Liberty University School of Divinity

Discipling Children and Youth:

Helping the Church Enable Parents to Lead

A Thesis Project Submitted to

The Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

by

Angela Hazel

Lynchburg, Virginia

February 28, 2019

Liberty University School of Divinity

Thesis Project Approval Sheet

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Dr. Dan Burrell

Department Mentor

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Dr. Dave Earley

Reader

THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

Angela Hazel

Liberty University School of Divinity, 2019

Mentor: Dr. Dan Burrell

Parental apathy in the discipleship of children has become a worrisome issue in the Protestant churches of the United States. Where once the home was the foundation of Bible learning and character building, now parents have placed the responsibility of spiritual formation of children squarely on the shoulders of the church. The church, however, is ill-equipped to fully disciple a child or youth during this transformational time in their lives. This study sought to examine the issues that lead to parental withdrawal from discipleship training of their offspring and develop a method for the church to equip and enable parents to take the lead. The research consists of survey responses from one-hundred parents, grandparents, and guardians from various economic, regional, denominational and racial demographics. The result of this study will help churches develop practical methods to help parents rebuild their confidence in leading their children.

Thesis Project Topic Abstract length: 145 words

Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

Introduction

A typical Sunday morning at most Protestant churches will find parents herding children and youth of all ages into their appropriate classrooms and dashing off to their own. Children and youth workers will be rushing about for supplies and extra helping hands as they work to reach the hearts of their young attendees, hoping the lesson will be enough to carry the child through the week until they see them again. For many children and teens, this is where they will experience their only Bible lesson for the week. In the past, families shared devotional and prayer times as part of the weekly schedule. Parents oversaw discipline and character development in their children. However, times have changed. Family quality time seem to have yielded to sports, video games, and long work days. Exhausted moms, dads, and grandparents chauffeur children from school to sports to lessons to church to home. The Barna group reported, According to the research, parents typically have no plan for the spiritual development of their children; do not consider it a priority, have little or no training in how to nurture a child's faith, have no related standards or goals that they are seeking to satisfy, and experience no accountability for their efforts.[1]

Parental apathy in the discipleship of children has become a worrisome issue in the Protestant churches of the United States. Today, many parents have placed the responsibility of spiritual formation of children squarely on the shoulders of the church. The church, however, is ill-equipped to be the primary disciple to a child or youth during this transformational time in their lives. This is problematic for two reasons. First, for better or worse, children learn from example and experiences. Once author writes,

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[1] Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childs-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness/, (accessed September 15, 2017).

> The root of the word virtue means to make second nature behaviors that do not come naturally. Little by little we climb uphill to become the person we were created to be. Nothing influences that process more than how diligent or delinquent parents are about modeling and reinforcing godly character.[2]

They remember and emulate the examples they witness consistently; primarily, the parents. Of course, this may include any grandparents and legal guardians who are raising children. These examples and experiences can be positive such as loving others, taking care of themselves, and praying. However, these experiences can be negative such as lying, living selfishly, and treating others poor. The church cannot influence the lives of children every minute of every day. Children are exposed to multitude of living examples that will contradict or support the teaching of the church.

Secondly, the church cannot influence children in every area of their lives. They cannot observe their interactions with friends, their problems at school, and their goals for the future. All of these have an impact on how children or teens will develop their character and where they will place God in their lives. Each of these moments is a chance to guide hearts that are trying to find God and find their place in the world. Building faith in a child requires consistent, daily interaction with God's Word and discussion of faith. "Spiritual formation at home is a little-by-little, long-term process rather than a one-time event."[3] The church cannot bear the sole responsibility in this task, nor was it designed to do so.

This does not mean that the church cannot partner with parents by offering them the tools and knowledge they need to teach and guide their children confidently. In fact, this is one

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[2] Kurt D. Bruner, *It Starts at Home: A Practical Guide to Nurturing Lifelong Faith* (Chicago, IL; Moody Publishers, 2010), 35.

[3]. Bruner, *It Starts at Home*, 32

of the most important roles of the church. Steve Wright explains that God's creation of two

institutions, the family and the church, were meant to work together, not in isolation from one

another. "These two institutions, like pedals on a bike, are interdependent on the other to

accomplish the task of discipleship."[4] This study will ask and examine two questions. 1.) Why do

parents feel inadequate to lead their children in spiritual education and matters? 2.) How can the

church address this inadequacy? Why is the answer to these questions so significant? Children

need a stable, Biblical example in their family life to aid their growth in faith and in the practical

application of Biblical character, understanding, and service.

<center>Statement of the Problem</center>

What is the biggest problem stemming from lack of parental involvement in the

discipleship of children? One common complaint is that children and teens are reaching

adulthood and leaving the church. "LifeWay Research reported that two-thirds (66 percent) of

American young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a

teenager say they also dropped out for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22."[5] An

aggressive postmodern philosophy is opposing the true nature of God. It leads youth to believe

that God is unnecessary or that He is a tyrant who will destroy their happiness. However, simply

counting attendance numbers is not an accurate view of the problem.

The deeper issue that flows from a lack of parental guidance in spiritual formation is that

children and youth are developing a distorted or shallow view of Christianity. Their only

influence towards God comes from one to two hours a week of programmed classes in the

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[4] Steve Wright, *A Parent Privilege* (InQuest Ministries, 2008), 98.

[5] Rick Richardson, "Emerging Adults and the Church: Is There Really an Exodus?" *Christianity Today* February 15, 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2019/february/emerging-adults-and-church.html

church. The rest of the week they are influenced by cultural forces that reject the foundations of

Christianity. Josh McDowell writes,

> It is apparent that here at the beginning of the twenty-first century we face a generation of young people who no longer hold…to be the true foundations of the Christian faith: belief in the deity of Christ, the reliability of Scripture, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Whatever adjustment we make in the way we present the gospel to young people influenced by cultural thinking, those three pillars of the faith are central, crucial, and indispensable.[6]

This age group struggles to grasp the reality of God and how He relates to their lives..

"More than one-third of Gen Z (37%) believes it is not possible to know for sure if God is real."[7]

If parents are not helping children and youth bridge this gap of uncertainty with knowledge and

truth, these young disciples do not own their faith. They may feel cheated of real answers and

veer away from the church towards more concrete ideas. Despite of being exposed to a Christian

environment, the views of the progressive world are planting doubts and distortions that combat

the teaching of the Bible. Without strong parental guidance, discipleship will not happen as it

should.

There is a final issue stemming from the transfer of responsibility from parents to the

church leaders; parents and children have begun to view the church with a consumerist mindset.

Parents shop for the best children's programs, the most engaging activities, the right music, and

the most charismatic speaker. The development of the attractional church model has contributed

to this mindset. Some church leaders, such as Andy Stanley, defend this view. In his book, *Deep

and Wide,* Stanley places great importance on the right church building and décor, charismatic

leaders and speakers, and dynamic programs.[8] Though there is nothing wrong with having

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[6] Josh McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, FL; Green Key Books, 2006), 27.

[7] Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/

[8] Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide,* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2012), Kindle.

programs and events; if this becomes the primary focus of ministry, then the purpose of the

church is diminished. "When Christians accept a consumerist culture's definition at face value,

they look to the church primarily to provide them with the means to improve their private lives,

enhance their self-esteem, and give them a sense of purpose."[9] The teaching of the church can be

lost in the pursuit of perceived satisfaction from various programs.

