.”²⁸ MOPS is wonderful support group for mothers and can provide an entry point for the church into the community.

A similar program that is for moms together with their children is Mainly Music. Similar in purpose to MOPS, Mainly Music provides a short weekly music program for preschoolers followed by play time for the kids and fellowship time for moms. It is designed to mingle Christian and non-Christian moms in a safe environment.²⁹

Both of these programs charge initial and annual fees, both to the church and to those who attend. While the monies involved are not outrageous (\$400-\$500 per church; \$20-\$30 per family), they may still be out of reach for smaller churches. A church could set up their own program, as mine is planning to do and avoid all church associated fees and charge a lesser amount to families who attend.

GAP Kids

In any community there will be kids who fall through the cracks; we call them GAP Kids at my church. These are normally children with two working parents who come home after school and remain there alone until dinner time. In my area, where two hour commutes are common, children might be alone for much longer. Churches can offer tutoring or after school care for these children. This need not be free either, depending upon the resources of the community in which the church is located. An after school tutoring program can become a self-supporting way to serve people in the community by fulfilling a need.

²⁸MOPS International, Mothers of Preschoolers, www.mops.org

²⁹www.mainlymusic.org

Many churches have identified this need and have begun programs to touch at-risk teens with the love of Jesus. We plan on launching one possibly in January 2013 once we have settled into our new facility. FASTEN Network (Faith and Service Technical Education Network), located in Charlottesville, Virginia, offers free resources to churches desiring to reach out to their communities through tutoring and mentoring programs. This organization has compiled a library of “best practices” and provides valuable resources to churches interested in starting a program like this.³⁰

Community Celebrations

In addition to offering major outreach events throughout the year and day-to-day service to children and their families, churches can also offer periodic special events in the community. In the summer when school is out, weekly or monthly “Movie and a Message” outings can be held at the church facility. A child-friendly film can be shown along with a brief message latching onto some point of the movie that can be woven into a gospel presentation. A church van can conduct block parties or sports contests in neighborhoods in the community. These free events introduce families to the church and allow the church to serve the community. Churches can also organize parties that acknowledge special transitions in kids’ lives, such as moving from elementary to middle school; middle school to high school; or high school to college. I call these events Family Fun and Celebration parties and try to hold at least one a year, usually in the summer just prior to when the children move up to their new school grade.

³⁰www.fastennetwork.org

Children Discipling Parents?

Activities that involve parents and children are healthy because they emphasize family and can at least form a bridge to mentor parents and encourage them to return to their biblical role as primary spiritual leaders in their households. But what about families in which the children have accepted Jesus as Savior but the parents have not? In many respects the traditional expectations have been turned upside down as a lost generation of young adults, whose parents may have abandoned organized religion, have no firm Christian mooring. As a children's pastor, I see more and more of these families. One or both parents may bring their children to church, but since they are not believers, they are not equipped to raise their children to know and love the Lord because they do not know what that means.

All of the processes and programs discussed above can be adapted to include the entire family, even those that have a believing child and an unbelieving parent. The parents can be reached through the children. In fact, that is one of the main reasons that churches invest so much in their children's departments and do things to ensure that children have a good time at church events; they feel that if they can attract the children, they will reach the parents. This has been confirmed in survey after survey. Says one mother who received Jesus after attending a church because she was impressed with their kids' program, "You know, I now realize I was hell-bound.... I never would have returned to Lakeview without the great ministry of Wee Care....Do you think churches realize that good childcare may make an eternal difference in someone's life? Do they really understand?"³¹

³¹Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 92.

A smart church will take a dual approach; it will reach out to and mentor parents who are already Christians, equipping them to disciple their own children. Through service and outreach, the church will also evangelize and serve children and families in the community who may not yet be Christians. Jesus came to seek and save the lost; the church must do the same.³²

³²Luke 19:10.

Chapter Five

Helping Parents Reclaim Their Biblical Mandate: The Parents' Responsibility

This chapter is written to parents and to those who work with parents. It contains biblical directives and examples from Scripture of people who obeyed God and the resulting blessings they received. In the biblical model of children's discipleship, the responsibility for teaching God's truths to children is given to the parents, not Sunday school or children's church, not Christian schools, not the children's pastor, but the parents. The church must help parents reclaim their biblical roles as spiritual mentors to their own children, and, if the church is to give the responsibility back to the parents, the parents must be ready to reclaim their biblical role.

Many parents are either unprepared or apathetic about their biblical role. A survey that I conducted via email and Facebook, sent to more than 400 people in my church and community only yielded thirty-four responses. Twenty percent of respondents said that they thought it was the church's job to teach biblical truths to their children. A similar number indicated that they were strongly or somewhat uncomfortable teaching their children about God's word and their place in His plan. Sixty-seven percent said they prayed *for* their children every day, but only thirty-three percent said they prayed *with* their children or read the Bible with them each day. A similar grouping of respondents prayed for others in their sphere of influence and, together with their children, sought ways to touch them with the love of Jesus.

Seventy-two percent said they wished more resources were available for parents who wish to train up their children to love and serve the Lord. Interestingly, the twenty-eight percent who said they did not want more resources also posted very negative comments, indicating that there were either too many resources available or that they did not have the time to browse through or read any resources to help them in discipling their children. Although seventy-two percent indicated that they desire more resources, only sixty-seven percent accepted the offer of a free hard or soft copy of the Epic Families booklet, and of those, only a fraction actually provided an email address or mailing address to receive one. I was rather surprised and disappointed in the response, considering that many of the respondents were parents of children whom I pastor (perhaps that means my team is doing its job too well).

Fifteen people received copies of the Epic Families booklet. After church one day, I found one of the copies in the ladies room; no-one claimed it. That leaves fourteen families who started the Epic Families program. One of the more interesting things that I noticed was that the families who showed the most interest were the ones with the youngest children, almost too young to do the program. That is positive from the perspective that they are starting while their children are young; it is disappointing because some of the children who really could benefit from parental discipleship are the very ones who will not be participating in the program. Further results will be discussed in chapter six.

Parents must spend time discipling their children. God's word must permeate their households. Discipleship must be both informational and incarnational. Parents need to teach their children through their words and actions that the Bible is completely true and

the most important book they can learn. Children must see parents put into practice principles learned from the Bible and learn that they love God and his word.¹

A Discipling Process that is Informational and Incarnational²

While it is important to teach Bible verses and biblical truths to children, it is not enough. The wisdom of the Shema bears repeating: Parents are to love God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength. His words should penetrate to the very heart of their being, and all of their actions should flow from Him. Not only should they teach God's words diligently to their children, but they should talk about them in the course of their daily lives...as they sit in their homes, walk down the road, when they lie down, and when they rise up.³ God's word must flow in, and His love must flow out.

An informational and incarnational approach to discipleship does not take a linear path from point A to point B. Rather, an informational and incarnational approach spirals upward and outward, moving toward God while simultaneously moving outward toward others. This approach also offers individuals the opportunity to constantly reevaluate their faith as God's word touches them in deeper and more profound ways. They may encounter identical situations throughout life, but as they are deepening and growing in their relationship with the Lord and others, their response may be different from what it would have been previously, because they have been transformed by the Word of God.

¹Fowler, 35.

²David Wheeler and Vernon M Whaley, *The Great Commission to Worship*, (Nashville, TN: B &H, 2011), 62-183.

³Deut. 6:6-9.

We no longer live in a society where basic Christian beliefs are accepted and taught as unconditional truths. Political correctness and moral relativity influence us and our children far more deeply than in previous generations. Foundational truths have been lost. “In the absence of foundational training, our young people have been influenced by a philosophy that permeates much of our society-government, schools, movies, television, and music-and guides much of their behaviors without them (or most of us) even being aware of it.”⁴ Parents cannot make the assumption that their children accept basic, biblical premises that pave the way for their acceptance of the gospel message.

Without foundational moorings, teens and young adults will drift from the faith. While it is never too late to begin learning God’s word or teaching it to children, the time to begin is now. Parents can learn along with their children. Every biblical precept that applies to children also applies to their parents.

The process of discipling children should not be a legalistic program; enough flexibility should be allowed in the model to accommodate busy family schedules. The goal is to equip parents to raise their children “in the training and admonition of the Lord,” while inspiring children to know and love the God who made them.⁵ The process should include Scripture passages, memory verses, and various application assignments. Daily prayer is also integral in the process: parents for children, and parents together with their children. The important thing is not *when* these topics are discussed and prayed for each day or week, but *that* they are discussed and put into action.

⁴McDowell, 43.

⁵Eph. 6:4.

The importance of daily prayer cannot be overemphasized. Scripture is clear that “... we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.”⁶ Prayer will pave the way for the Holy Spirit to work in parents’ hearts and in the hearts of their children. The Holy Spirit will be able to facilitate understanding and acceptance of biblical premises as parents and children study their Bibles together.⁷

Foundational⁸

A solid discipleship program must include foundational truths. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) is a good verse for children and parents to memorize.⁹ There is no better place to start than at the beginning. The first book of the Bible, indeed its first few chapters, contains foundational information that provides an essential filter through which to understand other biblical events.

Genesis, Chapter 1, which recounts the six days of creation and details exactly what God created on each day, is so familiar to children who have attended Sunday school that parents might be tempted to gloss over it. They should not. God is capable of giving, to those who ask, fresh eyes to see the miracle and majesty of His creation. The goal is not necessarily to memorize what was created on each day, although that can certainly be a fun exercise, but to note the scope and sequence of the biblical account of creation and to

⁶Eph. 4:12.

⁷Psalm 19:7.

⁸With the exception of Week One, Foundational Truths, the categories of each week follow those suggested by Wheeler and Whaley. The format as well as the informational/incarnational approach is taken from their *The Great Commission to Worship*, but the suggested Bible studies are unique to this study and tailored to the needs of children.

⁹www.singtheword.com. The Harrow family offers multiple CDs with Bible verses put to music. This is an excellent resource for parents who wish to memorize Scripture with their children.

appreciate the majesty of a God who was able to speak everything into being. For more in-depth study on the account of creation, Answers in Genesis provides specific answers to many challenging questions.¹⁰

A couple of passages that are of particular note in the first chapter of the Bible are Genesis 1:2b and 1:26. In the first passage, we see the first evidence of the Holy Spirit, as the “Spirit of God hovered over the waters.” In the second, we see the first suggestion of the Trinity; “God said, ‘Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness.’” The Bible implies a triune God right from the beginning.

John 1:1-3 complements the account of creation in Genesis 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.”¹¹ Jesus was not only present at the creation of the universe, He created it! From reading the first two verse of Genesis and the first few verses of the Gospel of John, we can see that the full Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) were all present at creation. Ephesians 3:9 also affirms that God created the world through Jesus Christ. In addition, Colossians 1:16 affirms, “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.”¹²

Additional details of creation are included in Genesis 2. This chapter discusses how God rested on the seventh day, setting a pattern for us to follow. It also describes the creation of man and woman in detail as well as the splendor of the Garden of Eden. It

¹⁰www.answersingenesis.org

¹¹ John 1:1-3, NKJV.

¹² Col. 1:16, NKJV.

illustrates the perfect relationship that existed between God and Adam and Eve. This chapter also states God's prohibition to Adam and Eve against eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They had everything they ever could have wanted and could partake of every tree in the garden except for one.

Genesis 3 details how sin entered the world and with it, death, just as God had promised when He told Adam and Eve not to eat from this particular tree. Children should be told about how the serpent (Satan actually) deceived Eve and tricked her into eating from the forbidden tree. They should learn how the enemy can twist God's word, just changing a nuance here or there in order to lead His creatures astray, with deadly consequences.

In spite of Adam and Eve's deceit, God promises a Savior. Genesis 3:15 predicts the coming of Jesus and His defeat of Satan: "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." Not even three chapters into the Bible, still during the beginning of life on earth, God gives his people the promise of a Savior!

God reiterates the promise of a Savior to Joseph, hundreds of years later, when He tells him of the impending birth of Jesus.¹³ Children need to be led to connect the dots from creation and the proto-evangelium to Jesus' arrival. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."¹⁴ Once again, the Bible tells us something amazing, that the Word, Jesus, who created the earth and everything in it, became flesh and lived among us. God with us, Jesus came to earth to live among us and save us from the tragic

¹³Matt. 1:18-24.

¹⁴John 1:14, NKJV.

betrayal of Adam and Eve. These are biblical facts about which we all should stand in awe.

Another foundational activity is prayer. As parents read through foundational Scripture with their children, they should prayerfully ask for discernment and wisdom. They should also pray that God will move them to love Him with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength and that they will love their neighbors as themselves. They should check in spiritually with their children, pray together, and pray for their children. They should also never underestimate the power of personal testimony and should regularly share their “God stories” with their families.

Formational

In addition to teaching foundational truths, a solid discipleship process will also regularly discuss what it means to be saved, our need for a Savior, and the perfect plan that God put into action to redeem His fallen creation. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”¹⁵ Through prayer and Bible study, this simple, yet profound, Scripture verse should be ingrained in young hearts and minds.

Children need to know not only that they have a Savior, but they also need to grasp why they need one. They need to have an understanding of God’s laws, the ease with which we break them, and our need for forgiveness from a holy and powerful God. By understanding this, children will begin to more deeply appreciate the pathway God chose for our salvation and the power of the Holy Spirit to point our hearts and minds toward God.

¹⁵John 3:16, NKJV.

The value of prayer in the process of discipleship cannot be stressed enough. Jesus promised his followers, “And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”¹⁶ Parents and children should also get into the habit of acknowledging God before others. God promises that this will bring blessing. Jesus said, “I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God.”¹⁷

The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments dissects the commandments Jesus held as the two greatest (Love God and love your neighbor) into bite-sized morsels¹⁸. The Ten Commandments are definitely worth memorizing, and parents would do well to display them somewhere in their home. We have them framed by our front door; even now, sometimes, I will march a wayward teen over to the picture and ask them to tell me which commandment he has broken. It takes away some of the tussles that come along with disciplining children because it refocuses the issue back to God rather than keeping it between parent and child.

The first four commandments relate directly to loving God. Jesus said we should love God so much that all of our other affections—for parents, siblings, and even our own life—should seem like hatred compared to the love we have for the God who gave our loved ones and our life to us (Luke 14:26)¹⁹ Parents should regularly discuss with their

¹⁶Matt. 21:22, NKJV.

¹⁷Luke 12:8, NIV

¹⁸Mark 12:29-30.

¹⁹Comfort, 93.

children what it means to put God first in everything and provide examples of times that they have not put God first, used His name casually, or replaced Him with something else. False idols are anything that takes our attention away from God or distorts our view of Him, even something as simple as television watching or computer games. God's word reveals His nature; reading the Bible is the way to glean a true view of the God of the Bible as opposed to the god we have created in our imaginations.

While the first four commandments relate to people's relationship to the Lord, the remaining six concern how we relate to others. The fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother," is a favorite of most parents and is repeated throughout the Bible in various places.²⁰ Children need to understand that in obeying or disobeying parents, they are obeying or disobeying the Lord.

