

A Biblical Assessment of Ministry Practices as They Relate to the Child and the Family

Benjamin Tanner Baldrige

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Steven Vandegriff, Ed.D.
Thesis Chair

David Wheeler, Ph.D.
Committee Member

James H. Nutter, D.A.
Honors Director

Date:

Abstract

The methodology behind children's ministry is never expressly stated throughout Scripture; thus when examining the biblical nature of said ministry in the modern church, one must examine the biblical principles on which it is founded. This thesis seeks to examine the threefold nature in which children are described—as individual souls, members of the family unit, and members of the local church—and compare how the current models for ministry to children seek to address them in this way, if at all. From there, a methodology will be discussed for adjusting the current models to address children biblically, thus increasing the effectiveness of the church's discipleship of both its families and its children.

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Definition of Abbreviations

FIC - Family Integrated Church Model

ASM – American Sunday School Model

MEM – Modern Evangelical Movement Model

**A Biblical Assessment of Ministry Practices as They Relate
to the Child and the Family**

Any ministry of the local church should be guided by Scripture in both its principles and the practical nature of their application; and children's ministry is no exception. While there are no explicit commands for ministry to children from the church body as a whole, Scripture addresses children frequently and thoroughly. Each of the current three models for addressing children in the church—the Family Integrated Church model, the American Sunday School model, and the Modern Evangelical Movement model—fail to address children completely as the Bible does, and as such, are failing to truly act biblically and assist the discipleship of children. The current models must be addressed in light of the Bible's use of a threefold description of children and their principles must be addressed in how they relate to each aspect of the description of the child. Since there is no practical methodology from which to draw conclusions about the consistency these models have with Scripture; consistency must be seen in the principles given to the Church throughout the pages of Scripture in how to address children in general. Therefore, for a ministry to be biblically accurate in its methodology, it must be grounded in the principles found in Scripture to have a more wholistic view of the child in light of their own individuality, God's grand design for the family unit, and God's intention for His Church's growth.

Threefold Position of Anthropology

This threefold position on humanity is not unique to this research. In fact, the Bible alludes to a threefold nature of humanity several times throughout it. In

Deuteronomy 6:4 specifically, Moses commands all of Israel to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” directly implying a threefold nature to humanity. He is implying in this passage that the children of Israel are to commit themselves to following and loving the Lord with every part of them: the heart (emotionally), the soul (spiritually), and their might/strength (physically). The number three shows up multiple times throughout the pages of Scripture, as it is largely a symbol of God’s completeness. God is a triune God, unique to any other singular “god” worshipped by any religion in the world. Because of this fundamental uniqueness of His triune nature, it follows that He would emphasize it in His created order and throughout Scripture.¹ As such, it makes sense that He would reflect that in His creation of humanity, endowing them with a heart, soul, and body for them to reflect His glory and ultimately worship Him in. This is reflected in the Bible’s establishment of children having a place as individuals, in the Christian family unit, and, upon conversion, as members of the church body.

The Threefold Description of Children

In its description of children, the Bible establishes them clearly as individual human souls who are members of the family unit and, once ransomed into the Kingdom of God, are also under the authority of and committed to serving the local church. Children are primarily directly addressed throughout Scripture as members within the family unit; with the majority of the commands directly establishing their place under

¹ Reeves, Michael. *Delighting in the Trinity: an Introduction to the Christian Faith*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.

their parental authority. However, as children are fundamentally human beings, he commands and principles applying to humanity as a whole can be directly applied to them and as such they are to be understood as fundamentally human and individual in nature. It is because of this, once their individual souls have surrendered to the authority of Christ and received His redemptive power upon salvation that they become members of the global church and as such are to be seen as fully functioning members of the local church body. They are able to mature, serve, and participate along with the local church body.

Children as Individual Souls

First and foremost, children must be understood as human beings, created as such in the image of God and endowed with personhood upon conception. Through studying the scientific process of conception, it can be noted that life begins the moment the twenty-three pairs of chromosomes that make up a human being's DNA are complete and the newly fertilized egg contains a fixed genetic structure.² That genetic structure is influenced by the DNA from both the mother and the father yet is completely unique to this individual. It is with this individual human personhood endowed within the God-ordained procreation process that human beings are given individual souls at conception.³ Both the physical and metaphysical parts of humanity are unique to the individual first. It

² Beck, James R., and Bruce A. Demarest. *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: a Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2007.