Unfortunately, many parents began to depend on the church to disciple their children in

matters of faith. The result of this mindset was a type of drive-thru spirituality for children and

youth. Parents would drop off and pick up their children from various programs, but they never

engage with leaders or the program to nurture their children learning experience. Churches began

to encourage this as a way of giving children a "better" place to be and while receiving teaching

from professionals. "Without meaning to, the growth and sophistication of children and youth

programs at churches unwittingly created a toxic codependency between families and

churches."[10] In this way, parents can avoid the difficult questions with their children regarding

biblical knowledge they may not have. Instead, they allow the weekly programs of the church to

Once again, there is a gap between knowledge and heart transformation in discipleship.

The purpose of the following research is three-fold. First, the research will seek to

understand the issues facing parents who are raising children in the church. Are they unaware of

the responsibility? Are there other reasons that keep them from helping their children grow in

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[9] Craig E. Peters, "Recapturing the Transformational Power of the Church: Moving Beyond Consumerism and Individualism to Experiencing Life-Changing Christian Community," Doctoral diss. Northeastern Seminary, 2018), 4, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/2036416344?accountid=12085.

[10] Dr. Tim Kimmel, *Connecting Church and Home* (Nashville, TN; Randall House, 2003), Kindle edition.

their faith with God? These answers will help in developing a plan of action to address the church's approach to helping families.

Secondly, this research will address the parental view of current church programs and approaches. Even the most talented and diligent ministry leaders lose track of the pulse of the church as they seek to keep up with their work load. Many times church programs continue to exist simply because they are traditional activities. A yearly evaluation of programs and approaches is always a helpful tool to keep churches current to the needs of their participants.

Third, the research will be used for three specific purposes: a.) To highlight and evaluate current programs and approaches that are counterproductive to equipping parents to be spiritual leaders in the home; b.) Develop an overarching vision statement that will help churches move toward a successful family ministry that puts parents back in the leading role of growing spiritual faith in children; c.) Outline several approaches that can be used by a variety of churches to help families become stronger units that can be mobilized for the missional purpose of the church.

<div style="text-align:center">Definitions of Terms</div>

1. *Family* - Merriam Webster defines family as "the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children." However, this definition, while still applicable to many families, is too narrow for use by the church. For this research, the family unit is considered much broader. "A family, then, could consist of a father, a mother, their children, and, by extension, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, though not every family could be defined with the classes."[11]

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[11] Nathan Michael Schneider, "Families that Change the World: Exploring the Childhood Experiences of Missionaries at Church and Home," Doctorate diss. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 13 In PROQUESTMS ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1972896629?accountid=12085.

2. *Parents* - For this study, the definition of parents refers to the adults primarily responsible for the minor children in the household. This can include biological parents, grandparents, relatives, and adoptive parents.

3. *Discipleship* - J. Oswald Sanders defines a disciple as "a learner of Jesus who accepts the teaching of his Master, not only in belief but in lifestyle."[12] This research classifies a disciple as a believer of Jesus Christ who strives to obey the commandments of Christ in all aspects of life.

4. *The Church* - The Church is the body of believers who gather on a regular basis to live and work together towards the obedience of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20.

Statement of Limitations

For this research, a few delimitations must be noted. First, the researcher has chosen to survey only parents who have children between the ages of five and eighteen. These families should be actively attending a church as part of the Christian lifestyle.

Second, this study assumes that discipling children is an essential aspect of raising children. However, this study will not attempt to the importance of discipling children. As a result, this project will be limited in the time frame and number of participants. This group of participants cannot adequately represent the conservative congregation of the United States as a whole.

Theoretical Basis

Historically and biblically, the success of the children as they grow and choose their life's path is rooted in the role their parents play in that process. In the secular world, when a child chooses an Ivy League school, succeeds at sports, or chooses a good mate; his or her parents receive commendation for their time and influence in that child's life. If the child chooses a life

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[12] J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship* (Chicago, IL; Moody Bible Institute, 1994), Kindle.

of neglect and crime, the parents are suspected of being absent or emotionally detached. The same assumptions apply in the Christian world. However, the process of discipling children requires more than some good life choices and church attendance. The way parents live out their faith has a lasting impact on the spiritual growth of children and youth. "One of the strongest factors associated with older teens keeping their faith as young adults was having parents who talked about religion and spirituality at home."[13] Therefore, parental influence is very important in the lives of children and youth.

None of this means that age-appropriate classes or curriculum are entirely ineffective. However, they are a means to an end, they are not the end. Even secular education has begun to realize the importance of adult participation and guidance in the life of a child. Teachers and administrators are working hard to inform and communicate with parents to recruit them to help with their children's progress. "In general, parental involvement during elementary school has been positively linked with students' academic achievement, attendance, educational aspirations, academic self-competence, and overall well-being."[14] In the church, however, parental roles are even more critical. They are the leaders. They are the disciplers for their young children, tween, and teens. Cultural changes have distorted this message. "Cultural messages encourage parents to turn their children over to "experts," and many parents consider faith formation to be the

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[13] David Briggs, "Parents Are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active in Religion as Young Adults," November 5, 2014, accessed February 28, 2019, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014- 11/parents-no-1-influence-teens-remaining-religiously-active-young-adults

[14] Jill Campo, "Parental Involvement in Education: Model Exploration among Parents of Elementary and Middle School Students," Doc. Diss. Saint Louis University, 2011. http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/883987901?accountid=12085

 responsibility of clergy, Sunday schools, and youth groups."[15] They cannot view the church as the "school" where they volunteer from time to time, but as a partner to help them lead.

In Bible times, parents were the primary teachers for their children. "The primary agency of education in both ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia was the home. Parents and elders of the clan or extended family were responsible for the education of children."[16] Lessons were taught in the home, both academically and biblically. Though the parents were not alone in their endeavor to build moral value and character in their children, it did begin with them.

The researcher chose this topic based on the current cultural norms of the education system and how they have infiltrated the church's outlook on teaching children. In the United States, children are required to start instructional education at the age of six. For the majority of Americans, this means sending children off to public school where they join a class of twenty to thirty other children of the same age. These groups will usually grow together as they progress through the grades, finally graduating as seniors in high school. This has become the example of successful education in the United States

In much the same way, the church's children and youth programs have begun to mimic this structure of education. Children attend similar classes where leaders teach age-appropriate curriculum. The problem lies in the pattern to the families. As children grow up through the education system and become parents, they continue in the patterns they learned. If they choose to drop children off at church as a way of learning discipleship, yet never become involved in the spiritual teaching and growth themselves, then the children "graduate" from church having never

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[15] Briggs, "Parents are Top Influence," https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014- 11/parents-no-1-influence-teens-remaining-religiously-active-young-adults

[16] Walter A. Elwell, "Education in Bible Times," *Baker Evangelical Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Books, 1997), Kindle.

learned to live a life of discipleship by watching their parents. They may have memorized the

basics and received rewards for accomplishments, but hey may never have made the Christian

faith their own. The church never becomes their spiritual family and the purpose of the church

never becomes real for them.