The sixth commandment is one that most children have not broken, at least on the surface: "Do not murder."²¹ Lest they get puffed up, children must be reminded that Jesus upped the ante on this commandment. He taught that murder begins in the heart and that whoever thinks ill thoughts toward another is guilty of murder.²²

The seventh commandment is especially appropriate for teens and preteens as it warns against sex outside of marriage. It states, "You shall not commit adultery."²³ Most children know that their parents share a bed, so this can easily be explained to children not yet ready to understand about "the birds and the bees" in the context of sleeping together; this commandment says that only married couples should share a bed. Parents

²⁰Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20.

²¹Ex. 20:13.

²²Matt. 5:21-22.

²³Ex. 20:14.

may or may not want to explore this commandment more deeply, depending upon the ages of their children.

The eighth and ninth commandments are ones that children of any age can benefit from reviewing: “You shall not steal” and “You shall not bear false witness” (lie).²⁴ This is a good time to remind children that God sees and knows *everything*. I had the occasion many years ago to review this with my daughter, who mysteriously had a toy from a store appear in her pocket. We marched back into the store and returned the toy with an apology. She insisted then, and does now, that she never took the toy and had no idea how it landed in her jacket pocket. Regardless of whether or not it was intentional, the situation presented a good teaching opportunity about violating the eighth and ninth commandments.

The tenth commandment, “You shall not covet,” reminds us that God wants us to be content with what He has given us and not obsess over what He has given others.²⁵ Children are known for the yardsticks they use to measure inequalities: “She has more _____ than I do! No fair!” The story of David and Bathsheba provides a wonderful illustration of the dangers of coveting and the path to death that it leads. Jesus also rebuked Peter for comparing himself with John.²⁶

James demonstrates the pathway that coveting (or any type of sin) follows: “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”²⁷

²⁴Ex. 20:15-16.

²⁵Ex. 20: 17.

²⁶John 21:2-124.

²⁷James 1:14-15.

God's Pathway of Restoration

If the Ten Commandments demonstrate how easy it is for us to sin, several verses in Romans reinforce the problem yet also demonstrate the wonderful love that God has for us, providing a way back to Him. Romans 3:23 confirms that everyone has sinned and fallen short. The Ten Commandments make that evident. Romans 6:23 reminds us what the earnings of sin are: death, not a pretty thought. However, the second half of that verse encourages us that God has made a way back to Himself. All have sinned; the penalty for sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus.²⁸ The Bible also says that God presented this gift to us in while we were still sinners: “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”²⁹ Elsewhere in Romans, the Bible directs readers more specifically on the path of salvation and says “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”³⁰ To be redeemed from their sin, children need to recognize that they are a sinner and have done wrong things (admit), believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be and that He died for them (believe), and tell this to God in prayer (confess). Children should be asked to articulate what these verses mean to them. The more they internalize God's truths and learn how to share them, the better they will grasp their own weakness and God's grace.

²⁸Rom. 6:23, NKJV.

²⁹Rom.5:8, NKJV.

³⁰Rom. 10:9-10, NKVJ.

Born Again In his letter to the Corinthian believers, Paul reminds them that once they have trusted in Jesus Christ as their Savior, they are a new creation.³¹ In the gospel of John, when Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again to inherit eternal life, He's talking about this transformation into a new creation. The next two verses say that "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."³² Those who do not believe already stand condemned because of their sin. The Ten Commandments make it easy to identify sin, and Romans 3:23 tells us that everyone has sinned. The penalty of that sin is death, or condemnation. One only needs to trust in Jesus to be born again, escape the condemnation that comes with sin, and have eternal life. There is a rich interconnectedness that runs throughout God's word.

Old Testament Connection Another verse of John 3 also benefits from being put in context. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."³³ Nicodemus, being a Jew, would have understood Jesus' reference, and it would have reinforced Jesus' promise of eternal life to those who believe in Him.

³¹2 Cor. 5:17.

³²John 3:17-18, NKJV.

³³John 3:15, NKJV.

This is a reference to Numbers, chapter 21. After the Lord had led the Hebrews safely across the Red Sea from slavery in Egypt, they began to grumble against God and His provision, provoking His wrath. The Lord sent venomous snakes among the people, and many who were bitten died. The people then acknowledged their sin before God and, through Moses, asked Him to take away the serpents, so Moses prayed for them.³⁴ “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.”³⁵

Parents should note the parallels between this and Jesus’ crucifixion; both He and the bronze serpent were lifted up. Faith was required by the people of Israel and the faith is required for sinners to trust in Jesus. Once bitten by a poisonous serpent, the people had to look at the bronze serpent and believe God’s promise to survive. Those of us who have sinned (everyone) need only trust in God’s promised Savior, Jesus, to be saved from the penalty of sin (death).

Transformational

The Word of God is transformational. Once God enters our lives, and we trust in Him, life will never be the same. The Bible is filled with accounts that illustrate God’s transforming power. Parents should be equipped to share with children a time when God stepped in and totally changed their circumstances or their perspective of a given circumstance. Once parents and children embrace God’s transformative power, they can

³⁴Num. 21: 1-7.

³⁵Num. 21:8-9, NKJV.

then appropriate it in their own lives and pray for Him to touch others with His mercy and saving grace. Scripture says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.”³⁶ This is a truth that children and parents should take to heart.

David and Goliath

David’s triumph over the Philistine illustrates the victory that comes from fully trusting in God. David was quite young and slight in comparison to his brothers and others who feared the mighty Philistine, Goliath. David knew, however, from whom his strength came: it came from the Lord. After the giant mocked him for daring to fight him with a slingshot and stones, David replied,

You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD’s, and He will give you into our hands.³⁷

David knew that his strength came from God; he trusted in Him with *all* his heart. His own understanding would have told him that it was foolish to even attempt to fight a man who towered over him and who was equipped with heavy armor and mighty weapons. However, David’s trust in the Lord told him that God would work things out; the battle was the Lord’s. God not only gives us strength and wisdom, but when we trust completely in Him, He directs our paths.

³⁶Prov. 3:5-6, NKJV.

³⁷1 Sam. 17:45-48.

Esther

The Book of Esther provides a wonderful example of a woman who trusted in God with all her heart. Esther, a young girl living in Persia with her older cousin, Mordecai, is taken as queen to King Ahasuerus. After she becomes queen, Mordecai discovers a plot by the treacherous Haman to kill all the Jews in Persia. Deeply distressed, Mordecai tells Esther of the plot, challenging her that she must tell the king and that perhaps she has become queen for such a time as this.³⁸ Anyone who approached the king uninvited, including the queen, was repaid with death, but Esther agreed to go to him, stating, “If I perish, I perish.”³⁹ She requested that Mordecai and all the Jews in the city fast, and she and her maids also agreed to fast for three days and nights. She trusted in the Lord, and He came through for her. In a wonderful twist, Haman was hanged on the very gallows that he prepared for the Jews, while Esther and Mordecai were honored by the king. The account of Esther, like the account of David and Goliath, illustrates that the Lord is in control and protects those who trust fully in Him.

Paul

Perhaps one of the most stunning transformations in Scripture is that of the apostle Paul, originally known as Saul. As one of the most ardent persecutors of early Christians, Paul was well-known and feared. One day, on the road to Damascus, he met Jesus, and emerged from his encounter a new man and a passionate evangelist for Jesus. With the zeal that he once persecuted Christians, he now preached Christ. More books and letters

³⁸Esth. 4:14.

³⁹Esth. 4:16.

in the Bible are attributed to Paul than any other writer. His passion to evangelize was such that he even lamented that he could not trade his life for the lives of his countrymen.⁴⁰

Jesus' transformative power is grandly illustrated in the life of Paul. That transforming power is still in force today in those who yield to the Holy Spirit. Parents and children should regularly discuss times that God showed up in their lives and pray for Him to show up and transform the lives of others

Peter

One of Jesus' original disciples, Peter, also was transformed at the Lord's hands. Peter followed Jesus and served with him for nearly His entire ministry. He saw the healings; he saw the dead raised; he witnessed demons cast out with a word from the Master. In fact, when Jesus predicted His death, Peter vowed to follow Him to death as well. Jesus corrected him, stating, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."⁴¹ Sure enough, under pressure, Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. A primary lesson from this story is Jesus' restoration of Peter. He lovingly and firmly reconciled with him and restored him to a position of leadership. Most children should be able to relate to disobedience, punishment, and reconciliation within the family context. They should be taught to repent and reconcile to God when they transgress and trust that they will be restored.

⁴⁰Rom. 9:1-4.

⁴¹Matt. 26:34.

Jesus' Power over the Unseen

Another dramatic moment in Christ's ministry, one that displayed His complete power and sovereignty over things seen and unseen, was when he healed a demon-possessed man in a dramatic fashion.⁴² The man in this account was severely afflicted. He was shunned, naked, and unfit to live with others. He lived in a cemetery. Even chains had been unable to keep him under control. With simply a word, Jesus sent the demons out of him. Suddenly the one whom chains had been unable to tame was seen sitting clothed and in his right mind. I find it interesting that the townspeople feared Jesus and wanted Him to leave when they saw this; certainly His display of raw power over the powers of the air unhinged them a bit.

The man whom he healed did not fear Him; he wanted to follow Him. "Now the man from whom the demons had departed begged Him that he might be with Him. But Jesus sent him away, saying, '*Return to your own house, and tell what great things God has done for you.*' And he went his way and proclaimed throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him (italics added)."⁴³ This account not only illustrates Jesus' power, it also directs those who have been transformed to share their experience with others. Just as the healed man was directed to proclaim the great things Jesus had done for him, those who are touched by His transforming power today should proclaim His power, love, and mercy as well. If this man, who had previously lived naked in a cemetery, was unafraid to tell others his story of transformation, why do we sometimes hesitate to tell our stories to others?

⁴²Luke 8:26-40.

⁴³Luke 8:38-39, NKJV.

Relational

“God has a plan for [our lives]. All that He has planned for us is based on the relationship we maintain with Him. As we wait for His plan to unfold before us, He works out what is best for our lives.”⁴⁴ We and our children need to understand that the God who created us wants to have a relationship with us, much like He had with Adam and Eve before the Fall. This generation, with its post-modern, relational way of thinking, is perhaps more open to a relational God than generations of the past, whose modern, rational way of thinking depended upon facts and figures to discern truth. While God’s truth and the truth of the gospel are absolute, the way that we approach sharing the God of the Bible with others should vary based on the people whom we are trying to reach. Children and many adults in the twenty-first century may be more open to God’s relational attributes.

Scripture consistently demonstrates that God is a relational God, “for the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers.”⁴⁵ Parents should stress to children that God hears them when they talk to Him. Prayer is not meant to be a repetitive, formulaic occurrence but rather an honest outpouring of praise, repentance, thoughts, and requests.

Jesus and Children

Jesus had a special affinity for children. Parents who saw Jesus minister must have felt drawn to Him, as they brought their children to Him so He could bless them. Jesus’

⁴⁴Wheeler and Whaley, 100.

⁴⁵1 Pet. 3:12.

disciples seem to have felt that He was too important to be bothered with children, who lacked social status, so Jesus set them straight. "People brought babies to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. When the disciples saw it, they shooed them off. Jesus called them back. "Let these children alone. Don't get between them and me. These children are the kingdom's pride and joy. Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in."⁴⁶ We can learn several things from this passage and the parallel passages in Matthew 19 and Mark 10. Without getting into any deep implications about what message he may have been sending to adults by using the child as an object lesson, if we take this passage at face value, we can conclude that Jesus valued children. He took joy in them.

He also sought to protect them: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."⁴⁷ To parents, charged with teaching children to know and love the Lord, this last passage has serious implications. We love our children; there is no time like the present to begin pointing them towards the Lord.

Communicating with God

When two people have a relationship, they need to communicate with one another. One way that God communicates to us is through His word, the Holy Bible. Another way is through other Christians: parents, teachers, and friends. We communicate to God through our prayers. Jesus' followers once asked His advice on how best to talk to God. Jesus' response has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer and can be found in Luke 11.

⁴⁶Luke 18:15-17, *The Message*.

⁴⁷Matt. 18:6.

When His disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, He responded not by telling them to say specific phrases but by telling them the nature of and general order of prayer to the Father. He taught them to revere and praise God's holiness, acknowledge that all belongs to Him and that His will be done. He also taught them to forgive others, and to seek forgiveness. Jesus told them to ask also for protection from temptation and the evil one.

Jesus told his disciples that it was fine to ask for provision from God: "Give us this day, our daily bread." The verses that follow the Lord's Prayer affirm that God hears and answers prayers. He instructs His followers to ask, seek, and knock. He reminds them that if they, being evil, give good gifts to their children, how much better things will God give them.⁴⁸ Note that Jesus is not talking primarily about asking for stuff, although He promises here and other places that He will provide for those needs.⁴⁹ Here, God promises to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. That is an amazing promise that parents should embrace not only for their children but for themselves.

Reconciliation

God promises that when we sincerely ask for forgiveness, He will provide it. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."⁵⁰ Psalm 51 illustrates a prayer that confesses wrongdoing and seeks and expects reconciliation. In this Psalm, King David comes to God seeking forgiveness for what many would consider an unpardonable act: murder.

⁴⁸Luke 11:5-13.

⁴⁹Phil. 4:19.

⁵⁰1 John 1:9, NKJV.

After committing adultery with Bathsheba, the king wanted to cover up his act and orchestrated a situation that he knew would lead to the death of her husband, Uriah. This account can be found in 2 Samuel 11 and is worth reading to give Psalm 51 context. This great but imperfect king had a relationship with God and sought Him in times of success and times of failure. God listened to him, heard his prayers, and restored David. David is even called a man after God's own heart and was afforded a place in the lineage of Jesus.⁵¹

Parents and children can seek God together and individually, asking for forgiveness and asking to be men, women, and children after His own heart. They should seek to grow closer to Him, to know Him and to serve Him more and pray that He will allow them to serve others in His name.

Praying and Claiming Scripture

Parents should also get into the habit of praying Scripture verses for their children and themselves. God promises to answer when we ask, seek, and knock, and He promises to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. In Galatians, we learn some of the benefits of having the Holy Spirit in our lives: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control."⁵² Who would not want attributes like joy, peace, and kindness? What parent would not gratefully accept self-control and patience (longsuffering)?

Throughout the Bible, we find Scripture passages that we can pray for ourselves or others. In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul is praying that God will grant the Ephesians spiritual

⁵¹Acts13:22.

⁵²Gal. 5:22-23a, NKJV.

wisdom. One can easily substitute a personal pronoun, a child's name, or the name of a friend in the Scripture in order to personalize this prayer. Ephesians 1:17-20 asserts the power that He has granted believers as they pray for themselves and others? The same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in those who trust in Him! God promises that He will hear us when we pray and that He will give us good gifts when we seek Him. He will also touch the hearts and minds of others as His children pray for them.

Similarly, Ephesians 3:17-21 provides a great opportunity to pray Scripture for others, particularly those who do not yet know Jesus as their Savior. Verse 20 affirms God's power, that He can do "exceedingly, abundantly" more than anything that we can ask or think, *according to the power that works in us*. Parents and children should pray this passage of Scripture for themselves and, with a list of people for whom they have been praying, go through this passage of Scripture, claiming the promises for them, too. Then wait in anticipation for God to work in their lives.

Deliver Us from Evil

As we pray for ourselves, our children, and others, we also need to be aware that in addition to praying *for* things from God, we can also pray *against* those beings that are against God and seek to harm us. It bears repeating that Scripture says we don't wrestle against flesh and blood but "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*."⁵³ Our battle is against Satan and his fallen angels (demons) who seek to infiltrate our lives and either keep us from knowing Jesus as our Savior or render us ineffective as witnesses to others.