³ MacArthur, John, and Richard Mayhue. *Biblical Doctrine: a Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.

is from here that the individual is connected to both the family and, upon responding properly to the Gospel, the Body of Christ.

This idea of the child being individual traces its roots to Genesis, wherein immediately upon describing the creation and fall of man in detail in chapters 2 and 3; the author gives a description of the birth and subsequent lives of Adam's first two descendants: Cain and Abel. In Genesis 1:28, part of God's creation of man and woman clearly contained His first command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth",⁴ essentially instructing them in the formation of their own families and generations. The fourth chapter of Genesis shows the results of that command in light of the reality of the individuality of the children of Adam. Meaning, while they are essentially members of the family unit and a product of the God-ordained structure for filling the earth with the *Imago Dei*, Cain and Abel are shown specifically in this story to be primarily viewed as individuals with their own specific wills, actions and ultimate judgments.

In the story of the brothers Cain and Abel, the theme of individuality is apparent from the very introduction of the conflict between the two brothers. In verses 3 and 4, the brothers are addressed as independent units from both themselves *and* their mother and father. Note that Scripture does not say that the family brought the offering all at once at the appointed time; Cain and Abel's offerings are separate from not only each other but their parents as well. This is essential to understand because it is showing from the very beginning the individual wills of the children of Adam. While they are directly connected

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references have been taken from *ESV: Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016.

to the family unit as a whole, this story is focused on the result of each child's own obedience and disobedience to God the Father.

Cain and Able are viewed as individually responsible for their own decisions in bringing their offerings before God, and as such receive individual pronouncements of judgment (Genesis 4:4b – 5) based off of their actions. Cain was guilty of offering a faithless sacrifice before God (Hebrews 11:4) and therefore was not accepted by God for doing so. His brother was. Note that both sons, while still remaining a part of the family unit (as indicated by the fact that neither of them have been married yet, and thus have not fulfilled the command to “leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife” [Genesis 2:24]) are judged as individuals for their own offering. In Cain's disobedience, as he was not a head of a household, he did bring judgment on anyone other than himself and his own descendants (Gen. 4:10-15).

In the same way that Cain was judged, so too shall all men and women who stand before God in the final day of judgment. They will be seen primarily for their own *individual* obedience or disobedience and submission (or lack thereof) to God as they existed on earth. It is essential to understand children in this way first, as it provides them with a personhood that is inherent to being a created being in God's created order.⁵ This personhood is essential for understanding them in all of the other categories in which they fall under.

⁵ MacArthur, John, and Richard Mayhue. *Biblical Doctrine: a Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.

Children as Members of the Family Unit

In its addressing of children specifically, Scripture primarily refers to them as members of the family unit. While they are fundamentally unique and autonomous souls, and will be addressed throughout eternity as such, Scripture addresses them in the temporal, earthly realm as specific members of the family unit. The commands given to children (and likewise parents) throughout Scripture directly assume that their primary function (according to the established order of creation and the institution of the family) is to serve as members of the family unit, under the authority of their God-ordained mother and father until such time that they mature and gain physical independence, either through marriage or single living as an adult.

Every single time children are addressed explicitly with a command in Scripture, they are expressly called to function as members of the family unit in submission to their parents (Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16, Ephesians 6:1-4, Proverbs 1:8-9; 6:20 Colossians 3:20). It is also important to note that the one and only command involving the family unit given in the ten commandments is for children to honor their fathers and mothers through both action and attitude (Ex. 20:12, Deut. 5:16). This is because this one command establishes the family unit above all other commands.⁶ These commands throughout Scripture serve to emphasize the family unit's role in glorifying God through a proper representation of the created order.

By falling in submission to parents, children are willingly showing the acknowledgement of and submission to the God-ordained authority created in the

⁶ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary: Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005.

establishment of the family in the first two chapters of Genesis. In the same way the wife shows submission to God's authority by acknowledging her husband's role as head of the household.⁷

In addition to its commands, the Bible also implicitly refers to children as members of the family unit throughout many of its narratives, particularly its salvation narratives in the Gospels and the book of Acts as well as the narratives of judgment throughout the Old Testament. Each of these narratives follow a certain pattern. For the salvation narratives, a person or individual (typically an adult male) is given an opportunity to respond to the Gospel of Christ. Once they have responded (through confession of sins and surrender to Christ as savior) it is said that their *households* also responded in the same way. The term *households* (*oikía*)⁸ refers to every single member of the household (children, spouses, and servants) who are old enough to understand and respond to the Gospel of Christ.⁹ Narratives of judgment in the Old Testament (Joshua 7, Daniel 6:24, 1 Kings 15:29, 2 Kings 9:8) follow a similar format: a person or individual (typically an adult male) sins or dishonors God in some major way (requiring judgment by physical death). Once they have been caught and tried, their entire household endures the same judgment.