Though many ministry leaders will agree that the lack of parental involvement is a huge

problem, not all will agree as to the cause. Some will blame the church, some will blame the

culture, and some will blame the parents. However, in several places, God's Word gives

instructions to parents as to what their role should be in the lives of their children. If this job

were easy, God would have no reason to state it over and over again. "It is clear from the New

Testament and other early Christian texts that, centuries before Sunday Schools even existed,

Christian parents struggled at times to fulfill their calling to disciple their children."[17] The author

continues, "Then, as now, it was not a church program that caused the problem or provided the

solution. What was needed was—and is—to call parents back to the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Based on these cultural norms, the researcher believes the church needs a new approach. The

programs and events of the church must not interfere with the leadership role o the parent. The

results of this research will hopefully yield some insight as to how the church is damaging this

role, and how she can return to her primary role of supporting and equipping parents in the

discipleship formation for their children.

<div align="center">Statement of Methodology</div>

This project will consist of a multi-method research methodology. First, the chosen

parents will complete a series of questions on a survey. These questions will attempt to assess

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[17] Robert L. Plummer, "Bring Them Up in the Discipline and Instruction of the Lord," *The Journal of Family Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2010): 20-28, http://www.sbts.edu/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2012/03/0191-fm-journal-fall-2010-v3-01.pdf?_ga=2.268321294.1482241806.1539375980-471246140.1539375980.

the parents' feeling on discipleship of children, the church's role in this matter, and parental responsibility as it is revealed in the Bible. They will also ask practical questions regarding the parents' effort in the home to teach the Bible to their children. These surveys will be anonymous to encourage honesty. Data collection will be through an online survey site.

Second, the researcher will analyze the data. Through the use of charts and graphs, the parents' answers will be displayed to show trends on thoughts and perception of discipleship. This information will portray habits in the home in regards to Bible study and family time. These responses will allow the researcher to identify the underlying issues that impeded parents from leading their children in discipleship.

Third, after analyzing this information, the researcher will formulate possible solutions and actions that the church can apply to help parents become more knowledgeable and more confident in their role as biblical leaders for their children. The goal of this research is not to shame or condemn parents who are not deeply involved in discipleship with their children; instead it is designed to encourage a shift in the church's perspective about family ministry in order to help the church develop better strategies to empower and guide parents in leading children in the Gospel.

The layout of this project is as follows: Chapter 1 will consist of the Introduction and overview of the project. This chapter will include the statement of the problem, the theoretical basis, the statement of methodology, and the review of literature.

Chapter 2 will consist of the biblical, theological, and historical foundations for the study. This chapter will highlight the Bible verses or passages that provide the foundation for the thesis. These verses will concentrate on explicit commands to fathers and parents as well as those which

speak to Christians as children of God. An examination of the historical figures that contributed to the understanding of the importance of parental guidance in faith is included as well.

Chapter 3 will illustrate and explain the researcher's focus and the findings from the data. This chapter will analyze the research results and how they apply to ministry issues. The researcher will examine the most relevant responses to the survey questions and decipher how they apply to the church's approach to family ministry.

Chapter 4 will analyze the church's role in equipping parents to better disciple-makers for their children. This chapter will use the research from chapter 3 to evaluate some of the current programs used by many churches. Then this chapter will illustrate several family ministry ideas that can help the church refocus their mission to help parents become better leaders for their children. These methods will utilize current research from ministry leaders. The researcher's conclusions and final thoughts will be included in this chapter.

<div align="center">Review of Literature</div>

The following is a review of the relevant literature to this thesis project. The listed books, websites, and thesis projects will be used to demonstrate the need for parental leadership in the discipleship of children, the Biblical support for the presented theory, and the issues that arise between church ministry and parental efforts.

Websites

The following websites contain valuable resources for discipleships, children, and parenting. They are reputable sites used for instruction and guidance.

Focus on the Family - *http://www.focusonthefamily.com/*. This website founded by Dr. James Dobson, a leading child and family psychologist, frequently prints valuable articles to help parents teach and lead their children in their Christian walk.

Cornerstones for Parents – *www.cornerstonesforparents.com*. This website uses the motto for "building up families." They seek to encourage, educate, and advise parents on discipleship and help parents form a solid biblical foundation in their families.

The Barna Group - *https://www.barna.com/*. The Barna Group, led by George Barna, conducts various research projects to gain insight into different aspects of our culture regarding areas of faith and life. They have frequently posted results of surveys on parents and churches pertaining to discipleship of children.

Books

The following authors and books will be used to bring insight and Biblical foundation to the idea that parents should be the leaders of discipleship in their children.

Vonnie Baucham, Jr. – In his book, *Family Driven Faith,* Baucham begins with the premise that parents face significant challenges to stay focused on discipling their children. When compared to the world, the lives of Christian families are not so different. Baucham gives parents practical examples for making disciples in their homes.

Timothy Paul Jones, ed. – Dr. Jones has edited the book, *Perspectives on Family Ministry.* This book explores three perspectives for doing family ministry within the church. These perspectives will be helpful to explore different options for incorporating parents, providing for parents, or equipping parents for discipleship of children.

Jim Burns and Mike Devries - *Partnering with Parents in Youth Ministry* demonstrates that one of the most important aspects of youth ministry is understanding one's students and their culture. Burns and Devries have studied the cultural changes among youth for decades. This book will highlight many of the social and cultural changes that have influenced youth and children's ministry since the 1950s. This insight will demonstrate the need for the church to stay

current in the cultural changes surrounding their families to help equip parents for modern challenges to the Christian faith.

Diana Garland - *Inside Out Families, Living the Faith Together.* Diana Garland illustrates an important Christian dynamic; the makeup of the family and its effect on faith. However, Ms. Garland does not stick to the traditional roles of the family but she shows how families can consist of many different makeups. This book allows readers to see how faith can be lived out in the family life; even when the family is not traditional in its makeup. This type of living faith helps children apply their faith to real life situations and allow parents, guardians, and caretakers to have a prime role in leading children on their faith journey.

Dr. Tim Kimmel - *Connecting Church and Home,* is an exploration of efforts of parents in the home and the ministry of the church in the discipleship of children. This book will provide insight into the importance of the church in the life of the family, but also it will provide foundational need for parents to be discipleship leaders.

George Barna - *Growing True Disciples* defines discipleship and equips the readers with methods for developing true discipleship in their own lives and in the lives of those they lead. This book can help parents understand the different aspects of developing and applying discipleship as they seek to raise their children in a godly home. Barna offers five discipleship models to help believers find a successful plan for making disciples.

Mike and Sally Breen – these writers in their book, *Family on Mission,* strive to illustrate the difference between knowing about discipleship, studying discipleship and living out discipleship. As their book progresses through various stages from building a family to moving out on mission; they encourage believers to see how discipleship is a way of life, a life lived in

the path of Christ. These stages apply to parents teaching children about discipleship by reminding them that they must learn to live out what they seek to teach.

Jeffrey Klick - *Gospel Legacy: A Church and Family Model Reaching Beyond our Generation,* helps parents reach the hearts of their children with the love of Christ. However, he knows that generational changes and cultural norms are at war with these intentions. His book highlights practical ways for parents to fight for their children. He also provides evaluations for the church; to demonstrate the need for updated programs that equip parents to be disciple makers.

Paul Petit – *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* draws from the examples of the Bible to show how spiritual formation affects every part of the life of a believer. After all, there is more to discipleship than just attending church and confessing faith. There must be a process of spiritual formation within the heart of the believer. This process is just as important in children as it is in adults.. Parents can use this as a guide as they seek to teach their children about worship, loving others, character development, and leadership.

Steve Wright and Chris Graves - *A Parent Privilege,* provides insight into how the church can partner with parents and teach them to accomplish the most wonderful goal; raising children who will develop a lifelong faith. The task of parenting is not easy but is essential and necessary. However, when it comes to discipleship and faith building, parents tend to cringe or fear to step into the murky waters that contain difficult questions and lack of tangible evidence. Wright and Graves understand this monumental task and seek to equip parents with tools and understanding to help them along the way.