⁵³Eph.6:12, NKJV.

Scripture tells us to “be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”⁵⁴ Lest we fear the enemy, the Bible also reminds us how to proactively defend against him and protect ourselves and our loved ones. Ephesians 6: 13-18 reminds believers to put on the complete armor of God. Buckle up the belt of truth...the truth of God’s person, the truth of the gospel message, the truth of His holiness and majesty. Scripture says of God, “Your word is truth.”⁵⁵ Children should be taught that they can believe the Bible.

The breastplate of righteousness also protects parents and children from the enemy. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”⁵⁶ God wants His children to do what is right, to seek after Him and live a righteous life. In Romans, Paul remarks that one is either a slave of sin, which leads to death or a slave of obedience, leading to righteousness, which leads to eternal life.⁵⁷

Believers are told to put on the shoes of the gospel of peace. This command implies a readiness to be able to share our story with others: sharing the gospel message and the reason for the hope that is in us.⁵⁸ Scripture tells us to always be prepared to share the reason for our hope with others.

Above all, the Bible says to take the shield of faith, in order to defend against the attacks of the wicked one. Scripture says that “without faith, it is impossible to please

⁵⁴1 Pet. 5:8.

⁵⁵John 17:17.

⁵⁶Matt. 5:6.

⁵⁷Rom. 6:16, 18.

⁵⁸1 Pet. 3:15.

God.”⁵⁹ When one has a rock solid faith in God and His word, as seen in some of the accounts already presented in this chapter, one can more readily rebuff the attacks of the enemy and avoid sin.

Along with the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation guarantees that one belongs to the Lord rather than the enemy. We have discussed salvation in previous chapters. The Bible says that those who believe in the Lord Jesus will be saved.⁶⁰ It also says that faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of God.⁶¹

As part of the armor, the word of God is described as the sword of the spirit, an offensive rather than defensive weapon. Psalm 119:11 says, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.” Scripture also says that the word of God is a powerful weapon, “living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword....”⁶² One reason for Bible verse memorization is so that God’s word becomes so imbedded in our souls that it becomes a part of us, easily recalled when we are tempted.

Even Jesus, when He was tempted by Satan for 40 days in the wilderness, used the word of God to respond to the devil’s attacks.⁶³ Satan actually tempted Jesus using God’s own words, and each time Jesus responded firmly with Scripture that corrected Satan’s deceit. If even Jesus, who is God, used His word to thwart the enemy’s attacks, how much more we need to know God’s word to respond to and attack the enemy.

⁵⁹Heb. 11:6.

⁶⁰Acts 16:31.

⁶¹Rom. 10:17.

⁶²Heb. 4:12.

⁶³Matt. 4:1-11.

Scripture also reminds us to pray always. After detailing the full armor of God, Paul reminds us to pray. The fact that Paul lists prayer after all the armor of God should in no way minimize its importance. In fact, the Bible commands us to pray continually.⁶⁴ Prayer is the way that we communicate to God, appropriate the armor of God, and render the enemy ineffective. Prayer is also the way that we can beseech God to show up in the lives of others.

Missional

Scripture tells us to “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”⁶⁵ It also tells us to be kind to strangers.⁶⁶ We can demonstrate the gospel in action serving those for whom we have prayed. Baking cookies, spending time with an elderly neighbor, mowing a lawn or doing another household chore for someone are all ways that parents and children can intentionally demonstrate the love of Jesus to those within their spheres of influence. In serving others, we should follow Jesus’ example.

In Humility

Jesus set the example for us to be kind and loving to one another: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself

⁶⁴1 Thess. 5:17.

⁶⁵Eph. 4:32, NIV.

⁶⁶Heb. 13:2.

by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!”⁶⁷ Jesus left His heavenly home, came to earth, lived as a man, and died, *died* on the cross for us. Parents and children can discuss the implications of this passage of Scripture, the mindset that Jesus wants us to have toward one another, how He wants us to treat each other. Does Jesus want us to stay within our comfort zone? To what extent should we go to touch others with His love?

Jesus also said that a servant is not above his master, nor a student above his teacher. On one of the occasions on which he said this, the Last Supper, he washed the disciple’s feet.⁶⁸ Foot washing may seem strange to us now, but in the days when most people got from one place to another wearing sandals and walking on dirt roads, it was a very needed yet messy job, generally reserved for servants of low stature. “Hebrew custom [included] the washing of guests feet, a gesture of welcome in a hot, dusty country where stony roads often made foot travel a painful experience.”⁶⁹ I think most kids today would still find the concept of washing someone else’s feet to be unpleasant. What messages was Jesus sending when He washed the feet of His disciples? He was God, yet He served them in a lowly way. How does Jesus want us to serve others? These are questions and concepts that should be considered by parents and children who can then brainstorm together how to serve those they have been praying for.

Indiscriminately

But Jesus did not only want His followers to serve those they knew well or were within their social circles; He had a very different definition of what it means to be a

⁶⁷Phil. 2:5-8.

⁶⁸John 13: 1-17.

⁶⁹ Packer, 485.

neighbor to someone. When Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he was conversing with an educated young man.⁷⁰ The man asked Jesus how he can get to heaven. Jesus preceded His answer by asking the man how he viewed God's law. The young man answered correctly, "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,*" and '*your neighbor as yourself.*'"⁷¹ Wanting to justify himself, he then asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus told him a story that must have been eye-opening.

In Jesus' parable, the first two men who passed by, the priest and the Levite, were men who served God: think of a pastor or priest today. In other words, they were people who would be expected to stop and help. For whatever reason, they walked right by the injured man. The person, who did stop, the Samaritan, was from a group who was greatly looked down upon and despised by the Israelites. He was the one man who would not have been expected to stop. Yet he did. Not only did he likely save the man's life, he put him up at an inn, and offered to pay for the duration of his care. This story can prompt meaningful discussion for parents and their children about whom God values and whom He wants them to serve.

Serving Sinners

In John 4:1-42, we see how Jesus reached out to a Samaritan woman and how she then shared the good news with those in her community. This woman had two things against her; she was female, and she was a Samaritan (remember that Jews did not associate with Samaritans). So, the fact that Jesus even spoke to her is notable. He engaged her in

⁷⁰Luke 10:25-37.

⁷¹Luke 10:27.

conversation and, while not condoning her admitted sin, did not let her lifestyle get in the way of his outreach to her. Granted, Jesus, who is all-knowing, had insight into her life that we could not have into the lives of others, but His respect of her and His willingness to relate to her are what opened up the doorway for her salvation. If He had shunned her because of her sin, she would not have recognized Him as the Messiah and run back and spread His good news to everyone in her city.

When Jesus' disciples returned, having gone off to buy food, they were stunned to see Him conversing with a Samaritan woman. He took some time to tell His followers that the fields were ripe for harvest; people were ready to hear His good news and meet their Savior. He told them that some will sow; some will water, and others will reap.

Even today, people are desperate to hear the good news of the gospel message; they are waiting for His loving touch that can only come from His people here on earth. Many are waiting to be transformed. They need only to be touched by someone who acts in the name of Jesus. Parents and children can prayerfully minister to others in the name of Jesus, acting as His hands and feet.

Fields Ripe for Harvest

In Luke 10:1-20, Jesus sent seventy disciples to surrounding towns to share His good news with others. They returned exhilarated! It was exciting to serve Jesus. Note that Jesus took ownership of the results; he told them that if people to whom they went rejected them, it was only because they first rejected Him. He reminded them that the fields were white (ripe) for harvest; the needs were many, but the workers were few.

The need for followers of Christ to share His word and His love with others is still great today. Jesus promises an abundant life to those who follow Him. He says, "I came

that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly.”⁷² Parents can serve together with their children and experience the exhilaration of living their lives for Jesus and seeing others transformed by His love.

The Helper

Jesus’ departing words to His disciples were, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”⁷³

Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”⁷⁴ Jesus also promised that the Holy Spirit would teach His followers all things and bring to their memories His words and direction.⁷⁵

Children need to grasp that the Bible confirms that those who trust in Jesus as their Savior have the Power of the Holy Spirit living *in* them. Notice the sequence Jesus presents in His departing words to His followers: first, they would receive power (the Holy Spirit); then they would become His witnesses in their neighborhoods, larger communities, and around the world. What does this imply for children and adults who follow Jesus? If the disciples were commanded to be His witnesses, His followers today are as well. Praying for and reaching those on our prayer lists with His love is simply

⁷²John 10:10b, NASB.

⁷³Acts 1:8, NKJV.

⁷⁴John 14:15-17, NKJV.

⁷⁵John 14:25-26.

obeying Jesus' command. Parents and children should pray for increased opportunities to reach out to those on their list, review their God stories (testimonies), and commit to share them with others. This practice will not only strengthen family and individual faith, it will spread the good news in ever increasing concentric circles, like the reverberations of a rock dropped in a still pond.

Reproducible

In this way, the discipleship process must be reproducible. As we inspire children to seek the Lord, to know Him and serve Him, we also need to equip them to lead others to Christ. "Since the ultimate goal of discipleship should always be to reproduce more disciples, evangelism and discipleship are dependent on each other. Therefore, evangelism is much more than seeking 'decisions' and sharing gospel presentations. Discipleship is much more than simply 'training' people to memorize Bible verses."⁷⁶ The processes of discipleship and evangelism are intertwined; one should lead to the other in a spiraling cycle. Much like the force of a twister that picks up items as it swirls, the process of discipleship and evangelism should attract and capture others even as the disciple spirals closer to God.

In the Great Commission, Jesus' charged his disciples: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age.*" The New Testament contains many examples of individuals

⁷⁶Wheeler and Whaley, 139.

who obeyed Jesus' directives and were blessed when the Holy Spirit showed up and changed lives.

The Philippian Jailer

One never knows when the opportunity will be presented for one to share the good news, so Christ-followers should always be ready to proceed. In Acts 16:15-31, Scripture recounts the story of Paul and Silas, who have been jailed because they cast a demon out of a young slave girl who had made money for her masters by fortune-telling. They were in jail, chained, yet praying and singing praises to God. No doubt, the other prisoners and the prison-keeper witnessed their faithfulness. Suddenly, with a great earthquake, they were freed by an angel. The jailer, fearing that the prisoners had fled, raised his sword to kill himself. Paul shouted out to him that they were still there, and he put down his sword.

I find it interesting that immediately after this; the jailer asked Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul's and Silas's actions while they were imprisoned must have certainly drawn the jailer's attention; the fact that they were miraculously freed yet did not flee sealed the deal. The jailer wanted what they had. They had a ready answer for him: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."⁷⁷

We should also be prepared to answer this question when the opportunity arises. The Bible tells us to always be ready to give an explanation for the hope that is in us.⁷⁸ This should include a gospel presentation that tells others not only the source of our hope, but lets them know how they can attain that hope as well.

⁷⁷Acts16:31.

⁷⁸1 Pet. 3:15.

Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

When one responds to God's prompting and shares the gospel with others, the results belong to God. The story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts: 8:26-40 illustrates that Phillip was in tune with the Holy Spirit and willing to obey His promptings. Phillip did not know who this man was or what he was reading, but when told by God to approach the man's chariot, he went. The eunuch was sitting in his chariot reading a passage of Scripture aloud. God perfectly orchestrated this encounter; the Ethiopian eunuch was seeking, and Phillip was prepared to answer his questions and lead him to faith in Christ.

The context might be different today; most of us do not travel in chariots or read aloud routinely, but the principles remain the same; God is always working in our lives and the lives of those around us; we need only to be available and obedient to share in the joy of seeing someone come to Christ.

Sharing the Gospel

Although there are several ways of explaining the gospel (in fact, the Holy Spirit can use many different ways to quicken someone's heart), a simple A, B, C method is easy for children to understand.

Admit: one must admit that he or she is a sinner/has done wrong things. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."⁷⁹ Most people generally acknowledge that they have done or thought wrong things, even one time; the Holy Spirit can be trusted to convict them of this wrongdoing.

⁷⁹Rom. 3:23, NKJV.

Believe: One must believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be and that He died on the cross to take the punishment that they deserve. This is more about accepting Jesus' sacrifice personally rather than just believing it in general. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."⁸⁰

Confess: The Bible says "that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."⁸¹ A person needs to confess his belief to God, acknowledging his need and embracing Jesus and His death on the cross as the only solution to his sin problem.

Parents and children need to remember that it is not about having a perfectly worded gospel presentation; God will bless a desire to obey Him when one shares the reason for their hope with others. Some people may be called to plant the seed of truth, others to water that seed, and others to reap the harvest, leading people to Christ.

Scripture consistently affirms that God is working in the lives of people and shows up when we join Him in this endeavor. People who were changed by Jesus shared their stories and witnessed Him touch the lives of others as well. Like the once demon possessed man who proclaimed throughout his town what Jesus had done for him or the Ethiopian eunuch who went on his way rejoicing, we need to share with others what Jesus has done for us. In the case of the Philippian jailer, whose whole family was saved and baptized, both parents and children who have experienced Jesus' love have an

⁸⁰John 3:16, NKJV.

⁸¹Rom. 10:9-10, NKJV.

obligation to share that love with others. When we obey and work with God, marvelous things happen, life changing to us and those we serve.

We must review the Great Commission in light of the Great Commandment. Jesus said, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”⁸² The two are interrelated. In fulfilling the Great Commission, we are partially fulfilling the Great Commandment. If we obey the Great Commandments as stated by Jesus, we must be compelled to fulfill the Great Commission.

Conclusion

The Shema in Deuteronomy commands that we not only learn God’s word but that it becomes imbedded in our lives and thus becomes incarnational in everything we do. The gospel is both informational and incarnational.⁸³ We must live a life of worshipping God by learning and memorizing His word, fellowshiping with other Christians, serving Christians and non-Christians in His name, and sharing His words of life with others. In all accounts of Jesus’ parting words, it is stressed that when we do this, He promises to be with us.⁸⁴ This can be the generation that changes a family’s legacy. God promises to bless those to the thousandth generation those who love Him and keep His commands.⁸⁵

⁸²Matt. 22:37-40, NKJV.

⁸³This is a David Wheeler saying; I am not referencing it from any page in his book, but want to give him credit since I have heard him say this so often.

⁸⁴Matt. 28:20; Acts 1:9.

⁸⁵Ex. 20:6.

Parents can bring blessings to their families as they worship God, bring blessings to others, and teach their children to do the same; the time to start is now.

Chapter Six

Churches Partnering with Parents

Churches and parents must partner together as we seek to disciple the next generation of Christ-followers. This will necessitate a paradigm change on the part of both churches and parents. Even in Jesus' time, His followers needed reminding about the value of children in His economy. "People brought babies to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. When the disciples saw it, they shooed them off. Jesus called them back. 'Let these children alone. Don't get between them and me. These children are the kingdom's pride and joy.'"¹ It seems that parents, in the time of Jesus, recognized that He had something special to offer their children. His followers, trying to guard the environment of His ministry, surely thought they were protecting Him as they shooed the parents and children away; His response likely jolted them. The church needs to be jolted again; so do parents.