⁷ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary: Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005.

⁸ Grimm, Carl Ludwig Wilibald, Christian Gottlob Wilke, Joseph Henry Thayer, and Maurice A. Robinson. *The New Thayers Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimms Wilkes Clavis Novi Testamenti*. Place of publication not identified: Christian copyrights, 1983.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The narratives of judgment and salvation in both the Old and New Testaments serve as an example of success and failure in leadership within the home. Success is seen through the salvation stories as the husband who comes under the rule of Christ proceeds to bring his family subsequently under that rule upon conversion. Failure is seen through the judgment stories as the husband has either set a poor example or actively led his family into sin. In both cases, the family unit as established through Scripture is on full display as either being fully understood as it was intended or being used to dishonor God.

This consistency in the grouping of children as a part of the family unit, falling under and experiencing the direct consequences of both good and bad leadership within the home; coupled with the commands for both children and parents throughout Scripture firmly establish children as members of the family unit. This does not disqualify them from being considered as individual souls; rather, it strengthens this principle in the fact that the commands are given to both the parents and the children. The parents and children are both addressed as separate units of this one relationship. Parents are given the responsibility to lead, and children are given the responsibility to honor that leadership. In doing so each party places emphasis on God's created order and each one will be held individually responsible for how they responded to these commands throughout Scripture.

Children as Members of the Church

While children are unique and autonomous souls, upon their surrender to the rule of Jesus Christ through the faith and knowledge required for salvation they enter into the ultimate Body of Christ, a Body which transcends all people, nations and languages. Upon salvation, a child (or any professing Believer, no matter the age) is adopted into the

family of God and thereby grafted into His Body as per Scripture, specifically the picture given to Believers by Paul in the first four chapters of his Epistle to the Ephesians. Christ Himself makes the distinction that He is building His kingdom through the church and people that He has called into the Family of God,¹⁰ and this includes people of all ages.

In Ephesians specifically, Paul lays out the principles for unity within the Body of Christ, and those principles are founded on the fact that each Believer is uniquely equipped to serve the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:1-16). This equipping transcends any physical factor such as race, age, or gender but rather is based solely on the adoption through Christ that every believer experiences upon salvation. Whenever a child surrenders his heart and soul to Christ as savior, he is being equipped in the exact same way and this must not be overlooked.

In another of his epistles, namely the one addressed to Titus, Paul lays out the principles for discipleship and growth throughout the church. He calls for a level of intergenerational ministry that is essential for both unity and growth of the Body of Christ. In the second chapter of that Epistle he discusses that those who are older in the faith (and in age) should go about teaching and discipling those who are younger. It is this kind of inter-generational ministry that is to be seen throughout the Church as evidence of the health and work of Christ.

While children who grow up as members of a Christian home should be discipled with that context in mind (equipping the parents and holding them accountable for being the main discipleship unit), one must understand that there will always be members of the

¹⁰ Mayhue, Richard. *What Would Jesus Say about Your Church?* Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 1995.

church who do not align with the traditional family unit; even those who do not align with a *Christian* family unit. In the third chapter of St. Peter's first epistle, he gives instructions to wives within the church who are unequally yoked (in this case, those who have been converted after having married an unbeliever), thereby directly implying that evangelism within the church can happen apart from the precedence set in the New Testament with familial conversion. The original intent of these commands was for the wives to win over their husbands through their own faithfulness; however, this is the end goal. Peter recognizes that in order for that to happen, there will times when parts of the congregation are not a part of a Christian family unit.

The Christian family unit is the ideal, but it is far from the norm, both in modern times and in ancient days. James gives the command in his Epistle to not neglect the "widows and the orphans" (James 1:27). This term was used to denote the members of the church who were not a part of the traditional, Christian family unit. James and Peter recognized this importance for the church to treat children who are not a part of a family unit with the same love and compassion as they would any other, because it is the blood of Christ which unifies all people of all nations and backgrounds.