Julius Scott - *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* outlines the historical foundation of the family and how parents, especially fathers, sought to teach their children the

important aspects of Scripture and faith. The author affirms the biblical teaching that parents are the primary teachers for their children rooted in Scripture. Therefore, it is wise to look back at the ways of life of the people of Israel to see how they sought to obey God's commands in Scripture.

Klaus Issler - *Living into the Life of Jesus* notes one of the most significant problems in discipling children and youth is that parents and churches have turned this teaching into a behavioral reward system. If a child acts a positive or acceptable manner, they receive rewards. If they behave unacceptably, they receive punishment or exclusion of reward. What is missing is the heart change which precedes Christian character. Issler's book gives parents a fresh look at Christian character that applies to child and youth development. This is crucial to the spiritual formation of the heart rather than behavioral conformity in a legalistic system.

William Yount – *The Teaching Ministry of the Church* highlights how the church works with the leading of Scripture, the presence and responsibility of the family, and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Few would doubt that the church plays a vital role in the Christian education of its members. However, placing that role into the proper context is essential.

Sue Miller and David Staal - *Making Your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of the Every Kid's Week.* If the church is to have a positive impact in equipping parents to be disciple-makers, it must have the ability to demonstrate significant Biblical teaching in its programs. Miller and Staal's approach to Children's ministry is an example of building a ministry around as strong vision. If that proposed vision is to equip parents, then that program can be successful. This book offers several insights that can be applied to the current ministry of the church to build

lifelong faith in children and youth.

Timothy Paul Jones -- *Family Ministry Field Guide* is a long-term, honest look at how families are engaging in home discipleship and building a church ministry that will strengthen and build a spiritual resolve in parents to engage their children in Biblical learning throughout the week. Programs for families alone will not make parents disciple-makers. This book provides the three approaches to family ministry outlined in Chapter 4.

J. Oswald Sanders - *Spiritual Discipleship* is an excellent source for highlighting the principles of discipleship in the Christian life. This book examines how discipleship improves every aspect of life such as work, maturity, acts of love, and the help of Christian brothers and sisters. Sander's approach will be helpful to this research in understanding the nature of discipleship and how parents can build this in their lives and the lives of their children.

Josh McDowell - *The Last Christian Generation,* is a sobering look at the present climate in youth ministry and discipleship. Youth today are facing challenges from a postmodern world that directly wars against the teaching of the Gospel. McDowell's research and insights are valuable to this research as they help highlight the necessity of parental involvement in the youth culture. The researcher will use these sources to demonstrate how youth need more than basic life application lessons but they need concrete examples as they battle modern culture.

Thesis Projects

The use of previously finished thesis projects will allow the researcher to develop a well-rounded project to research new angles and questions.

Mr. Brett Boyette provides an extensive look at his research within his church. His thesis, "Equipping Fathers at Parkridge Baptist Church in Coral Springs, Florida, to Lead in the

Discipleship of their Children," will benefit this project in illuminating his success and failures as well as helping develop ideas to equip all parents in child discipleship better.

Mark Edwin Smith. – in his thesis, "Discipleship at Home," examines the impact of spiritual formation in the home of teenagers and how that activity impacts their spiritual strength as they become adults. This research is valuable in highlighting strengths and weaknesses in various applications of discipleship methods in the church and home.

Robert L. Plummer wrote "Bring Them Up in the Discipline and Instruction of the Lord." It is an examination of the parent role of parents in the discipleship of their offspring. Mr. Plummer examines aspects of child discipleship to include instruction from the Old and New Testaments and the struggle of modern day parents. This research is a valuable tool in examining the historical perspective of discipleship and how it has changed with the cultural climate.

Chapter 2

Biblical and Theological Foundations

To understand the importance of discipleship and parental guidance, Christians must build their beliefs upon the foundation of God's Word. The Bible is our special revelation from God. There is no other higher source of authority for the Christian believer. Therefore, the following chapter will explore the Biblical and theological foundations to support the theory that parents are the primary disciple-makers for their children.

Understanding Discipleship

The first step to understanding the role of a disciple-maker is to know the meaning of discipleship and the outcome of discipleship in the life of a believer. The term discipleship was defined in the first chapter. However, to provide a definition without application leaves an incomplete understanding. Commonly, the most cited verse for making disciples is Matthew 28:19-20 – "Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you." This is an evangelical and missional call to all Christians. However, it does not mean that all Christians must go to foreign nations or be church planters.

> The Greek verb translated *go* is actually not a command but a present participle (going)…Jesus said, 'While you are going, make disciples of all nations.' No matter where we are, we should be witnesses for Jesus Christ and seek to win others to Him (Acts 11:19-21).[18]

Jesus' command was clear; make disciples wherever you are. This absolutely includes making disciples of the children in one's home.

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[18] Warren Wiersbe, "Matthew," *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: NT* (Colorado Springs, CO; David C. Cook, 2007), 87.

Understanding the command to make disciples might seem slightly easier than understanding how to make disciples. However, if Jesus gave us the command, one can be sure He provided the instruction to fulfill the command.

> In other words, the disciples present on the hill outside of Galilee were not likely bewildered by this command, not only because they were familiar with the term *mathateusate* or the phrases 'to go, to baptize, to teach,' but because Jesus had displayed the process for them.[19]

We must look at the life of Christ to understand how to make disciples and how to evaluate discipleship training in the role of the church.

In the Old Testament, God gives us our first look at discipleship in His relationship with Israel. God called these people to be a unique nation with a particular purpose. Leviticus 26:12 says, "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people." God called His people to Himself. They were to live with Him as their only God. Their lives were to reflect His commandments and His glory. God did not command this to the Israelites and then expect them to succeed apart from Him. Instead, he guided them through every challenge. He had already shown His faithfulness in releasing them from the grasp of Egyptian slavery. When they fled the land God led them by fire and cloud (Ex. 13:21-22). When they were hungry in the desert, God provided food (Ex. 16). When they faced enemies, God fought for them (Ex. 14, Num. 31, Jsh. 10). God even came and communed with His people through the temple. Therefore, we see that God dwelt, directed, guided, and even disciplined the Israelites as He built a relationship with them. This example is a foundation for the parental relationship in building disciples in

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[19] Daniel Wayne Hinton, "The Influence of in-Home Family Discipleship and Youth Ministry on Young Adult Disciple Making," (Doctorate Thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 26, In PROQUESTMS ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1849022351?accountid=12085.

children. Though the Israelites failed on many counts as they walked with God, God was faithful in His promises. This type of relationship continues into the New Testament.

 In the New Testament, Jesus came as the fulfillment of God's promise to save His people. Christ was the foundation of all future relationships with God. The veil of the temple, once separating God and man was torn in two. Christ offered a way to heal the relationship once broken by sin. He began by calling men to Himself. Their journey of those first disciples gives us many insights into the life of a follower of Christ. This paper does not provide room for a complete analysis of all discipleship characteristics. However, the following traits are an overview of discipleship.