Since the church is still perceived as the authority in discipling and religious pursuits, the church must take the initiative in pointing people in the right direction, while still ensuring that children whose parents either are not saved or are not willing to disciple them do not fall through the cracks. Children's ministry workers and pastors need to simultaneously educate and mentor parents while continuing to present the gospel and solid biblical teaching to children. It is not an either/or activity but a both/and mentoring process.

¹Luke 18:15-16.

This does not mean that parents cannot and should not seek help from pastors and others in the church. They need to learn to disciple their own children in a Deuteronomy 6 approach. As the Shema directs, parents themselves must first love God; they must first seek Him and be discipled in His ways. After all, parents cannot train their children to become what they are not. The process of reclaiming their biblical mandate includes parents becoming fully devoted followers of Christ themselves.

Most Christian parents will readily admit that it is their responsibility to see to it that their children learn about the Lord. The manner in which parents interpret being responsible, however, is producing some serious consequences in western churches and in some Christian homes.² Though parents may believe that they are responsible, if they also believe that children's workers in the church are the "experts" in training children spiritually, they may think they *are* fulfilling their biblical role by dropping off their children at Sunday school, Awana, Christian school, or other church programs to be taught by the "experts."

This misguided belief can lead to devastating consequences. Since parents feel that discipleship is happening at church (for which they are grateful) they do little spiritual training at home. Discipleship becomes simply another activity in the lives of children rather than an integral part of life. The location for spiritual training moves from the home to the church building. Children do not link spiritual training to everyday activities and do not develop a worldview that includes spiritual training. The local church, pastors,

²Fowler, 28.

and children's workers need to partner with parents in a way that helps them realize that passive involvement in their children's spiritual development is not acceptable.³

Initial Survey Results

The challenges faced by parents, children, and the church in general are mirrored in my own ministry setting. A survey that I sent to more than 400 Christian parents yielded a response rate of less than 10%. I considered this to be reflective of many factors: spiritual apathy, busy-ness, and general overload. The survey was sent out at the beginning of February, typically a time when the craziness of the holidays and New Year has ebbed. I included a brief note explaining the purpose of the simple ten question survey, and also personally asked some people to take it.

Whose Job is It?

My survey confirmed that; a full 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that teaching spiritual truths to their children was their responsibility.⁴ However, when the question was asked in reverse, asking if it was primarily the church's job to teach children about God and his ways, 20% agreed or strongly agreed that it was the church's job. This response indicates confusion on the part of parents or perhaps evidences a mixed message being sent by the church to parents. Two comments received on this question support a misunderstanding of the parents' role and the church's role. One parent wrote, "I believe it's the churches job to teach because they have the expertise but it is most definitely my job as a parent to reinforce that teaching and follow up." Another

³Fowler, 29.

⁴See Epic Families Survey in Appendix.

said, “I think it is the Church's responsibility to plant a seed in the children, but it is up to the parent to make sure the seed is nurtured and grows.”⁵ Neither of those responses is biblical and in agreement with either the Shema or Ephesians 6:1-4. The good news for my research is that my survey agreed with findings of experts like Barna, Fowler, Ham, or McDowell, men who have been monitoring this issue for many years. The bad news for my church is that my survey agreed with these findings. Local area churches, including my own, face the same problem that churches do on a national scale, once that we have largely created ourselves.

Some respondents recognized the need for a partnership between parents and the church, but not necessarily in a good way. One respondent stated that it must be, “Church in partnership with parents, not either-or; *parents must teach within the truth of the church and receive the church's guidance and direction* (italics added).”⁶ To me, that is chilling. The person who wrote that comment identified himself as an associate pastor. His comment illustrates just how much work we have to do in overcoming the view of the church as expert and the parents as incapable of discipling children. Parents and church leaders need to accept that the parents both own the responsibility of training their children in the Lord’s ways and are the ones who should primarily perform this responsibility, not delegate it to “experts.”⁷

⁵Epic Families Survey, Question 2, see appendix.

⁶Ibid, Question 2.

⁷Fowler, 29.

Spiritual Practices

In addition to those two basic questions, some of the other questions in the survey gauged spiritual practices among families. Fewer than 70% of parents surveyed said they prayed for their children every day. One mother who took the survey said until a pastor in her church discussed the power and value of prayer, she rarely prayed at all; now she prays an average of four times each week for her family. How have we gotten so far from biblical principles?

Although 67.7% of parents prayed for their children each day, when asked if they prayed with their children or read the Bible with them daily, the number dropped to a staggering 33%. An additional 52% said they prayed or read the Bible with their children at least weekly. A disappointing 15% of respondents neither prayed with nor read Scripture with their children.⁸ Some of the lack of time together as a family is likely due to harried work and school schedules rather than apathy or abrogation of responsibilities, but as in all aspects of life, parents need to prioritize. This would explain why some parents who take the time to pray *for* their children each day do not have the time to pray *with* them. In some instances, however, we have become too enamored with the world's priorities in lieu of God's. Sports, social, and academic pursuits have grueling commitment levels and sometimes draw parents and children away from their commitment to spiritual development.

A majority of parents, 66% have shared their faith with their children; 25% have not, and 9% shared that they simply did not know how to do so. This result (at least the number of parents who have shared) nearly mirrors the number of parents who said they

⁸Epic Survey, Question 4.

spend time each day praying together or reading Scripture with their children. It seems that close proximity and time spent together facilitated this faith sharing. That any number of professing Christians does not know how to share their faith with their own children indicates a lack of mentoring on the part of the church. If parents are not or do not know how to share their Christian faith with their children, they are likely not sharing it with anyone, a topic that is beyond the scope of this study but one that has troubling implications for the church's goal of making disciples.

Two thirds of parents claimed to regularly pray with their children for others in their communities and serve them in an attempt to demonstrate the love of Jesus. One respondent said, "We intentionally pray for others. I would like to see more opportunities to serve others in the community."⁹ This particular response is interesting in that, at least in my reading of it, the writer expects the church to offer service opportunities. Again, this is an issue that extends beyond the scope of children's discipleship and into the broader discipleship of the body of Christ. Opportunities to pray for and serve neighbors, teachers, the elderly, latch-key kids, and others abound. They do not need to be church-driven or approved. All one needs to do is to open one's eyes to see the many hurting and lost people in our world who would benefit from a kind touch in the name of our Savior. Jesus said, "Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!"¹⁰ Numerous opportunities exist. Christians need to take the initiative and serve others in their homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools. The church needs to educate parents and families about their responsibility to be ambassadors

⁹Epic Survey, Question 6.

¹⁰John 4:35.

for Christ as individuals and as family units, not merely through church-organized missions and service events.

Biblical Knowledge

The next question on my survey dealt with how comfortable parents are with discussing God, Jesus, and moral challenges that their children face in school and the community. A full 82% of respondents said they felt comfortable discussing these topics with their children. That means that more parents are comfortable discussing God and Jesus in general terms than are comfortable sharing their personal experiences and relationship with Him. Some parents (15%) said they were sometimes comfortable discussing such things and 3% were not comfortable discussing God, Jesus, and moral struggles with their children.

It is possible that the disparity between the number of parents who felt comfortable sharing their faith with their children and those who felt comfortable discussing God, Jesus, and moral challenges indicates shallowness in biblical knowledge and a need for discipleship of all ages in the church. This is consistent with the view that children's workers are the experts and parents are inadequate to teach spiritual truths to their children. This may reflect the post-modern nature in which we live. While it may be fine for one to share his or her own experience with God, post-modern believers may feel uncomfortable sharing absolute truths about God, Jesus, and morality. This is definitely a topic that could benefit from further exploration.

Their Spiritual State

Two-thirds (67%) of parents surveyed felt that they and their children were growing in their faith. This is interesting because it is consistent with the number of parents who pray for their children; serve with their children, and who share their testimonies with their children. A little less than half of that number (27%) worried about their family's spiritual growth, while 6% felt they were in trouble spiritually.

When queried about the need for resources for spiritual discipling of their children, a majority (72%) said they wished there were more materials available. The remaining 28% were satisfied with the resources currently out there. One parent said, "There are already plenty of resources. We don't necessarily need 'more.'"

Another responded, "I don't have time to read the resources that are already available." Yet another parent commented that while he wished there were fewer resources, he wished there were more that presented the truth.¹¹ These parents were all offered a free copy of the first module of the Epic Families discipleship process. While 67% of respondents said that they would like a free copy, only half of them provided the necessary identifying information (email or postal address). Only about 30% of survey participants were able to receive further information and participate in the rest of the Epic Families' study.

Ministry Observations

The lack of an energized and passionate response from parents did not surprise me. Having been in ministry for more than ten years, I have had the opportunity to observe churches, parents, and children in the ministry setting. As a parent and tutor, I have also

¹¹Epic Survey, Question 9.

had the chance to observe children and parents outside of a church setting. My general observations and concerns over the years have been consistent with those of others in the field, and they were consistent with the results of my Epic Families survey.

In our fast-paced world, parents frequently work long hours, and many children grow up in households where both parents work. As a result, parents and children spend less time together as a family; children spend much more time with their peers than their parents. Long commutes, long school days, and heavy homework schedules also limit the time that parents and children have together.

In addition, the pressure to participate in extracurricular activities and sports adds to already-full schedules. For many parents interested in making sure their children get into the best colleges, these activities take precedence over spiritual pursuits. Bible study, family devotions, and family prayer time are put on the back burner, while secular pursuits have priority. At best, spiritual pursuits are added to the long list of activities in which children participate; at worst, they are pushed to the side and forgotten.

Churches

For the most part, churches are aware of the problem. Some address the issue by holding mid-week programs such as Awana or by utilizing curriculums that provide mini devotionals for children and parents to do at home during the week. As a children's pastor, I have always liked activities that bring children together to hear the word of God and provide a chance for parents and children to learn together. However, as a practical matter, I have observed that those families most at risk and needful of family devotion time are the families that do not participate in the mid-week programs or do the take-home portions of the children's church lessons.

The main issue that I have observed in churches over the years is that many still operate within the paradigm of church-directed, programmed discipleship. The focus is still on bringing children and parents to church and then having them complete church-approved devotions at home. No doubt, it is difficult to break free from a church-focused model of doing discipleship. After all, we have done it for so long. At least some churches are recognizing that the paradigm has to change and are incorporating parent-driven activities into their children's ministries. This is a positive trend.

One church in La Plata, MD hosts Vacation Bible School for families rather than just for children. Their children's church director told me that each year families will team up, print their own family tee-shirts, and go through the week of VBS together, parents and children learning about Jesus side-by-side.¹²

This church also has a Baby Dedication process that seeks to educate parents in a biblical model of child discipleship right from the beginning. Parents wishing to dedicate young babies or toddlers to the Lord in a church ceremony, first go through a series of lessons that train parents in a Deuteronomy 6 approach to parenting. Then, together with their friends and relations, at a separate event apart from a church service, parents dedicate their children. This is designed to foster community among families with children of the same ages as well as firmly implant the concept of parent-driven discipleship.

Northpoint Community Church in Alpharetta, GA also has a similar mindset. For infants and parents, they have a process called Baby D. Information is freely available on

¹²New Life Wesleyan Church, La Plata, MD. Conversation with Karla Ecklund, Dec. 13, 2011.

their website.¹³ Like New Life Church in La Plata, MD, Northpoint seeks to point parents toward godly child discipleship right from the start. As previously discussed, Northpoint's children's curriculums also have the intent of bringing parents and children together in a way that allows the parents to be the primary discipleship influence in their children's lives.¹⁴

Although these activities are still originated by the church, they are a step in the right direction. The church must take a both/and approach while returning to a biblical model of child discipleship; they must partner with parents and ease them into their God-given role while still providing solid biblical teaching in children's church and other church activities for kids.

Parents

Parents, for the most part, desire the best for their children. But God's definition of "best" is not necessarily the same. Even the most well-intentioned parents that I have observed either do not realize that it is their responsibility to raise their kids to love and serve the Lord, or they feel that adding Children's church or Sunday school to their already long list of activities is fulfilling their God-ordained responsibility. Many, if not most, parents have been deluded into believing that worldly success is of paramount importance for their children. They want their kids to achieve the best grades, participate in the best sports, and get into the best colleges so they can have a successful career when they are older.

¹³ <http://northpoint.org/babyD>.

¹⁴ <http://kidstuf.com/>.

Some see what the world deems to be typical teenage behavior (drinking, drugs, and teen sex) as rites of passage through which all teens must go. One Christian mom told me, “I did some of these things and made it through fine, so why should I be worried about my daughter’s participation in these activities?” Another mom told me that her teen’s troubles, which are considerable, are simply the norm these days, and that as long as her daughter does not get pregnant or harmed through drugs or drunk driving, that she considers herself lucky. Scripture says that the whole world lies under the sway of the evil one.¹⁵ Increasingly, Christian parents seem to be having trouble distinguishing between worldly pursuits (even those we would deem good pursuits) and godly pursuits.

“Desiring God” and pursuing Him are simply not at the top of their list of important things to do for themselves or their children. This is exactly the opposite of what Scripture commands. The Bible says to seek first His kingdom and then the rest of these things will be given to us.¹⁶ Many of today’s parents were not disciplined themselves, so they do not know how to, or even that they should, disciple their children. I once heard a godly evangelist say that we are dealing with a lost generation; he was referring to the parents of the current generation of youth, not the youth.

Parents need Jesus; they need godly discipleship along with their children. Their lack of concern or inability to train up their children indicates that they, too, need mentoring and guidance. The church is faced with something that it has not faced since its inception: the need to mentor and disciple whole families--parents and children. No longer can it be assumed that parents, even parents who grew up in “the church,” understand and know how to implement the commands given to them in Deuteronomy 6.

¹⁵1 John 5:19.

¹⁶ Matt. 6:33.

Children

Children, now like always, absorb information and worldviews, from their surroundings, the places where they spend the most time. This includes their homes, schools, churches, and after-school social or sports activities. Those children who receive discipling at home stand out from the crowd; they are easy to recognize because of their attentiveness to the Word and to the Holy Spirit. These children are a joy to host in children's church and can be a great help mentoring other, younger children. They are not the majority of children in our midst, however.

The majority of children that I have encountered in kid's church have a desire to learn about God and His ways. They approach each Bible story with interest and curiosity. Frequently they will express confusion between what is taught in the Bible and what they have learned in school, chiefly about topics such as evolution and world religions. The worldly views taught in schools are something that parents and children's ministry workers must frequently counter. Taught that the teachers are authority figures, children cannot imagine that teachers would teach them something that is not so, but that happens every day.

Children in the younger grades (kindergarten and preschool) are generally the most receptive to spiritual truths. They have not yet begun to take notice of things their peers deem to be un-cool. Once a child begins attending school full-time, generally in first grade, he or she becomes more and more in-tune to peer-pressure and less in-tune with spiritual pursuits unless those are specifically reinforced and taught by parents.

Some children, raised in ostensibly Christian homes, are spiritually obtuse from a young age. Parents may be believers but are what a pastor friend of mine calls “carnal Christians,” those who are more focused on worldly than godly pursuits. Their children generally raise havoc in the children’s church environment and make it difficult for other children to focus on and worship their Savior.

All children, however, have the potential to learn about Jesus and His plans for their lives. They, like adults, need to realize their shortcomings and their need of a Savior. We live in a scary world, filled with spiritual misdirection and downright lies. Children deserve to be pointed to the Way, the Truth, and the Life by the caring adults in their lives.