When children are understood as primarily human souls with individual wills and being, and that is viewed in light of the context of the God-ordained family unit; the Church is able to see that the inconsistency in the family unit in modern culture is a result of the Fall and as such ministry has to take place to children with understanding of this context as well. As children are individual souls, when they have surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ they are adopted into the family of God regardless of their earthly family situation. As such, it must be understood that upon conversion they are legitimate

members of the local church which benefit from the preaching and teaching of God's Word and intergenerational fellowship.

An Examination of Practices

While there are many different children's ministries throughout the country and across the world, each with their own unique approach to discipling children in their cultural contexts, there are three main models that these children's ministries follow. The Family Integrated Church Model, the American Sunday School Model, and the Modern Evangelical Movement Model all seek to address children and aide in their discipleship by integrating different methodology based off of different biblical principles. While each seek to address children in their own contexts, this examination will make clear the shortcomings of each ministry and how, through the over-emphasis on one aspect of a child's nature, fail to address the child properly in all three areas as outlined by the principles found in Scripture. This is not to say that each of these models is heretical, dangerous, or anything of the sort. Rather, the goal in this examination is to bring to light shortcomings in order for them to be properly addressed so that these forms of ministry can move forward in their mission to advance the Kingdom of God in a way that is most effective in honoring Him.

Family Integrated Church Model

Summary

The Family Integrated Church Model (FIC) for children's ministry is characterized by a lack of programs specifically geared towards children. Rather, the FIC chooses to bring the children into the service and allow them to hear and experience the preaching and teaching of the Word of God with their parents. Proponents of this model

would argue that because of the lack of a distinction in programs designed for children and programs for the whole congregation, unity within the Body of Christ is gained and the congregation is able to be as fully diverse and representative of the Kingdom of God itself.

This model began, in the most modern sense, as a way for the family and the church to become more connected, rather than developing a church culture of many church bodies within one church body.¹¹ Family Integrated Church is the name adopted by modern evangelicals to describe this movement, but its roots can be traced back to the methodology briefly described in the reading of the law throughout the Old Testament¹² (Deuteronomy, Nehemiah), and its application can be seen in ministries throughout the world; with a group of churches in Africa being seen to have children connected deeply in the services of home ministries throughout, choosing to allow them to participate in the discussion and discipleship of one another.¹³

Focus

FIC is centered around creating a unity with the family and the church and avoiding any discrepancy between what is taught at home and what is taught in the local church body. It seeks to equip families to disciple their children and to instill the connection between the church and the family. The model for comparison of the church

¹¹ Baucham, Voddie. *Family Driven Faith: Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Coetsee, Dirk, and Jan Grobbelaar. "A Church Where Children Are Welcome: A New Paradigm for Children's Ministry in Africa," n.d.

and the family is one that is seen throughout Scripture, particularly in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians wherein Paul discusses the similarities between the family and the Church. He states, "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands" (Ephesians 5:23-24). Paul also draws direct comparison to the command for a husband to "leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife" saying that this in and of itself is a command to act like Christ and the church. The Church was called away from its life of sin and alienation from God to become one with Christ as a part of Christ's body.

This focus is seen directly in the emphasis on a connection to Church and family life, as the main goal of this ministry as it relates to children is to show them the whole family at church. The children see the mother and father, worshiping with them and submitting to the weekly teaching of God's Word.¹⁴ This is a noble focus and is one that should not be ignored; however, its shortcomings are seen through this focus. Namely, that the Gospel becomes something that is only effectual for the family unit.

Main View of Children

The FIC's focus of connecting the family unit and the church is based primarily on the view that children are members of the family unit. While there is encouragement for parents to disciple their children as individual souls, those souls are only viewed in the context of a biblical, nuclear family. This means that while children are encouraged to attend church, their interactions between other generations is limited to and filtered

¹⁴ Baucham, Voddie. *Family Driven Faith: Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011.

through their family unit. They are not fully integrated as members of the church, which flows from them not being given proper autonomy as individual souls outside of the family.