Belief

The life of a disciple begins with belief in Jesus Christ. Though many in our culture talk about being spiritual, being loyal church attendees, or simply being "good" people; none of these things make someone a disciple. Romans 10:9 states, "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Discipleship requires us to lay our sin at Jesus' feet and confess our need for a Savior. Though the twelve disciples in the New Testament did not understand everything immediately, they still retained a level of belief that Christ was their promised Messiah. John MacArthur calls this the first phase of the calling of the disciples. "It was a calling to *conversion.* It illustrates how every disciple is called first to salvation."[20]

Life Change

The disciples Jesus called to follow Him did not stay the same. They became new men with new lives. Some of this change was reflected on the outside. Eventually, they served in the

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[20] John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson, 2002), 555.

ministry of making disciples. However, they also became new men on the inside. Through the three years of following Jesus, they learned how to set aside their previous perspectives and faulty thinking and become more like the Messiah. Romans 12:2 states, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." Our belief and spiritual growth as disciple should result in a life change. Where one was once selfish, there should be generosity. There should be generosity where there was once selfishness. There should be humility where there was once arrogance. There should be contentment where there was once greed and envy. While these changes will not happen immediately, the life of a disciple should reflect a steady change of priorities.

Learn

The Greek word for "disciple": *mathetes...* When directly translated, it means *learner*."[21] To be a disciple of Christ means believers must open their minds to a new way of living. Jesus did not send His disciples out without an education. They spent at least three years with Christ as they applied His truths to their lives. "The key to immersion is having access to the culture you are hoping to shape you."[22] Disciples of Christ must dedicate their lives to learning and growing in the body of Christ. It is not just *knowing about* Christ, but learning to *live out* Christ. N.T. Wright says,

> "Disciples" means not just head-learners, not just heart-leaners, but life-learners.
> We have to discover, through prayer, study of the Scripture, and above all
> devotion to Jesus himself such as we express when we come to his table, how we
> in our generation can implement the decisive victory which he won.[23]

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[21] Breen, Mike. *Building a Discipling Culture* (Kindle Locations 224-225). 3DM. Kindle Edition.

[22] Ibid., Kindle.

[23] N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), Kindle Edition.

Therefore, the learning process in discipleship is a life-long journey. Regardless of when the journey begins, discipleship will be about growing in faith and surrendering one's life to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Other characteristics should come to life as a disciple learns the attributes of Christian living and develops their faith. These characteristics include serving, loving, and obedience

Serve

An essential aspect of a disciple's life is the call to serve others. Serving others is a pivotal difference in the change from unbeliever to believer. Modern culture tells people to live for themselves. However, Christ tells us to live for Him and in that command is the requirement to serve others. "God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another."[24] The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer brings with it an extraordinary gift to serve God and others. This presence can manifest itself in a variety of ways; including teaching, singing, and administration, preaching, and creating.

Serving the community of believers is only one side of service in the life of a disciple, however. Christians should also serve the world as a whole. The earliest believers of the New Testament set the example by, "selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."[25] After receiving their faith and salvation, these believers could not wait to share their newfound love of God with those around them. Their works became a prime example of their faith. "The early Christian communities were noted for being generous and caring for one another and for the poor."[26]

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[24] 1 Peter 4:10

[25] Acts 2:45

[26] James Montgomery Boice, *Foundation of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 1986), 503.

A willingness to serve others sacrificially is an example of the change of heart of a Christian. Jesus' life reveals another benefit of a serving attitude in the life of a Christian. In Mark 12, Jesus points out the stewardship of a widow who gave everything she had, though she had very little to give. Service helps believers maintain an attitude of humility and compassion for others, regardless of their financial resources. Jesus' miracles in healing those who were desperately sick or in need of forgiveness shows that same compassion. Christians are to display this same attitude, unconditionally, as children of God. Jesus healed and loved many who never became believers, but He loved and served them all the same.[27]

Love

Though many believe love to be a natural emotion in the human heart, the kind of love described in the Bible is anything but natural or automatic. Most humans love in selfish ways, seeking their desires or demanding others to meet their expectations. This self-focused love is not the love of a disciple of Christ. Christ gives several commands and exhortations in regards to love. In John 15:12 Jesus says, "This is my commandment; Love each other in the same way I have loved you." Christ is our most extraordinary example of true love. This love surpasses what we see in our physical and emotional world, but should show us how to love on a spiritual level. Jesus' example of love included surrendering to the Father's will to come to earth as a human,[28] spending time with those considered less fortunate or less worthy,[29] healing the sick and brokenhearted,[30] and giving his life on the cross for the sins of the world.[31] Though Christ does

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[27] Boice, *Christian Faith,* 502.

[28] Philippians 2:7.

[29] John 4, Luke 19:1-10.

[30] John 9:1-12, Luke 8:40-56.

[31] Matthew 27:32-56.

command love as part of discipleship living, the heart of each disciple should thirst to love God

and others because of the internal work of the Holy Spirit. This yearning is rooted in the desire

to follow and obey God.

Obey

Part of the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is that those who are disciple-makers are to

teach new disciples to obey the commandments of Christ. This call to obedience often gets lost

in the process of sharing of the Gospel. However, Christ makes it clear that obedience is a

significant and necessary trait in the life of a disciple. John 15:10 says, "If you keep My

commands you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commands and remain in

His love." Christ also says in John 14:14, "If you love, you will keep my commandments." In

light of these verses and our previous definitions; if a believer claims to love Christ and be

disciple, then obedience must be present in their life. Warren Wiersbe writes,

> We do not obey the Lord simply because we want our prayers answered,
> somewhat like the attitude of a child just before Christmas. We obey Him because
> we love Him, and the more we obey Him, the more we experience His love. To
> 'keep' His commandments means to value them, treasure them, guard them, and
> do them.[32]

Believers should not have a disgruntled approach to the obedience of God's Word. Instead, this

obedience should flow from the love that Christ plants in the hearts of all disciples.

The above characteristics and foundational verses can help leaders and parents

understand the meaning of discipleship. However, understanding discipleship is only half the

picture. Some parents and families may still doubt that they hold the key to helping children

learn and grow in their faith as Christians. As noted before, the current cultural climate has

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[32] Warren Wiersbe, "John," *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary NT* (Colorado Springs, CO; David C. Cook
Publishing, 2007), 280.

taught parents to rely on professionals in most areas of their children's lives. However, this mindset is the opposite of God's plans for families. The Church is an integral part of discipleship, but it was not meant to be the sole teacher of children. "Though the family is not the exclusive means of discipleship, it is meant to be the primary one."[33] The following section demonstrates the Biblical evidence God has given to His children in regards to teaching *their* children.

<p align="center">Discipling Children and Youth</p>

The culture of modern day parenting is to allow the experts to be the teachers. We send our children to school as young as three years old in an attempt to give them the best start in life. We expect schools to have the most up-to-date educational plan to teach children. We expect churches to have an entertaining and doctrinally-sound curriculum to guide young hearts to Christ. Then we go about our week, fingers crossed, that our children will turn out to be good, successful people. However, this was not God's plan when it came to spiritual matters. God is the Creator of families. God had a plan for the well-being and instruction of the next generation from the time of the very first family of Adam and Eve and their children. Before the invention of teacher certifications and doctorate degrees; parents were responsible for passing on the knowledge of God and leading their children to become adults that live holy lives as commanded by God. The following passages give insight into God's commands on discipling children and youth.

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[33] Chap Bettis, *The Disciple-Making Parent: A Comprehensive Guidebook for Raising Your Children to Love and Follow Jesus Christ (*Diamond Hill Publishing, 2016), 14.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7

This Scripture states; "And these words that I command you today are to be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."