Epic Families, Module One Follow-up

One of the more positive results from the Epic Families’ survey was the number of parents with young children who were interested in receiving the first Epic Families Module. At least half of the respondents who requested the first module of the Epic Families curriculum were parents with preschool aged children. This is good in that it illustrates a desire on their part to train their children from an early age. One mother with whom I spoke said that she really enjoyed the flexibility in the curriculum and the ability to use any children’s Bible to read the selected stories to her children. She and her husband, upon receiving the Epic module, initiated daily prayer and devotion time with their children and looked for ways to serve others in Jesus’ name. Another mom of a preschool child said, “It [the Epic Families module] gave me a good framework for some basic ideas to begin with and also gave me a vision for the kind of things I can do with

[my daughter] in the future.”¹⁷ These families are clearly off to a strong start in discipling their children.

However, even with the positive responses, I could detect some warning signs. One of the above-mentioned mothers also said that she and her family are time challenged and suggested a weekly rather than daily schedule of family devotions and prayer. This, to me, indicates a need to disciple the parents as to their responsibility to have God’s word permeate every aspect of their home life each and every day. The Shema implies a continual reliance on and immersion in God’s word, not just weekly or monthly. Parents need to prioritize their time and activities to allow God and His kingdom to be their first pursuit and let other activities fit into that framework, rather than try to fit God into the framework of their current schedules.

Sadly, many of those families with elementary aged children who really could have benefited from being taught a Deuteronomy 6 model of parenting and discipling, failed to participate in the study even though they took the materials. The desire may have been there but they were unable or unwilling to break free from the worldly pursuits that stand in the way of seeking God’s kingdom first in their lives and the lives of their children.

To some extent, I can appreciate the difficulty they encounter, particularly from a time management perspective. My life is busy, too. But what they may not realize is that when one seeks to obey God first, whether in tithing, seeking His kingdom, or discipling, God fulfills His promises and multiplies our efforts in ways that far outweigh anything we can imagine.

¹⁷Email correspondence with parent, April 11, 2012.

Moving Forward

I minister at a church that is dedicated to directing people to seek God, obey Him, and experience His blessings for themselves and their families. Fireside Church is dedicated to igniting “an Exponential Movement of Christ-Followers here in our community to touch the extreme corners of the globe.”¹⁸ This church is not shy in its embrace of a godly purpose and mission. The document that declares Fireside’s vision and goals is actually called “A Declaration of War on the Kingdom of Darkness.”¹⁹ In this, we affirm our commitment to passionately communicate the gospel message to every man, woman, and child within our reach, regardless of the personal or financial cost we may incur: “never complacent, willing to anticipate, pray, strategize, and launch into the next theater of battle for the Kingdom; knocking down the gates of hell by aggressively moving the Kingdom forward.”²⁰ As of this writing, we are just completing our first building, something we consider to be a base of operation from which we can reach those in our community and around the globe.

Fireside’s Mission

Our mission, “Igniting an Exponential Movement of Christ-followers here and around the globe,” is fueled by three core principles: be, make, multiply. We must first each seek to be a disciple of Jesus. Jesus said, “Come, follow Me.”²¹ Before an individual can reach others for Jesus, he must be with Jesus. Only as one is a disciple himself can he make other disciples and become a fisher of men. When we are all doing this in unison, we then

¹⁸<http://www.firesidechurch.org/AboutUs/>

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Matt. 4:19.

have the potential to multiply, whether through personal evangelism, missions, or church planting. Fireside recognizes that the “be, make, multiply” cycle of discipleship is centrifugal in its force and effect. As we are growing and moving closer to the Lord, we should also be moving outward to touch the lives of others by sharing the love and message of Jesus with them.

We believe in passionately reaching out to others, including the unchurched and de-churched, with the same passion that God the Father reached out to us, using every creative and culturally relevant tool at our disposal.²² “We believe in living energized by the power of the Holy Spirit and fully engaging our whole person in everything God gives us strength to do.”²³ We believe that everything we do rises and falls based on prayer, so we relentlessly and intentionally seek God’s wisdom and power in all that we seek to accomplish through evangelism, fellowship, worship, and service. Fireside also recognizes the “importance of investing in the generations upon us and those to come. Children and youth are our most valuable resource and we will fight for the future.”²⁴ We value children not just for what they can become but for what they are now and the contribution they can make to the kingdom even in their young age.

ReelKidz Children’s Ministry

The children’s ministry that I lead, ReelKidz, is blessed to have more than fifty dedicated servants who volunteer their time each week to touch the current generation of kids with the love of Jesus and share His gospel message. In addition to children’s church

²²Rom. 5:8.

²³ <http://www.firesidechurch.org/AboutUs>

²⁴ Ibid.

on Sundays and a mid-week gathering on Wednesdays, a ReelKidz team taught a Good News Club at a local school this year, an endeavor that brought about seven salvations.²⁵ Each summer, we also host a well-attended Vacation Bible School, which typically results in 50-100 first-time professions of faith. In each activity, we intentionally try to include children and teens as assistants, who serve alongside adults and minister to children in a younger age group.

As we move into our new building, we have big plans for serving and blessing our community. One activity we are seeking to add is a weekly get-together for moms and preschoolers from the community, to intentionally cultivate an environment where Christians and non-Christians can form connections over things they have in common, in this case, the challenges and joys of raising preschoolers. While there are already some programs with this goal in mind, they are expensive for both churches and families to join. We are going to develop our own program that will include Bible lessons, crafts, music, fun activities for the children (a different activity each week of the month), and a time for moms to mingle over a cup of coffee while their children play.

Another plan that we have in the works is an after-school tutoring program for gap/latch-key kids beginning in fall 2013. In our community, before and after school care is necessary and prevalent as parents work long hours and have hefty commutes. This is not a service that would be free, but it is something that would be affordable and fill a need in the community and that could be a springboard to sharing the gospel with children and their families.

Step by step, we are attempting to serve children and families in our community in a way that takes the focus off the church and puts the focus on Jesus's love permeating the

²⁵www.cefonline.com

community. Our goal is to see men, women, and children come to Jesus Christ and become fully devoted followers of His. The building provides us with a base of operations from which we can reach out to those God has put in our midst.

EPIC Families

Along with the activities we can do through Fireside Church, God has given me the desire to form an additional ministry, EPIC Families (Equipping Parents, Inspiring Children). This ministry will be interwoven with my ministry at church in terms of goals as well as by name (our mid-week mother/preschooler program will be called EPIC Preschoolers; the mid-week Wednesday children's program will be called EPIC Kids). As the name implies, EPIC Families is a ministry dedicated to equipping parents to reclaim their biblical mandate and raise their kids to love and serve God while inspiring children to know and love the God who made them.

At this point, I anticipate that EPIC Families will largely be an online ministry that will provide advice and Christian resources to parents. The EPIC Families site will also include biblical activities and lessons that kids will find engaging. The goal is to provide parents with the tools they need to reclaim their biblical mandate while at the same time offer resources that their children will find inspiring and engaging. The EPIC modules will offer a wide amount of flexibility, allowing parents to use their own judgment. Already, some parents have found the first module helpful in this vein. One mom, Nicole said,

I found the information to be basic enough that even a new Christian could start to implement the teaching and learn as well. I felt free to adapt it to my own style; I used [the EPIC module] in conjunction with other “age appropriate” learning tools since my

children are really young - keeping them interested in just reading was hard. I was able to fit it into my schedule; with the children being young, I needed to break the lesson down to the root of the lesson, and go from there, teaching them about praying and how to serve others. I would definitely like to see more units like this! I never know where to start with my children and found this very helpful. I would love to get together with other parents so that we can learn from each other.²⁶

She has a good point. We must learn from each other and partner with each other: parent to parent; parent to child; child to child. If parents are to pass along the baton of a vibrant faith to their children, they must take back the mantle of spiritual leadership in their own families and communities. EPIC Families is a ministry that will promote and facilitate that goal.

Closing Thoughts; More Lessons from Road-Kill

I find it amusing that God frequently uses common or not-so-common events to illustrate spiritual lessons. Twice, He has used tragic incidents involving animals and traffic to powerfully touch my heart with a spiritual message. I have already shared about the mother duck/good leader/bad leader incident. Several months after that occurred; I was driving in our neighborhood one evening at dusk. Just as I was approaching the overpass to a busy, interstate highway, I heard the clip-clopping of hooves. As I looked ahead, I saw that a deer had wandered onto the overpass, spooked by a car behind her. I stopped and waited for her to cross to safety. She trotted along for a few seconds and then leaped-over the concrete barrier to the blacktop thirty feet below! I still get a lump in my throat thinking about it. No doubt she had leapt over fences and concrete barriers dozens

²⁶Email correspondence, April 27, 2012, edited for grammar and spelling only.

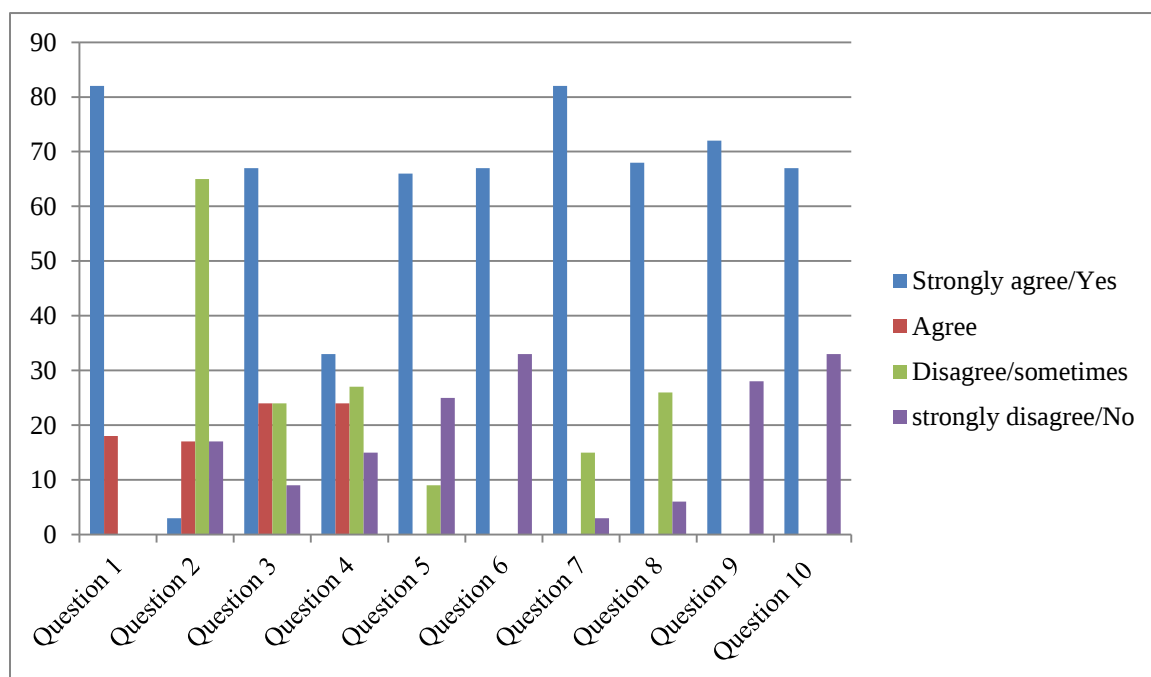
of times in the past. Each time, her hooves had landed on firm ground, and she had trotted to safety. She had no reason to doubt that the same thing would happen that time. Yet, this time was different; by doing what she had always done in the past, she plummeted to her death.

The church and families are in a similar position to the fateful deer; the habits of contemporary children's discipleship may lead us and our children right over the precipice to certain death below, spiritual road-kill. We are at a tipping point. If we do not return the role of children's discipleship to parents, we may lose multiple generations of young people. This cannot wait another generation; change must happen now. God is faithful; He has made the way of escape, paved the path to safety.²⁷ Through the prayerful efforts of many individuals, ministries, and churches that have studied Scripture, learned from the mistakes and successes of others, and committed themselves to exhorting parents and children to obey the Great Commandment and the spirit of the Shema, God will reclaim His children, and the baton of faith will continue to pass from this generation to the next.

²⁷1 Cor. 10:12-13.

APPENDIX A

Epic Families Survey, February 2012



Key

- 1: I believe that I bear the primary responsibility for my child's spiritual upbringing.
- 2: I believe that it is primarily the church's job to teach my child about God.
- 3: I pray for my child every day.
- 4: I pray with my child and read and discuss Scripture.
- 5: I have shared my faith with my children and encourage them to do so too.
- 6: We intentionally serve others in the community to demonstrate Christ's love.
- 7: I am comfortable talking to my child about God, Jesus, and moral challenges.
- 8: I feel that I and my children are growing in our faith.
- 9: I wish there were more resources available for parents.
- 10: I would like to receive a free discipling resource from Epic Families.

APPENDIX B

EPIC Families, Module 1

Helping Parents Reclaim Their Biblical Mandate

The Bible is clear that parents bear the responsibility of teaching God's truths to their children, not Sunday school or children's church, not Christian schools, not the children's pastor, but the parents. Yet, this is a challenge for many parents. This six week program is designed to help parents teach their children that the Bible is completely true and the most important book they can learn. Children must see you put into practice principles learned from the Bible and learn that you love God and his word.

While it is important to teach Bible verses and biblical truths to children, it is not enough. The wisdom that God gave to the Hebrews bears repeating: Parents are to love God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength. His words should penetrate to the very heart of their being, and all of their actions should flow from Him. Not only should they teach God's words diligently to their children, but they should talk about them in the course of their daily lives...as they sit in their homes, walk down the road, when they lie down, and when they rise up (See Deuteronomy 6:6-9). God's word must flow in, and His love must flow out.

This approach to discipleship is designed to give you and your children a greater knowledge of God while also teaching you to be a bearer of His love to others. A firm foundation of faith will prepare your children for a life of faith; God's word will be hidden in their hearts (Psalm 119:11).

We no longer live in a society where basic Christian beliefs are accepted and taught as unconditional truths. Political correctness and moral relativity influence us and our children far more deeply than in previous generations. Foundational truths have been lost. This program will equip you to work with your child and provide them with solid foundational moorings that will enable them to face the near daily assault on biblical truth that they are likely to encounter in their schools or from their friends.

Without foundational moorings, teens and young adults will drift from the faith. While it is never too late to begin learning God's word or teaching it to children, the time to begin is now. Parents can learn along with their children. Every biblical precept that applies to children also applies to their parents.

Below is the first of the EPIC Families (Equipping Parents; Inspiring Children) Discipleship modules. Each module follows a process that allows parents and children to grow together in their faith while also returning parents to the role of primary spiritual mentor to their children.

This is not a regimented program; enough flexibility is allowed in the model to accommodate busy family schedules. The goal is to equip parents to raise their children “in the training and admonition of the Lord,” while inspiring children to know and love the God who made them. Each module, studied over six weeks, includes approximately 30 Scripture passages with discussion questions, six Scripture memory verses, and various application assignments. Daily prayer is also part of the process: parents for children and parents together with their children. The important thing is not *when* these topics are discussed and prayed for each day or week, but *that* they are discussed and put into action. If you miss a day, don’t fret, just pick up where you left off the next day. Over time, you and your children will not only learn biblical facts, but will develop healthy spiritual habits that you can continue for a lifetime.