Biblical Assessment

While the principles behind this model are firmly rooted in convictions that are steeped in Scripture, the FIC fails to address children (and people in general) in light of their individuality and ability to be functioning members of the church outside of the family unit. This is because, the FIC movement ultimately places a borderline idolatrous level of emphasis on existing as a part of the family unit within the Body of Christ. It is true that God established the family before He ever established the Church; but the family was never meant to be an eternal solution or institution. The institution that is the foundation for family, marriage, is a temporal institution that will be ended in death and will ultimately cease to exist in the coming of Christ's Kingdom.¹⁵

This is not to say the family is not an essential means whereby the church grows and children are disciplined. However, the exaggerated emphasis shown by the FIC model pushes the importance of the family to a level that ends up alienating those who do not fall into the traditional, biblical standard for a family; thus forming a Gospel that is only accessible and ultimately effectual within the family. This creates a co-dependency which, ironically, goes against the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy and sufficiency claimed by many of these ministries.

¹⁵ Webb, Jason. "The Family-Integrated Church Movement: an Exploration in Ecclesiology." Dissertation, Reformed Theological Seminary, Virtual Campus, 2009.

Family is not only a temporal means, but Paul states that under the New Covenant it isn't even an ideal means to continue the Kingdom of Christ. He makes it very clear throughout his epistles that for many, singleness is a virtue whereby they are given the opportunity to focus more on their own personal ministry to the Church, aiding in the discipleship of all outside of a biblical family unit. God's command to fill the earth with His Image has been redeemed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the Church under the New Covenant. It is no longer the only means whereby God's mission is fulfilled in the earth and Christians have the opportunity to pursue Him in singleness without having to give in to the command to be fruitful and multiply.

Therefore, while the Family Integrated Church model is one which initially seems to place proper emphasis on the biblical roles of children; it is clear that in its methodology and principal ideals it fails to address humanity as Scripture outlines and has failed to address children specifically as both individual souls and independent members of the local church. What began rooted in a desire to see children be discipled by their parents has developed into a cultural system that does not biblically address children properly.

American Sunday School Model

Summary

The American Sunday School movement began in the early American church as a way to encourage participation of children in church, while teaching them basics of the

faith.¹⁶ Its goal is to encourage a faithful commitment to the Word of God while providing them with intergenerational discipleship through programs designed specifically to teach them the Word of God in an age-appropriate manner. Typically seen in older, well established churches, this form of children's ministry connects children with a different teacher each year (or every other year) in their development, and as such consistently introduces them to other members of the congregation who play an active role in discipling them as they develop.

Focus

ASM is focused on using the intergenerational discipleship, as well as adjusted programming, to teach children at an age-appropriate level while connecting them consistently to older members of the local church body. Its goal originally was to teach the Bible alongside the basic school curriculum; however, throughout the years it has narrowed its focus to become a branch of many local churches.¹⁷ Many aspects of that original influence still remain however, with ministries consistently using traditional forms of attendance and transition to provide children with a track of their consistency and growth throughout their time in the ministry.

Emphasis is not placed on evangelism and, like the FIC model, the focus is instead on the growth of students currently attending the ministry. Sunday school works

¹⁶ "Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880." *Choice ReviewsOnline* 26, no. 06 (January 1989).

¹⁷ Brown, Callum G. "The Sunday School Movement. Studies in the Growth and Decline of Sunday Schools. Edited by Stephen Orchard and John H. Y. Briggs. (Studies in Christian History and Thought.) Pp. Xxvii 466. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007. £19.99 (Paper). 978 1 84227 363 0." *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 59, no. 3 (2008): 580-81.

in tandem with the current church body in order to provide a means for discipling existing students within the ministry. This means that while being Gospel centered and focused on biblical principles for growth, the ministry itself is focused on creating a culture of growth rather than a culture of new Christian life.

Main View of Children

ASM primarily places emphasis on children as members of the local church body upon salvation. The Gospel is consistently presented in each Sunday School class; however, students are rarely encouraged to reach out beyond the walls of the church.¹⁸ Children are viewed as having individual souls and the ability to be active members of the local church; however, if they are not part of the local church, they are overlooked and not given their proper place in the evangelistic ministry of the church.¹⁹ Furthermore, while it is recognized that the children are members of the family unit, the family unit does not have much input into the discipleship of the child at all.

Biblical Assessment

Disconnection between evangelism and family discipleship leads many of the churches who follow this model of outreach to fall short in addressing the child in its proper context. They fall short in equipping the parents to disciple their children (as they are clearly called to do) and in equipping students to share their faith accurately and boldly with their peers.

¹⁸ May, Scottie. *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2005.

¹⁹ Ibid.