Arguably one of the most popular verses for parental leadership in discipleship, these passages highlight a crucial aspect of discipleship. Teaching discipleship is a daily, life long journey. Many Christians try "drive-by" discipleship. Perhaps there is 5-minute devotion or a quick thank you prayer over dinner. While neither of these activities is inherently wrong, they will not produce the type of life change God is seeking.

These verses were written to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. It was part of God's exhortations for their daily living. The people were expected to live in obedience to God. The command to pass on the truth of God and all He had done to the next generation was one of great importance. It was easy for adults to become preoccupied with daily living and never share their faith or the amazing grace of God. "The people were not to concern themselves only with their attitudes toward the Lord. They were to concern themselves with impressing these attitudes on their children as well."[34] Discipleship teaching must take place in all the common areas of life. Parents and guardians have the most opportunities to share God's truth with children in everyday moments.

However, this verse does not exclude all other teachers. It is possible to see that this verse could pertain to the church community as well. The Israelite families did not live in isolation

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[34] Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 1992), 66.

from one another. They lived, worked, and worshipped together. "In this case, every adult Israelite is to be a teacher, seizing every opportunity for instruction."[35] In the same manner, Christians are called to fellowship and worship together (Hebrews 10:25), and therefore, support one another as families who seek to educate their children in the truth of God's Word.

Psalm 78:5-7

Here the Bible states; "For he issued his laws to Jacob; he gave his instructions to Israel. He commanded our ancestors to teach them to their children so that the next generation might know them. Even the children not yet born, and they in turn will teach their children. So each generation should set its hope anew on God, not forgetting his glorious miracles and obeying his commands."

The command to pass on the laws and knowledge of God is not to stop with one generation. Every generation is to grow, learn, and pass its knowledge of God on to the next. The purpose of this teaching is explicit in verse 7. Every generation had to renew their faith and hope in God's promises. If parents became complacent in the formative years of their children's lives, their children were in danger of growing up without understanding all that God had done for the people of Israel.

Israel had already experienced this issue in the worst way. Because the first generation to leave Egypt was neglectful and unfaithful to God, their children did not know God. "The 'hearts' of the wilderness generation were not loyal…and their 'spirits were not faithful.' Instead, they were thoroughly rebellious"[36] If the generation that saw God's amazing miracles in Egypt, that

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[35] Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2012), 185.

[36] Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 1991), 506.

experienced His merciful protection in the wilderness was in danger of rebelling against God and forgetting His glory, then how much greater would that danger be for a generation of children that never hear about Him?

Each generation must know of the glorious plan God had created for their salvation. Psalms 102:18 says, "Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord." The most critical work for parents of the next generation of believers is teaching them to know and praise the Lord. Their work will reach well past their lifetime to continue to guide new hearts to the saving grace of God.

Deuteronomy 4:9

This verse states; "Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children."

Remembering God's glory was not the only necessary motivation for sharing God's Word with all future generations. Parents were also exhorted to tell their children of the discipline and lessons they learned as a result of their disobedience. It was not that the people might only forget the Word of God, they might soon forget the severity of the consequence of sin. Forgetting this important fact about the justice of God would be detrimental to their spiritual health. "The forgetfulness of which Moses spoke is not primarily a problem of mental alertness but spiritual laxity."[37] As children develop from concrete to abstract thinking as they mature, it is essential to remind them of the spiritual application of obedience, not merely the rewards they can see.

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[37] Doug McIntosh, *Deuteronomy, Holman Old Testament Commentary* (Nashville, TN; B&H Publishing, 2002), 62.

Proverbs 22:6

Here Scripture states; "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it."

This verse pertains to the responsibility of the parent or guardians to direct children on to the right path during their upbringing. Human minds possess a very short attention span when it comes to seeing and understanding the grand picture of life. They become preoccupied with daily living and strife, forgetting that eternity will be far longer than life on earth. Further, because of the stress and responsibilities of life, parents can forget to take advantage of life's best instruction moments to guide their children on the right path for life. Here, God reminds us that we must use our child's growing moments to influence them in a way that will affect the rest of their lives.

The key to this verse is understanding its meaning and context. Many parents take this verse in generalization. They consider taking their children to church as "the way" for their children to go and expect that faith will take root in their child's life. History demonstrates this is not the case. Nor is this proverb a promise of the acceptance of Christ by one's children. "It is not making an ironclad guarantee, but is laying down a general principle."[38] It is important to remember that this principle can have positive and negative connotations. If parents neglect their duties to bring their children up in the knowledge of God's Word, they may choose a path that take them away from God. However, the same can be true if parents diligently teach their children the ways of God. Regardless of the outcome, this verse shows the importance of providing instruction and guidance to growing children.

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[38] Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: OT* (Colorado Springs, CO; David C. Cook, 2007), 1085.

Ephesians 6:4

This verse states, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

In this verse, fathers receive a warning and an exhortation in the context of raising their children. Notice that fathers are highlighted explicitly in this passage. This wording does not exclude mothers but once again demonstrates that fathers are to be the spiritual leaders in their families. First, Paul warns that fathers are not to deliberately push their children to emotional limits of anger. Paul is not talking about discipline. Discipline will be a part of good parenting. However, parents are sinful human beings and tend to react emotionally or violently. This verse warns of being harsh for deliberately selfish reasons. Matthew Henry offers this perspective:

> Though God has given you power, you must not abuse that power, remembering that your children are, in a particular manner, pieces of yourselves, and therefore ought to be governed with great tenderness and love. Be not impatient with them, use no unreasonable severities and lay no rigid injunctions upon them. When you caution them, when you counsel them, when you reprove them, do it in such a manner as not to *provoke them to wrath.* In all such cases deal prudently and wisely with them, endeavoring to convince their judgments and to work upon their reason.[39]

Henry's teaching to avoid "unreasonable severities" is important as this leads children to bitterness and resentment. Colossians 3:21 says, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged." If parents are to show their children the love of God faithfully, they cannot do it through methods that leave children emotionally and physically scarred.

The exhortation part of this verse is that children need guidance in the "discipline and instruction" of God. Rather than discourage and embitter children in condemnation or ridicule,

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[39] Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary of the Whole Bible, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Eph/Eph_006.cfm?a=1103004* (accessed November 16, 2018).

parents are to raise their children in a manner that reflects the Word of God. Notice that this verse does not give specifics other than to highlight the fathers. "The biblical principle of Ephesian 6:4 allow a broad range of possible expressions. What remains the same, regardless of context or culture, is that God has called parents – particularly fathers – as primary faith trainers in their children's lives."[40] Stinson and Jones are acknowledging that while methods of discipleship in homes can look different across cultural norms, the foundational trust remains the same. Parents hold the responsibility to teach their children the Word of God.

2 Timothy 1:5

Scripture states, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also."

God has given us an excellent example of childhood discipleship in the life of Timothy. In this verse, Paul reminds Timothy that he learned about his faith at the feet of his grandmother and mother. We do not learn anything about Timothy's father from Paul's letters. All we know is that these two women passed on their love for God to Timothy from the very beginning of his life. We know this because Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:15 …"and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Though God highlights the spiritual authority of the family to the father in many areas of His Word, this does not exclude the mother and extended family when fathers are not present or willing.