The importance of daily prayer cannot be overemphasized. Scripture is clear that “... *we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 6:12). Prayer will pave the way for the Holy Spirit to work in your heart, the hearts of your children, and the hearts of others.

A great reference book for parents who want to learn more about praying for their children is *Praying for Your Children*, by Elmer Towns and Dave Early. Their book is full of biblical references to prayer, daily prayer suggestions, and many ideas for practical applications for praying for children and teaching children to pray for themselves and others. Some of their suggestions will be included below, but parents desiring a more in-depth discussion of praying for their children will be well served by purchasing this book.

Another wonderful book, one on which the structure of this six week plan is based, is *The Great Commission to Worship*, by David Wheeler and Vernon Whaley. I highly recommend it.

Week One: Building a Strong Foundation

Memory Verse Week One: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

Genesis 1:1. There is no better place to start than at the beginning. If a child doesn’t understand basic premises of the Bible, then more complex truths will be even more difficult to accept.

Pray for and with your children each day. Also, don’t forget to pray for and with your children each day this week. This does not need to be an elaborate endeavor. You can ask your children for prayer requests or just pray that God will bring you all closer to Himself and enable you all to grow in your faith. Take a few minutes to pray out loud, with your children present. This will reinforce in them the concept that they, too, can talk to God anywhere, at any time, and not just in church. Each day this week, ask your children to recount one thing that God has done for them or one facet of His creation that they appreciate. Have them share that with you and each other.

Day One

1. Read and discuss Genesis, Chapter 1 today, which recounts the six days of creation and details exactly what God created on each day. This story is so familiar to children who have attended Sunday school that you might be tempted to gloss over it. Don’t. Ask God to give you and your children fresh eyes to see the miracle and majesty of His creation. Note the progression of creation: day and night; heavens and earth; seas and dry land complete with trees, flowers, and other vegetation; the sun, moon, and stars; creatures to populate the sky and seas; and, finally, land animals, including the highlight of His creation, man. The goal here is not to memorize what was created on each day, although that can certainly be a fun activity, but to note the scope and sequence of the biblical account of creation and to appreciate the majesty and power of a God who was able to speak everything into being. For more in depth study on the account of creation, visit the website Answers in Genesis (www.answersingenesis.org).
2. A couple of passages that are of particular note, in light of the other studies this week, are Genesis 1:2b and 1:26. In the first passage, we see the first evidence of the Holy Spirit, as the “Spirit of God hovered over the waters.” In the second, we see the first suggestion of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit); “God said, ‘Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness.’”
3. One other phrase of note that occurs on each day of creation in chapter one of Genesis: “And it was good.” This details the perfection of God’s original, uncorrupted creation, before sin entered the world.

4. Review this week's Bible memory verse, Genesis 1:1. There are many different ways to help children memorize Bible verses. Younger children generally respond well to auditory means of memorization; older children can benefit from both visual and auditory reinforcement. A wonderful resource for select Bible verses put to music is the Harrow Family's Sing the Word collection (www.singtheword.com). This week's Bible verse is on their CD titled, *A New Commandment*.

Day Two

1. This day's lesson is from the book of John and complements the information learned on day one. John 1:1-4 states, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."* The term Word refers to Jesus. Look back at Genesis 1: 1 and 1:26. Jesus, the Bible tells us, was not only present at the creation of the universe, He created it!
2. From reading the first two verse of Genesis and the first few verses of the Gospel of John, we can see that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all present at creation. Many verses confirm that Jesus was involved in the creation of the earth. Here's one of them: Colossians 1:16 says, referring to Jesus, *"For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him."* Mull that over together with your children. Look around your yard or neighborhood; discuss things that Jesus created that particularly impress you, like flowers, birds, or a beautiful sunset.
3. Remember to pray with and for your children.
4. Practice your memory verse, Genesis 1:1.

Day Three

1. Genesis, chapter 2, fills in some of the details of creation. It talks about God's rest on the seventh day. This chapter discusses how God rested on the seventh day, setting a pattern for us to follow. It also describes the creation of man and woman in detail as well as the splendor of the Garden of Eden. Imagine that Adam was granted the privilege to name each animal! It illustrates the prefect relationship that existed between God and Adam and Eve. Imagine what life would have been like in the perfect place that God created for them. Ask your children to describe what they consider to be a perfect place: safe, beautiful, peaceful. See what they come up with, and, together, pray and offer God thanks for creating it.

2. This chapter also states God's prohibition to Adam and Eve against eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They had everything they ever could have wanted and could eat from every tree in the garden except for this one. God gave them a very stern warning, telling them that they would die if they ate from this tree. Take a moment and discuss this with your children.
3. Pray for and with your children.
4. Practice this week's memory verse, Genesis 1:1.

Day Four

1. The next chapter in Genesis, chapter 3, is where things get a bit dicey. Read this chapter together with your children. This account details how sin and death entered the world, just as God had warned when He told Adam and Eve not to eat from this particular tree. Discuss with your child how the serpent (Satan) deceived Eve and tricked her into eating from the forbidden tree. What was Eve's first mistake?
2. Compare verse Genesis 3:3 with Genesis 2:17. How did the serpent contradict God?
3. Review verses 4 and 5. How can the reader tell that Adam was present with his wife during this affront by Satan?
4. Read verse 6. What happened to them once they each took a bite of the fruit? How did God punish the serpent? How did God punish Adam and Eve?
5. One of the most amazing things in this chapter is how verse eight discusses how they heard the sound of God walking in the garden. The fact that Adam and Eve recognized that God was walking in the garden implies that this was something to which they were accustomed. Imagine that! God came and walked in the garden with them; He was familiar to them, and they to Him.
6. Another truly amazing thing that happens at this time in history is God's promise of the Savior. In Genesis 3:15b, speaking to Satan, God predicts the coming of Jesus and His defeat of Satan: "*He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.*" Not even three chapters into the Bible, still during the beginning of life on earth, God gives his people the promise of a Savior!

Day Five

1. God repeats the promise of a Savior to Joseph when He tells him of the impending birth of Jesus. Read Matthew 1:18-24. Here, God appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him, *Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.* So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which

was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, ‘God with us.’”

2. While much of Matthew- chapter 1 contains Jesus’ genealogy, this is to prove that He fulfilled the many prophecies that were made over hundreds of years about the promised Messiah of Israel. God confirms here to Joseph that Mary is pregnant with the Savior by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Christmas story can also be read from a different perspective in Luke 1 and 2. Both gospels affirm that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one the Bible first promised in Genesis 3:15.
3. Next, Read John 1:14, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”* Once again, the Bible tells us something amazing! The Word, Jesus, who created the earth and everything in it, became flesh and lived among us. Wow! God with us, Jesus came to earth to live among use and save us from the consequences of Adam and Eve’s betrayal.
4. Discuss these promises with your children. Amazing, aren’t they? After answering your children’s questions, take a few minutes to praise God and thank Him for sending Jesus to earth to come as a baby, live among us first as a boy, then as a man, and to take our punishment for sin.

Days Six and Seven

1. Pray for your children, particularly for their spiritual development. You can recap the week’s prayers and continue to pray that they will love God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love their neighbor as themselves.
2. Pray with your children. Do they have any specific needs that arose during the week? Have you observed any behaviors that indicate a schism between your children and the Lord? Address these with your children, and pray about them together.
3. Share your story with your children on one of these days. Have you trusted in the Lord Jesus as your Savior? If so, share your testimony with them: what your life was like before you trusted in Jesus and what your life is like now. If you have not yet come to a place where you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, why not pray aloud with your family and ask that God will point you in the right direction, reveal Himself to you, and ease your doubts, and help your unbelief.

Week two: Forming a Firm Faith

The second week of our study seeks to help you establish a firm grasp on what it means to be saved, our need for a Savior, and the perfect plan that God put into action to redeem His fallen creation.

Memory Verse, week two: John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

Again, this week, pray for and with your children daily. This cannot be stressed enough. Jesus promised his followers, *“And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive”* (Matthew 21:22). Ask God to transform their hearts into hearts that long for Him; ask Him also to transform your heart.

Continue to share with them one thing that God has done for you or some aspect of creation that amazes you, and have them do the same. This week, however, begin to share with others outside of your family; tell someone each day what Christ has done for you (This idea comes from David Wheeler and Vernon Whaley’s discipleship plan in *The Great Commission to Worship*). This need not be elaborate. You and your children can simply comment, “God really blessed me when....” or “Look at the beautiful _____ that God made today.” Even a simple, “Lord bless you” will do; the goal is to get into the habit of acknowledging God before others. God promises that this will bring blessing your way. Jesus said, *“I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God”* (Luke 12:8).

Day One

The Ten Commandments, found in Exodus, Chapter 20, break up the commandments Jesus held as the two greatest (Love God and love your neighbor) into bite-sized morsels. The Ten Commandments are definitely worth memorizing and you would do well to display them somewhere in your home for your children’s viewing. We have them framed by our front door; even now, sometimes, I will march a wayward teen over to the picture and ask them to tell me which commandment they have broken. It takes away some of the tussles that come along with disciplining children because it refocuses the issue back to God rather than keeping it between parent and child.

1. The first four commandments relate directly to loving God. The first commandment, *‘You shall have no other Gods before Me’* (Exodus 20:3), requires that we put God first in our lives... Jesus said we should love God so much that all of our other affections—for parents, siblings, and even

our own life—should seem like hatred compared to the love we have for God (see Luke 14:26). Discuss with your child what it means to put God first in everything. See if they can provide examples of times that they have not put God first.

2. The second and third commandment relate to the first: “*You shall not make for yourself a carved image*” and “*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*” These deal with giving God, the creator of all, the honor and respect that He deserves. The second commandment relates to the setting up of false idols. False idols are anything that takes our attention away from God or distorts our view of Him. Idols can be something as simple as television watching and computer games, activities that draw our attention away from the Lord. God’s word reveals His nature; reading the Bible is one way to glean a true view of the God of the Bible as opposed to the god we have created in our imaginations. Have your children ever carelessly used God’s name? Have they ever used it as a cuss word? Have you? Then you are guilty of violating the third commandment. Discuss with your children how easy it is to break these commandments.
3. The fourth commandment explains why we take one day each week to honor God. Just as God rested after He created the world, He asks His creation, to “*remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.*” Ray Comfort, in *How to Bring Your Children to Christ*, provides a wonderful illustration of this commandment. He suggests giving your child seven pieces of candy on a plate while telling him how much you love him. Then ask for one of the pieces back. Most children’s reticence to return the one piece reveals their natural inclination toward sin. Use this exercise as an opportunity to discuss God’s grace in giving us life and the importance of giving one day each week back to Him in thanks.
4. Remember to review this week’s memory verse, John 3:16.
5. Pray for and with your children; pray for others together.

Day Two

While the first four commandments relate to the Lord, the remaining six concern how we relate to others.

1. The fifth commandment is a favorite of most parents: “*Honor your father and mother.*” This is repeated throughout the Bible in various places. Colossians 3:20 states that children should obey their parents in everything, while Ephesians 6:1-3 reminds children to honor their fathers and mothers, stressing the blessings that come from obedience. Discuss with your children that God put them in your care, in part so you could train them to obey Him. In obeying you, they are obeying Him.

2. The sixth commandment is one that most children have not broken, at least on the surface: “*Do not murder.*” Lest they get puffed up, remind them that Jesus upped the ante on this commandment. He taught that murder begins in the heart and that whoever thinks ill thoughts towards another is guilty of murder (see Matthew 5:21-22).
3. The seventh commandment is especially appropriate for teens and preteens as it warns against sex outside of marriage. It states, “*You shall not commit adultery.*” Most children know that their parents share a bed, so this can easily be explained to children not yet ready to understand about “the birds and the bees” in the context of sleeping together; this commandment says that only married couples should share a bed. You may or may not want to explore this commandment more deeply, depending upon the ages of your children.
4. The eighth and ninth commandments are ones that children of any age can benefit from reviewing: “*You shall not steal*” and “*You shall not bear false witness*” (lie). This is a good time to remind your children that God sees and knows *everything*. I had the occasion many years ago to review this with my daughter, who mysteriously had a toy from a store appear in her pocket. We marched back into the store and returned the toy with an apology. She insisted then, and does now, that she never took the toy and had no idea how it landed in her jacket pocket. Regardless of whether or not it was intentional, the situation presented a good teaching opportunity about violating the eighth and ninth commandments. No doubt, you and your children can come up with many situations to illustrate how easy it is to violate these two commandments.
5. The tenth commandment, “*You shall not covet,*” reminds us that God wants us to be content with what He has given us and not obsess over what He has given others. Children are known for the yardsticks they use to measure inequalities: “She has more _____ than me! No fair!” The story of David and Bathsheba, found in 2 Samuel 11, provides a wonderful illustration of the dangers of coveting and the path to death that it puts one on.
6. James demonstrates that pathway that coveting (or any type of sin) follows: “*But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death*”(James 1:14-15).

Day Three

The Ten Commandments demonstrate how easy it is for us to sin. Several verses in Romans also illustrate the problem and show the wonderful love that God has for us, in providing a way back to Him.

1. Romans 3:23 confirms that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's glory: "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" This week's discussions of the Ten Commandments should have made that evident.
2. Romans 6:23 reminds us what the earnings for sin are: death, not a pretty thought. However, the second half of that verse encourages us that God has made a way back to Himself. The full verse states, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" Pause and think about that for a moment; all have sinned; the penalty for sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus. The Bible also says that God presented this gift to us while we were still sinners: "*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). Discuss these Scripture passages with your children, and ask them what each one means to them.
3. Elsewhere in Romans, the Bible directs us more specifically on the path of salvation and says "*that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation*" (Romans 10:9-10). Discuss these verses with your children. To be redeemed (saved/rescued) from their sin, they need to recognize that they are a sinner and have done wrong things (admit), believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be and that He died for them (believe), and tell this to God in prayer (confess).
4. Have your children come to a point in their lives where they have done this? If not, why not offer them the opportunity to ask God for forgiveness and receive Jesus as their Savior now. If they have already done that, remind them what the Bible says about those who have accepted God's gift of salvation: "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God's word reminds us that once we trust in Jesus as our Savior, we are born again; we are new creations in Him; the old has gone, and the new has come!

Day Four

1. Take a moment and read John, Chapter 3 with your children. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again to inherit eternal life; He's talking about this transformation into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17, from yesterday).
2. Review this week's memory verse, John 3:16.
3. Now read the next two verses, "*For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned;*

but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:17-18).

4. Do you see the relation between these verses and those you read in Romans on Day Two? Those who do not believe already stand condemned because of their sin. The Ten Commandments make it easy to identify sin, and Romans 3:23 tells us that everyone has sinned. The penalty of that sin is death, or condemnation. One only needs to trust in Jesus to be born again, escape the condemnation that comes with sin, and have eternal life.