While the Church is not centered around the family unit (as discussed in the biblical assessment of the FIC Model), the family unit does play a rather significant role in discipling children and helping them to grow up in the faith and knowledge of Christ Jesus. Parents are commanded consistently throughout Scripture to be the ones to disciple their children and instruct them in the ways of the Lord. While they are members of the church as a whole, the primary discipleship unit for should be the home (if the home is made up of Christians).

Biblically, Christian children should experience both the intergenerational ministry within the church and discipleship in the home. In Paul's Epistle to Titus he explicitly states that the older women should be teaching the younger women and the older men should be doing the same with the younger men. This is to show an emphasis of the effect of intergenerational ministry on unity within the Body of Christ. Yet, in another of his Epistles, this time to the Church at Ephesus, Paul tells fathers and mothers to disciple their children. He does this immediately after talking about unity in the Christ for all peoples.

In an attempt to provide an intergenerational ministry through the ASM, the churches adhering to this model have instead allowed programs to become a replacement for true discipleship in the home. The Church is not called to replace the discipleship in the home (if the home is one in which one or both parents are Believers along with the children) but rather to provide assistance for those families in the Church already and to create a space wherein children from all walks of life are addressed and those who have surrendered their lives to Christ are encouraged to spread the Gospel to their peers.

Modern Evangelical Movement Model***Summary***

The Modern Evangelical Movement Model (MEM) has followed closely with the advent of program-centered ministry that caters to an expressive individualist culture in a post-modern society.²⁰ The ministries that follow this model seek to reach children through individualized programs centered around encouraging them to become involved in the local church and surrender their lives to Christ. Many of their programs include curricula that seeks to extrinsically motivate children to participate in the Body of Christ,²¹ rather than seeking to establish the means through which they are intrinsically motivated by the Holy Spirit. The main difference in the programs of the ASM and these is the motivation and types of programs used. While the ASM seeks to equip and disciple the students already involved in the church, the MEM seeks to reach out to and motivate children who are not originally a part of a church body.

Focus

MEM's focus is to use the programs of the church to connect with students from all walks of life, and to provide an experience through which students come to know Christ and are excited about being involved with Church. This is seen through the structure of the programs, usually involving some form of a rewards system for progression through the curricula, as well as some sort of motivation for new children to

²⁰ Scotland, Nigel. "Shopping for a Church: Consumerism and the Churches." In *Christ and Consumerism*. London: Paternoster Press, 2000.

²¹ Firmin, Michael W., and Andrew Clemans. "Six-Year Outcome Effects of Former Timothy Award Recipients." *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 7, no. 1 (2010): 52–69.

be involved (essentially, some form of entertainment). The goal here is to create a culture wherein the students want to be involved, hoping to eventually transition the students from an extrinsic motivation to an intrinsic one through their maturity.²²

Main View of Children

As the MEM follows an increasingly expressive individualist culture, it can be concluded that the most logical emphasis for this type of programming to have is that on the individual soul. Programs are tailored to be able to have something to reach out to every individual who may want to attend the church and to provide a way to keep them entertained and ultimately, to provide some sort of draw for each child to come and know Christ.

Biblical Assessment

While MEM has the noble goal of becoming “all things to all people” as Paul writes in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, it is important to understand that in evangelism (with children especially) it is essential to form connections with people beyond the superficial and purely emotional aspects of being. In an effort to address each child as an individual soul, this model ends up leaving a greater disconnect between both the family and the greater church body.

Many of these ministries fail to actually provide any real substance or connection to the local church beyond the programs they provide.²³ Meaning, there is no real

²² Firmin, Michael W., Perry C. Kuhn, Jared D. Michonski, and Terra N. Posten. “From Outside-Into Inside-Out: A Qualitative Analysis of Childhood Motivation by Achievers in AWANA Programs.” *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 2, no. 1(2005):77–96.

²³ Clavier, Mark. *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism*. London: SPCK, 2013.

motivation for children to get involved with church following their completion of the ministry curricula. They are instead left with a system that provides for their superficial needs and they go on being satisfied, having no real desire within themselves to pursue sanctification or discipleship. This is not the case with all churches that follow this model, however this is a major pitfall when building programs based off of what seems to fit the individual's desire, rather than programs that connect the child properly to the local church.

In addition, MEM programs alienate the child from their role in the family, with parents neglecting the discipleship of their kids and using these ministries as a sort of "spiritual babysitting service".²⁴ Falling into the same pitfall as the ASM, this model creates a space for parents to become complacent in the Spiritual development of their child while at the same time going further in failing to provide a proper biblical teaching and instead feeding into emotionalism in an attempt to feed the child's individualistic nature.