The condition in which Paul is writing to Timothy is a noteworthy reason to understand the importance of parental guidance in the discipleship of children. In 2 Timothy 3, Paul is

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[40] Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones, *Training in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical, and Practical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 52.

warning Timothy of the people around him that would turn away from the way of Christ. They would be "evil men and imposters"[41] that were falling for false teachings. Instead, Paul was helping Timothy remember that he grew up learning to understand the foundation of God's Word and that Timothy could rely on that teaching of truth. Because of the work of Timothy's faithful grandmother and mother, he learned Scripture and truth from an early age. "They [Scriptures] disciplined him in obedience to God and also pointed forward to the coming Messiah, through whom salvation by faith would become available."[42] Parents that bring their children up in the truth of God's Word are equipping them to resist the evils of this world and are allowing God to prepare them for His work.

Joshua 24:15

The verse states; "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

This verse reflects the issues that faced the Israelites after their Exodus adventures. Despite all that God had done for them, some were still worshipping false idols in their midst. Joshua was not going to let them off the hook. The decision that he presents here is an imperative for all families, not just the Israelites. Joshua is making a stand that he will follow the Lord with or without the approval of culture. Similarly, his entire family will be a part of that decision.

The teaching of this verse is too important to miss. Joshua is not allowing for a temporary loyalty to God while God was blessing him. Giving loyalty based on temporal feelings is a

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[41] 2 Timothy 3:13.

[42] Ralph Earle, "1 & 2 Timothy," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 1981), 409.

typical attitude within the church today. Faithfulness to God is circumstantial rather than unconditional. Parents do not necessarily desire this attitude in their children. However, many do not make a solid declaration for their families to follow God. They follow cultural norms, wherever they may lead. As a result, their children gain a mixed view of how faith is demonstrated in the life a believer.

As the father and leader of his family, Joshua is providing a picture of how fathers, mothers, grandparents, and guardians can help children find a solid foundation for living out their faith. Those appointed to raising children must make a firm decision that their household will obey and honor the Lord, whatever may happen outside the house. "Joshua made it clear that the people of Israel had to decide to serve the Lord God of Israel. There would be no neutrality."[43] The people could not hang on to their false gods and straddle the line between faith and obedience. They must turn towards God and not look back.

Joshua's example has important modern implications for today's Christian families. Many of these families do not draw a clear line between cultural desires and obedience to God. Many Christian read the same books, watch the same movies, and demonstrate the same attitudes and beliefs as those in a house of unbelievers. The reason for this is that many Christians have not turned from their fleshly desires to make their faith known. The desire to embrace the world is particularly troublesome in the process of discipling children. Children growing up receiving theses mixed messages may never experience God on a deeper level; they may only see Him as someone to save them only in times of trouble. Children need a clear picture and firm example of how faith looks in the lives of a faithful and obedient servant such as Joshua. "In his famous words at the end of the verse, Joshua took his stand clearly and unambiguously on the Lord's

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[43] Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: OT,* 422.

side. Joshua stands as a good example of a leader willing to move ahead of his people and commit himself, regardless of the people's inclinations."[44]

Proverbs 1:8-9

This verses states, "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, or they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck."

God not only give instructions to parents, but also to children. In this proverb, children are told to pay attention to their parents' guidance and teaching. Proverbs is a book of wisdom. God offers believers a picture of the obedient life. Here God shows that the teaching of the parents is a blessing to the child. Daniel received gold chains around his neck as a symbol of his place in the kingdom (Daniel 5:29). Joseph was also present with a golden chain when Pharaoh promoted him to a high position within Egypt (Genesis 41:42). Therefore, the garland or chain about the neck has as significant meaning and is considered a great honor and blessing for the one that wears it. Children are to view their parents' instruction in this manner.

However, this is only one side of the teaching of this verse. The more subtle message is that parents must be teaching their children. If children are to be obedient to these verses, then the parents must do their parts as well. Though this verse may apply to many areas of life, the life of discipleship should be a top priority. "Great parents recognize that from the moment a child leaves the womb until the time he or she leaves home, they must tirelessly guard and shape the mind, heart, and soul of their child."[45] This verse is not the only exhortation in Proverbs is concerned with a child's response to parental guidance.

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[44] David M. Howard, *Joshua: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*: *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN; B&H Publishing Group, 1998), 436.

[45] George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting: What the Research Shows Really Works* (Carol Stream, IL; Tyndale House Publishers, 2007) Kindle Edition.

Proverbs 3:11-12

This Scripture reads; "My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights."

This verse helps lay the foundation of understanding as to why parental leadership in discipleship is so important. It points to the difficult subject of discipline. Discipline is an essential aspect of discipleship. In this verse, the writer urges believers not to grow bitter toward God if they receive discipline for their actions. This confrontation of sin is a genuinely loving response from God as that of a father would give to a child he is trying to protect. "Like a good father, Yahweh's primary concern for his children is not that they live an easy life, but that they live a good life. This requires discipline."[46] This can apply to many aspects of spiritual training. The obvious implication is that parents must be sure to curb their children's intentions to do wrong. Sin must be confronted, addressed, and confessed. Unchallenged sin will only lead to a rebellious child which in turn may lead to a rebellious unbeliever. However, this type of discipline is not the only one mentioned in God's Word.

God also allows certain hardships to affect His children to teach them specific attributes of the Christian life. Not all discipline and trial is a direct result of sin. Our primary example is that of Jesus Christ, who suffered on the cross for sins that were not His own. Another example is Job. Job suffered countless issues and trials that were no fault of his own. However, God used these bad situations for good and He blessed Job beyond measure as he stayed faithful during his trials. Though most parents try to shield their children from difficulties in life, too much protection can lead to a child that has no spiritual maturity. Parents must teach children to walk

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[46] Ernest C. Lucas, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans's Publishing, 2015), 67.

through the trials of life with spiritual peace and obedience. These attributes come from day

today interaction with God's Word and loving guidance; not complete protection. "Just as

athletes sometimes have to undergo training that is painful in order to develop their physical

muscles, so we sometimes have to go through painful experiences, unrelated to any mistakes or

errors…to develop our moral 'muscles.'"[47] This type of training will allow for dedicated

believers that grow to stand the tests of life against their faith. Parents must hold to their calling

to discipline their children that they may experience blessings from God.

Ephesians 4:11-13

Here Scripture states; "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists,

the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body

of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to

mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Finally, we see the role of the church. The work of the church is to equip the saints, and

this includes parents. Many churches have taken over the job of the parents, no matter how

unintentionally. But, if children are to learn to be a part of the unity of the faith or grow in the

knowledge of Christ, they must experience this in every part of their lives; especially in the

home. The church must reevaluate its approach to family ministry if it is to help fulfill this

purpose and equip parents to serve and lead in their families.

<center>Historical Understanding of Family Discipleship</center>

Understanding the biblical foundation for discipling children is an important first step in

building a strong and effective family ministry. However, to have a thorough awareness of the

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[47] Lucas, 67.

issues that influence parental involvement in discipling children, we must look at the historical and current approaches to the problem.

The struggle of the church to motivate and equip parents to lead their children in spiritual education is not new. However, the church's approach has ebbed and flowed with the tide of cultural norms. Though the reading of the Bible shows God's call for parents to lead, the church either did not support this endeavor or did not know how to do so. "With the dawning of imperial favor in the fourth century AD and the crumbling of the Roman Empire in the fifth, the primary focus of the Christian practice drifted from homes to dedicated institutional structures."[48] There were several factors that lead to this problem such as the growing power of the clergy in the Roman Catholic Church, the illiteracy of laypeople, and lack of access to Bibles. The church could have approached these issues in a way that would have strengthened the ability of families to worship and read together, but many did not. They chose instead to simply take on the tasks themselves and this greatly contributed to the deterioration of parental leadership in spiritual matters.