Day Five

1. Another verse of John 3 also benefits from being put in context. Jesus tells Nicodemus, “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:15). Nicodemus, being a Jew, would have understood Jesus’ reference, and it would have reinforced Jesus’ promise of eternal life to those who believe in Him.
2. Turn to the book of Numbers, chapter 21. After the Lord had led the Hebrews safely across the Red Sea from slavery in Egypt, they began to grumble against God and His provision, provoking His wrath (verses 1-5). The Lord sent venomous snakes among the people, and many who were bitten died (verse 6). The people then acknowledged their sin before God and, through Moses, asked Him to take away the serpents, so Moses prayed for them (verse 7). “*Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived*” (Numbers 21:8-9). Note the parallels between this and Jesus’ crucifixion; both He and the bronze serpent were lifted up. Also note the parallel in the faith that was required by the people of Israel and the faith that is required for sinners to trust in Jesus. Once bitten by a poisonous serpent, the people had to look at the bronze serpent and believe God’s promise to survive. Those of us who have sinned (everyone) need only trust in God’s promised Savior, Jesus, to be saved from the penalty of sin (death).

Days Six and Seven

1. In light of this week’s Scripture readings, pray for your children, particularly for their spiritual development. Continue to pray that they will love God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love their neighbor as themselves, and that they would begin to understand the amazing love with which He loves them.

2. Pray with your children. Allow them to share what God has been doing in their lives this week. Ask them what they think of the Scripture reading this week and what they have learned that can be applied to their lives.
3. Rest. In light of the fourth commandment, take the seventh day this week, and dedicate it to the Lord. If the seventh day is a Sunday, enjoy worshipping together with your children at church. If it is another day of the week, carve out some time to sit together as a family and reflect upon all that God has done for you, and give Him praise.

Week three: Be Transformed!

As we learned last week, the Word of God is transformational. Once God enters our lives, and we trust in Him, life will never be the same. This week, you will read Bible passages that highlight God's transforming power in the lives of others. You will also share with your children a time when God stepped in and totally changed your circumstances or simply changed your perspective of a given circumstance.

Who in your lives needs God's transformative power? One other aspect of this week's lesson is that you and your children will begin to identify people in your lives for whom you can pray. Write out a list of names and begin praying for them this week.

This week's Bible memory verse is Proverbs 3:5-6, "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.*" Review that daily with your children; offer incentives as they memorize it. Also, remember to pray with and for your child daily.

Day One

1. Read the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. David was quite young and slight in comparison to his brothers and others who feared the mighty Philistine, Goliath. David knew, however, from whom his strength came: it came from the Lord. After the giant mocked him for daring to fight him with a slingshot and stones, David replied,
You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands(1 Samuel 17:45-48).
2. David knew that his strength came from God; he trusted in Him with *all* his heart. His own understanding would have told him that it was foolish to even attempt to fight a man who towered over him and who was equipped with heavy armor and mighty weapons. But David's trust in the Lord told him that God would work things out; the battle was the Lord's.
3. What examples can you share with your child about trusting in God even when it seemed silly to others? Ask your children to share some examples as well. God not only gives us strength and wisdom, but when we trust completely in Him, He directs our paths.

Day Two

1. The Book of Esther provides a wonderful example of a woman who trusted in God with all her heart. Esther, a young girl living in Persia with her older cousin, Mordecai, is taken as queen to King Ahasuerus. After she becomes queen, Mordecai discovers a plot by the treacherous Haman to kill all the Jews in Persia. Mordecai, deeply distressed, tells Esther of the plot, challenging her that she must tell the king and that perhaps she has become queen for such a time as this (Esther 4:14). Anyone who approached the king uninvited, including the queen, was repaid with death, but Esther agreed to go to him. She requested that Mordecai and all the Jews in the city fast, and she and her maids also agreed to fast for three days and nights. She agreed to go to the king and stated, *“If I perish, I perish”* (Esther 4:16). She trusted in the Lord, and He came through for her. In a wonderful twist of fate, Haman is hanged on the very gallows that he prepared for the Jews, while Esther and Mordecai are honored by the king.
2. What do your children think of Esther’s faith in the Lord? What do they think of Haman’s deceit and ultimate judgment at the Lord’s hands?
3. Remember to pray with and for your children as well as others whom the Lord has brought to mind.

Day Three

1. Perhaps one of the most stunning transformations in Scripture is that of the apostle Paul. Read the Book of Acts, chapters 8-9. Paul, known as Saul, was one of the most ardent persecutors of early Christians; he was well known and feared. One day, on the road to Damascus, he met Jesus, and emerged from his encounter a new man and a passionate evangelist for Jesus. With the zeal that he once persecuted Christians, he now preached Christ. More books and letters in the Bible are attributed to Paul than any other writer.
2. Discuss with your children the transformative power that Jesus had on Paul’s life. Have they ever experienced healing or transformation from Jesus? Ask them to share a time that Jesus touched their lives.
3. Share with your children a time when God stepped in and rocked your world.
4. Remember to review this week’s Bible memory verse. Pray for and with your children. Seek the transformative power of Jesus over your hearts and minds.
5. Remember also to pray for those people on your list who also need to feel God’s love, healing, and transformative power.

Day Four

One of Jesus' original disciples, Peter, also was transformed at the Lord's hands. Peter followed Jesus and served with him for nearly His entire ministry. He saw the healings; he saw the dead raised; he witnessed demons cast out with a word from the Master. In fact, when Jesus predicted His death, Peter vowed to follow Him to death as well. Jesus corrected him, stating, *"Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times"* (Matthew 26:34).

1. Read Matthew 26:31-35 and 69-75. Then read John 21:1-19, paying particular attention to verses 15-19.
2. Can you relate to Peter's denial of Jesus and Jesus' restoration of Peter? I can. How do you think Peter was affected by his betrayal of his Lord? How do you think he felt when Jesus lovingly and firmly reconciled with him and restored him to a position of leadership?
3. Ask your children to share a time when they denied or disobeyed you, and though you may have punished them, you reconnected with them.
4. Share a time when you may have denied God or Jesus and how you came to be restored.
5. Remember to study this week's Bible memory verse, Proverbs 3:5-6.
6. Pray with and for your children, and pray together for others.

Day Five

Another dramatic moment in Christ's ministry, one that displayed His complete power and sovereignty over things seen and unseen, was when he healed a demon-possessed man in a dramatic fashion.

1. Read Luke 8: 26-40. Note the severity with which this man was afflicted. He was shunned, naked, unfit to live with others. He lived in a cemetery. Even chains had been unable to keep him under control. With a word, Jesus sent the demons out of him. Suddenly the one whom chains had been unable to tame was seen sitting clothed and in his right mind. I find it interesting that the townspeople feared Jesus and wanted Him to leave when they saw this; certainly His display of raw power over things unseen unhinged them a bit.
2. The man whom he healed did not fear Him; he wanted to follow Him. Note what happened next: *"Now the man from whom the demons had departed begged Him that he might be with Him. But Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your own house, and tell what great things God has done for you.' And he went his way and proclaimed throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him"* (Luke 8:38-39).

3. What do you think of this account in Scripture? Why do you think the people feared Jesus? How do you think the healed man now felt? Note that he obeyed Jesus and went throughout the city telling others what Jesus had done for him.
4. Discuss this story with your children. What do they think about the man's transformation? If this man, who had previously lived naked in a cemetery, was unafraid to tell others his story of transformation, why do you think we sometimes hesitate to tell out stories to others?
5. Share a personal story of transformation with your children and ask them to share one with you.

Days Six and Seven

1. Review this week's stories. What do your children think about the power of Jesus to change lives? Remind them of the verse we studied last week 2 Corinthians 5:17, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."* Which of this week's stories illustrate that verse?
2. Review this week's memory verse. Which stories this week illustrate our memory verse? What does each of these stories tell us about the Person and power of Jesus?
3. Remember to pray for and with your children and, together, pray for those on your list.

Week four: Relational...talking to God

“God has a plan for your life. All that He has planned for us is based on the relationship we maintain with Him. As we wait for His plan to unfold before us, He works out what is best for our lives” (*The Great Commission to Worship*, 100). We and our children need to understand that the God who created us wants to have a relationship with us, much like He had with Adam and Eve before the Fall. This generation, with its post-modern, relational way of thinking, is perhaps more open to a relational God than generations of the past, whose modern, rational way of thinking depended upon facts and figures to discern truth. While God’s truth and the truth of the gospel are absolute, the way that we approach sharing the God of the Bible with others should vary based on the people whom we are trying to reach. Children and many adults in the twenty-first century may be more open to a personal God who loves them and wants to know them. This week’s study will focus on Scripture that demonstrate how we can relate to God and how we can ask Him to work in the lives of others.

This week’s memory verse is 1 Peter 3:12a, *“For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers.”* Stress to your children that God hears them when they talk to Him. Prayer is not meant to be a repetitive exercise, but rather an honest outpouring of praise, repentance, thoughts, and requests. Take a moment and pray with your children after you have repeated the verse together several times.

Day One

1. Our first study this week sets the stage for the other days. Jesus had a special affinity for children. Parents who saw Jesus minister must have felt drawn to Him, for they brought their children to Him so He could bless them. Jesus’ disciples seem to have felt that He was too important to be bothered with children, who lacked social status, so Jesus set them straight. *“People brought babies to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. When the disciples saw it, they shooed them off. Jesus called them back. “Let these children alone. Don’t get between them and me. These children are the kingdom’s pride and joy. Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in”* (Luke 18: 15-17, *The Message*).
2. We can learn several things from this passage and the similar accounts in Matthew 19 and Mark 10. Without getting into any deep implications about what message he may have been sending to adults by using the child as an object lesson, if we take this passage at face value, we can conclude that Jesus valued children. He took joy in them.

3. He also sought to protect them: *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:6).”* As parents, charged with teaching our children to know and love the Lord, this last passage has serious implications. We love our children; there is no time like the present to begin pointing them towards the Lord.
4. Discuss this passage with your children. How does it make them feel that Jesus welcomed children even when some adults wanted to shoo them away? Have they ever felt belittled or shoved aside by grown-ups? How does it make them feel that Jesus, their creator and Savior, wants a relationship with them?

Day Two

When two people have a relationship, they need to communicate with one another. One way that God communicates to us is through His word, the Holy Bible. Another way is through other Christians: parents, teachers, and friends. We communicate to God through our prayers. Jesus’ followers once asked His advice on how best to talk to God. Jesus’ response has come to be known as the Lord’s Prayer and can be found in Luke 11.

1. Read Luke 11:1-13. When His disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, He responded not by telling them to say specific phrases but by telling them the nature of and general order that prayer should encompass.
2. He taught them to revere and praise God’s holiness, acknowledge that all belongs to Him and that His will be done. In other words, submit to His will for your life.
3. He also taught them to forgive others, and to seek forgiveness.
4. Jesus told them to ask also for protection from temptation and the evil one.
5. Jesus told his disciples that it was fine to ask for provision from God: *“Give us this day, our daily bread.”*
6. The verses that follow the Lord’s Prayer affirm that God hears and answers prayers. Read verses 5-13. How do your children feel about the story of the persistent friend? How do they feel about Jesus’ instructions to ask, seek, and knock? Note that Jesus is not talking primarily about asking for stuff, although He promises here and other places that He will provide for your need (See Philippians 4:19).
7. Read verse 13: *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”* Ponder with your children this verse. Pray together aloud, asking God to fill each of you with His Holy Spirit.

Day Three

1. God promises that when we sincerely ask for forgiveness, He will provide it. 1 John 1:9 says, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*”
2. Read Psalm 51 together with your children. Here, King David comes to God seeking forgiveness for what many would consider an unpardonable act: murder. After committing adultery with Bathsheba, the king wanted to cover up his act and orchestrated a situation that he knew would lead to the death of her husband, Uriah. This account can be found in 2 Samuel 11 and is worth reading again to give Psalm 51 context.
3. Discuss David’s story with your children. Then discuss his prayer for forgiveness. Do they know that God called David a man after His own heart (see Acts 13:22)? This brave, great, but imperfect king had a relationship with God and sought Him in times of success and times of failure. God listened to him, heard his prayers, and restored David. Do you know that God even afforded David a place in the lineage of Jesus?
4. Do you want to be a man or woman after God’s own heart? Do your children want to be boys and girls after His heart? Seek God together, asking for forgiveness for the times you have sinned against Him, and ask him to allow you to grow closer to Him, to know Him and to serve Him more.
5. Remember also to pray for your children and with your children for others.
6. Review this week’s Bible verse, 1 Peter 3:12a.

Day Four

1. Did you know that you can also pray Scripture verses for your children and others and teach them to do the same? Remember in yesterday’s Scripture, God promises to answer when we ask, seek, and knock, and He promises to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. In Galatians, we learn some of the benefits of having the Holy Spirit in our lives: “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control*” (Galatians 5:22-23).” Take a moment and discuss this spiritual fruit with your children. Would they like joy, peace, and kindness? Could they use some self-control and patience (longsuffering)? Could you?
2. Throughout the Bible, we find Scripture passages that we can pray for ourselves or others. Today’s lesson contains a couple of these verses from the Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Read Chapter 1, verses 17-19. In this passage, Paul is praying that God will grant the Ephesians

spiritual wisdom. You can easily substitute a personal pronoun, your child's name, or the name of a friend in the Scripture in order to personalize this prayer. Read verses 19 and 20. Do you appreciate what God is saying to you? Can you grasp the power that He has granted you as you pray for yourself and others? The same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in you! God promises that He will hear us when we pray and that He will give us good gifts when we seek Him. He will also touch the hearts and minds of others as you pray for them.

3. Look at Ephesians 3:17-21. This passage provides a great opportunity to pray Scripture for others, particularly those who do not yet know Jesus as their Savior. Again, note the reference to God's power: verse 20 affirms that He can do "exceedingly, abundantly" more than anything that we can ask or think, *according to the power that works in us*.
4. Together with your children, take the list of people you have been praying for and go through this passage of Scripture, substituting their names. Then pray this passage of Scripture for yourself and your children. Out loud, together. Then wait in anticipation for God to work in your lives.

Day Five

1. As we pray for ourselves, our children, and others, we also need to be aware that in addition to praying *for* things from God, we can also pray *against* those beings that are against God and seek to harm us. It bears repeating that Scripture says that we don't wrestle against flesh and blood but "*against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places* (Ephesians 6:12). Our battle is against Satan and his fallen angels (demons) who seek to infiltrate our lives and either keep us from knowing Jesus as our Savior or render us ineffective as witnesses to others.
2. Scripture tells us to "*be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour* (1 Peter 5:8).
3. Lest we fear the enemy, the Bible also reminds us how to proactively defend against him and protect ourselves and our loved ones. Read Ephesians 6: 13-18 with your children. What is the full armor of God? Buckle up the belt of truth...the truth of God's person, the truth of the gospel message, the truth of His holiness and majesty. John 17:17 says of God, "*Your word is truth.*" You can believe the Bible.
4. Cover your chest with the breastplate of righteousness. "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled* (Matthew 5:6). God wants His children to do what is right, to seek after him and live a righteous life. In Romans, Paul remarks that one is either a slave of sin, which leads to death or a slave of obedience, which leads to righteousness, which leads to eternal life (see Romans 6:16, 18).