Adjustments for the Three Models

Clarification must be made that while all three models fall short in some regard, they are not to be referred to as outright heresy. Since there is no practical methodology for ministry to children described in Scripture, the church must instead turn towards the application of biblical principles that define what that ministry should look like. The goal of this section is to note the needed adjustments each model should take in order to

²⁴ May, Scottie. *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2005.

properly address children in light of their threefold representation throughout Scripture so that they may more effectively use their programs and methodology to advance the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Family Integrated Church Model

In order for this model to be more effective for the work of Christ, FIC must properly address children as both individual souls and members of the church as a whole, beyond their existence as members of the family unit. This means shifting its mindset from one that is family-centric to one that is family-inclusive. Rather than focusing on the family and creating a culture where the Gospel is limited only to the ideal Christian family, the church should focus on equipping the ideal Christian family for the work of discipling their children while also ministering to those who do not fit into that Christian mindset.²⁵

This means creating a culture in the church itself that is centered around Gospel communication and intergenerational ministry beyond the family boundary. Some programs specifically aimed at connecting with children and equipping them to share the Gospel to their peers would be very beneficial in this context and can, and should, be done with the emphasis still on the family's importance in discipleship. The church will not take the place of the family in terms of discipleship, but it will provide intergenerational programming that connects its people regardless of family situation or background. This will ultimately lead to a more unified congregation and one that is more

²⁵ Webb, Jason. "The Family-Integrated Church Movement: an Exploration in Ecclesiology." Dissertation, Reformed Theological Seminary, Virtual Campus, 2009.

focused on connecting with children as individual souls and members of the church, while still emphasizing a proper biblical dynamic of parental discipleship.

American Sunday School Model

For ASM to be more effective for the work of Christ, there needs to be an adjustment and added emphasis on the equipping of the parent to disciple the child. The current situation provides a space whereby it is easy for parents within the church to have a hands-off approach to discipling their children. The children are being ministered to and treated as members of the local church, but children do not get to see that connection between the church and the family when they return home²⁶. In many cases, parents are not encouraged to engage with their child throughout the week and reinforce the spiritual truths they have learned through their Sunday School classes.

In its effort to unite the church body through inter-generational ministry, the American Sunday School Model has failed to connect the church and the family in a way that sticks. There needs to be an adjustment in programming that provides a space for families to be held accountable and equipped for discipling their children, curricula that equips and encourages children to share the Gospel with their peers, and an environment that teaches that studying the Bible and living for Christ is a life-long process.

Modern Evangelical Movement Model

For MEM to be more effective for the work of Christ, there needs to be a major mindset shift. Meaning, the Church needs to stop focusing on programs to merely

²⁶ Baucham, Voddie. *Family Driven Faith: Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011.

entertain people into heaven and focus on creating simple programs that adhere to the vision of the Church body and unify the Church as one unit,²⁷ while still creating a space wherein parents are equipped to disciple their children and children are equipped with the true Gospel, not self-centered emotionalism.

This requires the stripping away of programs and centering the focus of the ministry on the spreading of the true Gospel, with an understanding that the goal isn't to just entertain children. These programs need to be strengthened with ones that both equip the family and hold it accountable for the discipleship of the child, along with an emphasis on familial evangelism. The church should constantly be seeking to connect with the child's family; not just the child as they go through the program. Above all, these ministries need to stop serving the emotional needs of the goats and start equipping the flock of God (no matter how young) to live out the mission of the Church in how they live their lives and interact within the church and the home.

Conclusion

Ministries which fall under the current models for working with children must seek to search their programs and motivations to determine whether or not they are addressing the child fully and biblically. As individual human souls who are members of the family unit and, once ransomed into the Kingdom of God, are also under the authority of and committed to serving the local church. True, biblical ministry is found in a balance of these principles as it offers a wholistic approach that is consistent with the principles throughout Scripture relating to the child. While there is no principle in Scripture

²⁷ Sim Geiger, Eric, and Jeff Borton. *Simple Student Ministry: a Clear Process for Strategic Youth Discipleship*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009.

specifically relating directly to children's ministry, these principles relating to the threefold nature of the child in how the Bible addresses them should be the guiding principles to how ministries view children.

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