5. Put on the shoes of the gospel of peace. This command implies a readiness to be able to share our story with others, sharing the gospel message and the reason for the hope that is in us (see 1 Peter 3:15). There is a reason you have been practicing sharing your story about how God has been working in your lives. Sooner or later, you will be called to share your story with someone outside of your family; the Bible tells us to be prepared for this.
6. Above all, take the shield of faith, in order to defend against the attacks of the wicked one. Scripture says that “*without faith, it is impossible to please God* (Hebrews 11:6).” When you have a rock solid faith in God and His word, you can more readily rebuff the attacks of the enemy and avoid sin.
7. Along with the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation guarantees that you belong to the Lord rather than the enemy. We have discussed salvation in previous lessons. The Bible says that those who believe in the Lord Jesus will be saved (see Acts 16:31). It also says that faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of God (See Romans 10:17).
8. The word of God is described in the armor as the sword of the spirit, an offensive rather than defensive weapon. Psalm 119:11 says, “*Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You.*” So, the word of God prevents can prevent us from sinning. Hebrews 4:12 says that the word of God is a powerful weapon, “*living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword....*”
9. One reason for Bible verse memorization is so that God’s word becomes so imbedded in our souls that it becomes a part of us, easily recalled when we are tempted. Even Jesus, when He was tempted by Satan for 40 days in the wilderness, used the word of God to respond to the devil’s attacks. Read Matthew 4:1-11. Satan actually tempted Jesus using God’s own words, and each time Jesus responded firmly with Scripture that corrected Satan’s deceit. If even Jesus, who is God, used His word to thwart the enemy’s attacks, how much more we need to know God’s word to respond to and attack the enemy.
10. Pray always. After detailing the full armor of God, Paul reminds us to pray. In fact, the Bible commands us to pray continually (See 1 Thessalonians 5:17). We have discussed prayer extensively this week. Take some time now, discuss the armor of God with your children, and pray with them.

Days Six and Seven

1. Review this week’s lessons with your children. Initiate discussion on any topics this week that stood out to them or confused them.
2. Review this week’s Bible verse.

3. Pray with your children on days six and seven, and pray for them each day on your own. Pray Scripture for them as discussed on day four.
4. Remember to share with one another how God has worked in your life this week. Pray Scripture, together with your children, for those on your list.
5. Begin to ponder how you might be able to show these people an act of kindness in the name of Jesus. How can you serve them?

Week five: On Mission....Reaching Others

This week, we begin to demonstrate the gospel in action. In addition to studying God's word and praying for others, you and your children will begin serving those for whom you have prayed. Baking cookies, spending time with an elderly neighbor, mowing a lawn or doing another household chore for someone; these are all ways that you can intentionally demonstrate the love of Jesus to someone within your sphere of influence.

Choose two of the people on your prayer list and brainstorm with your children something you can do to demonstrate Jesus' love for those two people or families this week.

This week's Bible verse is Ephesians 4:32, "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*" Repeat that verse together several times. Also, repeat previous weeks' memory verses; remember, the intent is to imbed God's word firmly in your hearts. Pray for your children, with your children, and for those on your list.

Day One

1. The first day of our study this week, we will see how Jesus set the example for us to be kind and loving to one another. Read Philippians 2:5-8: "*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*" Jesus left His heavenly home, came to earth, lived as a man, and died, *died* on the cross for us.
2. Think about the implications of this passage of Scripture. Discuss with your children the mindset that Jesus wants us to have toward one another, how He wants us to treat each other. Does Jesus want us to stay within our comfort zone? To what extent should we go to touch others with His love?
3. Think about that as you prayerfully consider those to whom you will show His love.
4. Jesus also said that a servant is not above his master, nor a student above his teacher. On one of the occasions on which he said this, the Last Supper, he washed the disciple's feet. See John 13:1-17. Foot washing may seem strange to us now, but in the days when most people got from one place to another wearing sandals and walking on dirt roads, it was a very needed yet messy job, generally reserved for servants or slaves.

5. I think most kids even today will find the concept of washing feet yucky. Ask them what they think about that. What messages was Jesus sending when He washed the feet of His disciples? He was God, yet He served them in a lowly way. How does Jesus want us to serve others?
6. Pray together for those on your list. Think of ways to serve them in the name of Jesus this week.

Day Two

1. Turn to Luke 10:25-37, the Parable of the Good Samaritan; read this together. In this account, Jesus is conversing with an educated young man. The man asks Jesus how he can get to heaven. Note that Jesus first asks the man how he views God's law. He answers correctly, "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,*" and '*your neighbor as yourself.*' Wanting to justify himself, he then asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus tells them the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
2. As you read the story, you might want to explain to your children that each of the first two men who passed by, the priest and the Levite, were men who served God: think of a pastor or priest today. In other words, they were people you would expect to stop and help someone. But, for whatever reason, they walked right by the injured man.
3. The person, who did stop, the Samaritan, was from a group of people who was considered an enemy of the Israelites. He was the one man who would not have been expected to stop. Yet he did. Not only did he likely save the man's life, he put him up at an inn, and offered to pay for the duration of his care. Discuss this story with your children.
4. Based on Jesus' teaching, who is your neighbor? How should we treat others? What about those who are different from us? What about our enemies...those who treat us harshly or tease and pick on us?
5. After discussing this parable, go through the people on your list and your ideas to serve them. Make a plan to put this service into action. Pray for them; pray with your children, and for your children.
6. Review this week's memory verse, Ephesians 4:32.

Day Three

1. In John 4:1-42, we see how Jesus reached out to a Samaritan woman and how she then shared the good news with those in her community. Take a few minutes and read this account together. This woman had two things against her; she was a woman, and she was a Samaritan (remember that Jews did not associate with Samaritans). So, the fact that Jesus even spoke to her is notable. He talked to her and, while not condoning her admitted sin, did not let her lifestyle get in the way of

his outreach to her. Granted, Jesus, who is all-knowing, had insight into her life that we could not have into the lives of others, but His respect of her and His willingness to relate to her are what opened up the doorway for her salvation. If He had shunned her, as would have been expected, she would not have recognized Him as the Messiah and run back and spread His good news to everyone in her city.

2. When Jesus' disciples return, having gone off to buy food, they are stunned to see Him conversing with a Samaritan woman. He takes some time to tell His followers that the fields are ripe for harvest; people are ready to hear His good news and meet their Savior. He tells them that some will sow; some will water, and others will reap.
3. Even today, people are desperate to hear the good news of the gospel message; they are waiting for His loving touch that can only come from His people here on earth. Many are waiting to be transformed.
4. Today, after you have prayed for those on your list, put your plans into action. Bless someone on your list; be His hands and feet. You may be the one who sows the first seed of the gospel, the one who waters, or the one who actually leads someone to Christ. Trust that God is working in their lives and that He will bless your efforts.
5. Pray for your children and with your children. Pray for the person you served today. Pray for God to bring more opportunities your way.

Day Four

1. Read Luke 10:1-20. Jesus sends seventy disciples to surrounding towns to share His good news with others. They return thrilled! It is exciting to serve Jesus. Note that Jesus takes ownership of the results; he tells them that if people reject them, it was only because they first rejected Him. He reminds them that the fields are white (ripe) for harvest; the needs are many, but the workers are few.
2. The need for followers of Jesus to share His word and His love with others is still great today. Jesus promises an abundant life to those who follow Him. He says, *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10).
3. What does it mean to have an abundant (full) life? Note how thrilled the seventy were when they returned from being on mission for Jesus. How did you feel when you served someone in His name? Were you as excited as his disciples were 2000 years ago?
4. Discuss together additional ways you can serve others intentionally, demonstrating Christ's love to them.

Day Five

1. Jesus' departing words to His disciples were, *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).*
2. Read John 14:15-17: *"If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."* Also see verse 25-26: *"These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."*
3. Do you know that the Bible confirms that those who trust in Jesus as their Savior have the Power of the Holy Spirit living *in* them? Read Jesus' departing words again; notice the sequence He presents:
 - a. First, they would receive power (the Holy Spirit)
 - b. Then they would become His witnesses in their neighborhoods, larger communities, and around the world.
4. What does this imply for you as a follower of Jesus? You have that same Holy Spirit living in you, too. If the disciples were commanded to be His witnesses, you are as well. Praying for and reaching those on your prayer list with His love is simply obeying Jesus' command.
5. Pray for increased opportunities to reach out to those on your list. Pray with your children; pray for your children. Have your children review their God stories (testimonies) with you and commit to share them with others.

Day Six and Seven

1. If you have not already done so this week, choose from among the people on your prayer list and perform two acts of service in the name of Jesus. If you have already reached out to someone on your list, follow up with them or do something else. Remember that the goal is cultivating a relationship with them, not hit and run service.
2. Pray for your children and with your children each day.
3. Review your memory verses.

Week Six: Making and Multiplying Disciples

The discipleship process must be reproducible. As we inspire children to seek the Lord, to know Him and serve Him, we also need to equip them to lead others to Christ. The processes of discipleship and evangelism are intertwined; one should lead to the other in a spiraling cycle. Much like the force of a twister that picks up items as it swirls, the force and power of Jesus in us should attract and capture others even as we spiral closer to God.

Hopefully the activities that you and your children have engaged in the past several weeks have planted the seeds of the discipleship/evangelism process. This week's lessons will review the gospel message and highlight some biblical examples of the discipleship/evangelism process in action.

This week's memory verse is the Great Commission, Jesus' charge to his disciples found in Matthew 28:18-20: *"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Day One

1. Pray with and for your children.
2. Review the five memory verses from previous weeks; begin to learn this week's verse as well.
3. Pray together for those on your list.
4. Share with someone outside of your home all that Jesus has done for you.
5. After His resurrection, Jesus encountered two men along the road to Emmaus who were downtrodden over His death. See the story in Luke 24:13-35. He walked along with them and, without revealing His identity, shared with them all that Scripture had foretold about His life, His death, and resurrection. They later indicated that their hearts were burning inside them while He shared. However, they didn't recognize Him until he began to pray before eating with them. Their eyes were opened, and they knew that Jesus was indeed risen and with them.
6. The point of this story in the context of our studies is that Jesus, Himself, went through Scripture with those He was mentoring on that day, and the Lord opened their eyes. We also should be prepared to share Scripture related to Jesus and salvation and trust the Lord to open the eyes of those we serve.
7. Discuss this story with your children. What do they think about it? Do they have any favorite stories about Jesus that they can share with others?

Day Two

1. Today, we will review the basics of the gospel in order to be ready to share when the opportunity presents itself. We have already discussed this in previous weeks, so this week's lessons will contain a review of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and the steps to leading someone to a decision for Christ.
2. Read Acts 16:15-31: Paul and Silas have been jailed because they cast a demon out of a young slave who made money for her masters by fortune-telling. They were in jail, chained, yet praying and singing praises to God. No doubt, the other prisoners and the prison-keeper witnessed their faithfulness. Suddenly, with a great earthquake, they were freed by an angel. The jailer, fearing that the prisoners had fled, raised his sword to kill himself. Paul shouted out to him that they were still there, and he put down his sword.
3. I find it interesting that immediately after this the jailer asked Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul's and Silas's actions had certainly drawn the jailer's attention; the fact that they were miraculously freed yet did not flee sealed the deal. The jailer wanted what they had. They had a ready answer for him: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.*" (Acts 16:31).
4. Like Paul, we should also be prepared to answer this question when the opportunity arises. The Bible tells us to always be ready to give an explanation for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). This should include a gospel presentation that tells others not only the source of our hope, but lets them know how they can attain that hope as well.
5. Although there are several ways of explaining the gospel (in fact, the Holy Spirit can use many different ways to quicken someone's heart), here we will focus on the simple A, B, C method.
 - a. *Admit*: one must admit that he or she is a sinner/has done wrong things. "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23.) Most people generally acknowledge that they have done or thought wrong things, even one time; the Holy Spirit can be trusted to convict them of this wrongdoing.
 - b. *Believe*: One must believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be and that He died on the cross to take the punishment that they deserve. This is more about accepting Jesus' sacrifice personally rather than just believing it in general. John 3:16 says, "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*"
 - c. *Confess*: The Bible says "*that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes*

unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Romans 10:9-10). A person needs to confess his belief to God, acknowledging his need and embracing Jesus and His death on the cross as the only solution to his sin problem.

6. You and your children need to remember that it is not about having a perfectly worded gospel presentation; God will bless your desire to obey Him by sharing the reason for your hope and leading others to Jesus. Serve someone on your prayer list today and be prepared to share the blessing of Jesus with them.

Day Three

1. Share the gospel message with someone as God leads. Remember, the results belong to God, not you.
2. Read the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts: 8:26-40. Phillip was in tune with the Holy Spirit and willing to obey His promptings. Phillip did not know who this man was or what he was reading, but when told by God to approach the man's chariot, he went. The Eunuch was sitting in his chariot reading a passage of Scripture aloud. Note how God perfectly orchestrated this encounter; the Ethiopian eunuch was seeking, and Phillip was prepared to answer his questions and lead him to faith in Christ. The context might be different today; most of us do not travel in chariots or read but the principles remain the same; God is always working in our lives and the lives of those around us; we need only to be available and obedient to share in the joy of seeing someone come to Christ.
3. Remember to pray for your children and with your children.
4. Discuss your and their experiences serving and sharing the gospel with others. How do they feel about being a part of God's plan? Leading someone to Christ is an exhilarating experience; serving someone in His name is humbling and equally rewarding. As followers of Christ, we should strive to embody a lifestyle that not only brings us and our children closer to God but invites others into the body of Christ as well.

Day Four

1. Serve someone outside of your home in the name of Jesus. Share what God has done for you. If God leads you, share the gospel with them.
2. Review the story of how Jesus radically changed the demon –possessed man in Luke 8; notice again that he then proclaimed throughout the whole city the great things that God had done for him.
3. Review yesterday's story in Acts 8; the Ethiopian eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

4. The jailer in Acts 16 put his trust in Jesus, and he and his entire household came to know Him as their Savior.
5. When we obey and work with God, marvelous things happen, life changing to us and those we serve. Ask your children how they feel about the events that transpired in each of these biblical accounts. How do they feel about the joy and changed lives that the jailer and his family, eunuch, and formerly demon-possessed man experienced? How would they feel if they were part of God's plan in people's lives?

Day Five

1. Review this week's Bible verse: the Great Commission. Now, review the Great Commandment. Jesus said, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your mind. ' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments"* (Matthew 22:37-40).
2. Discuss the Great Commission in light of the Great Commandment. The two are interrelated. In fulfilling the Great Commission, are we fulfilling the Great Commandment? If we obey the Great Commandments as stated by Jesus, will we fulfill the Great Commission?

Day Six and Seven

It is the end of our six week study. Have you and your children developed the habit of praying together? Serving together? Studying Scripture together? I hope you have found this time to be rewarding. Pray with your children and for your children about how to continue the discipleship process together.

Conclusion

Hopefully this will begin a new pattern in the life of your family: a pattern of worship, prayer, discipleship, and outreach, one in which the gospel becomes central and sharing the Lord becomes a natural and normal thing to do. It generally takes 40 days to firmly develop a new habit. Let this habit of praying, learning, and serving with your children be just the beginning of a lifetime of living life close to your creator.

The Shema in Deuteronomy 6:6-9 commands that we not only learn God's word but that it becomes imbedded in our lives and thus becomes a part of everything we do. We must live a life of worshipping God by learning and memorizing His word, spending time with other Christians, serving others in His name, and sharing His words of life with others. In all accounts of Jesus' parting words, it is stressed that when we do this, He promises to be with us (see Matthew 28:20; Acts 1:8). Be the generation that changes your family's legacy and changes the lives of those God has put in your path. God promises to bless those to the thousandth generation those who love Him and keep His commands (see Exodus 20:6). You can bring blessings to your family as you worship God and bring blessings to others; the time to start is now

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