The post-modern culture reflects this same attitude. With the high price placed on higher education, the popularity of compulsory attendance at schools, and the rise of multiple income households; parents have become used to allowing others to take responsibility for their children. They spend time and money to hire the best instructors, the best teachers, and the best coaches. They may feel inadequate to teach their children in any way. Taking their children to church became the easiest way to address spiritual matters.

> The task of discipling children can be so daunting for parents that they simply
> give up, or worse, may not every start. Well-meaning parents, who are believers,

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[48] Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones, *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in the Theological, Historical, and Practical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI; Kregel Publications, 2011), 101.

choose to do the best they can by insuring their child attends a Sunday school where at least the Bible will be taught.[49]

Taking children to church is a good and necessary thing. But, discipleship requires more than simple attendance to a worship service. Though ministry officials are usually very good, very knowledgeable, and love the children and youth that attend their ministries; parents are still the most important asset in the life of a child. History shows that the family unit was extremely important in the spiritual formation of children.

Christian Families in Biblical Times

The families of biblical times were tight-knit units led by the father. As mentioned in the biblical foundations of discipling children, fathers were commanded to teach their children diligently. Though daughters were not educated like sons, they would have benefited from listening to the repetition of Scripture in the household.[50] Marriage and family were highly valued parts of life in the New Testament times. Marriage had a direct impact on the well-being of the family. Ephesians 5:22-32 gives instructions for husbands and wives and their attitudes toward one another. These actions were important because of their impact on the family of God.

The family unit is the foundation of human society from the very first family God created with Adam and Eve. God used families to give people relationships, support, love, acceptance, and children. These families shadowed the relationship between God and people. Our wise Heavenly Father knew people needed stability and love and He provided that through the

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[49] Bradley Bruton Boyette., "Equipping Fathers at Parkridge Baptist Church in Coral Springs, Florida, to Lead in the Discipleship of their Children" (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 53, In PROQUESTMS ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1985001960?accountid=12085

[50] Stinson and Jones, 52.

creation of marriage and parenting. When fathers and mothers obey God in His command to teach their children biblical truths, they are building a foundation for future generations.

Our culture has changed this view of family, marriage and children. Both have become disposable depending on the wishes of those in charge. The idea of "identity" and "individuality" have permeated the culture to have dire consequences on spiritual matters. "But the Old Testament characters and writers did not think that way…family relations defined people so completely that 'the concept of the individual and individuality identity did not yet exist.'"[51] Families included all those within the community of relatives. These tight-knit families were important in teaching children how to live out faith daily.

As our culture changes the perception of family and marriage, the teaching of children changes as well. Where once children absorbed God's Word from fathers and mothers, were included in family and faith discussions, and were expected to take part in worship and sacred ceremonies; now children are excluded or excused if it is deemed boring or "too formal." Instead, children and youth are shuttled to age-appropriate events where they are entertained and given quick devotions. The lie the enemy has fed the church and parents is that children and youth are too young, too immature, or too much trouble to try to teach them the depths of Christian faith. Many parents have adopted the mindset of allowing them to enjoy their childhood and let them decide on faith as adults. This attitude is not consistent with God's plans for families. "What remains the same, regardless of context or culture, is that God has called parents-and particularly fathers-to function as primary faith trainers in their children's lives."[52]

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[51] Michael and Michelle Anthony, *A Theology for Family Ministries* (Nashville, TN; B&H Publishing, 2011), Kindle Edition.

[52] Stinson and Jones, 52.

There are many examples in history of Christian writers, pastors, and missionaries that attest to the power of the family in the imparting of faith to the next generation.

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine of Hippo is a witness to the power of a parent's teaching in the subject of faith. Augustine's father was not a Christian, but his mother, Monica, grew up in a religious home. She sought to pass on that faith to her son. Augustine did not always share his mother's faith. However, Monica showed faith that God would answer her prayers for her son. She did not tolerate sin, but lived the example of love and forgiveness. She was a living testimony of a holy wife to a man who reportedly committed adultery. The fact that we know this about Monica is due to Augustine's writings. Monica not only taught her son tirelessly, but her prayers continued to cover Augustine into his adulthood. Augustine writes, "And Thou sentest Thine hand from above, and drewest my soul out of that profound darkness, my mother, Thy faithful one, weeping to Thee for me, more than mothers weep the bodily deaths of their children."[53]

This firsthand account of his mother's work and faithfulness are a witness to the power of an obedient parent to disciple their child. Monica was by no means a perfect mother and wife. However, she did not allow her failures to alter her position as a disciple maker for her children. "The impact of Monica's holy yet imperfect example would become evident in Augustine's later ministry as a spiritual leader and mentor."[54] Parents must realize the seeds they plant in their child's spiritual development have the ability to impact something far greater than they can imagine.

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[53] St. Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York; New York Press, 2007), 40.

[54] Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor* (Nashville, TN; B&H Publishing, 2008), 94.

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas was a great proponent of the family unit. He believed that marriage had important purposes. One of these purposes was for the procreation and education of children.[55] The irony of this view is that Thomas was sent off to be taught by monks at the age of five. His family did not approve of his religious choices. However, Thomas held fast to his beliefs and wrote on the importance of marriage and raising children.

Thomas had very strong views on the duty of the family in society. He believed that society would breakdown without the stability and protection of the family in the development of the child. A stable home allowed for children to learn, grow, and be protected from outside forces. "Thomas is opposed to separation and divorce on philosophical grounds, namely, that they are in opposition to the purpose of the family and the education of children."[56] Thomas's beliefs led him to write an instruction manual that would help with the education of children in the Church. This was, at least, an attempt for the Church to help in the discipleship of children.

Susannah Wesley

John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism, are some of the most well-known names in the Christian world. However, their faith and determination can be traced back to the teaching of their devout mother, Susannah. Susanna's husband, Samuel, traveled a great deal. This left a void in the household when it came to religious education. However, Susanna filled that void with her devotion to family worship and realistic approach to living out faith. "Much of what she taught them was for the purpose of helping them see through - and therefore, be able to

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[55] Robert Slavin, "St. Thomas and His Teaching on the Family," *The Dominicana Journal* Vol. XVIII, no. 3 (September 1933); 137, https://www.dominicanajournal.org/wp-content/files/old-journal-archive/vol18/no3/dominicanav18n3stthomashisteachingonfamily.pdf.

[56] Ibid, 140.

resist - the secular doctrine of the time."[57] Susanna understood the importance of raising her children in the Lord. She devoted hours of her time to teach them faith, manners, and reading. Much like Monica, Augustine's mother, she could not have known the impact of her obedience on the lives of those touched by her son. But, her life is a testimony to the work of parents that seek to live out faith with their children.

Corrie Ten Boom

Living out faith is the true description of the life of Corrie Ten Boom and her family. Growing up during WWII, Corrie Ten Boom's family reached out to help persecuted Jews during a time when it was extremely dangerous to do so. However, Corrie watched her father live out his faith by trusting God to care of them as he tried to care for God's people. Corrie's father and mother were both actively involved in educating their children. Corrie grew up to share the Gospel with thousands of people as result of her time in a concentration camp at the hands of the Nazis. Even after her release, her message of reconciliation and forgiveness came from the faith taught at her father's table. She recalled a story of a time when she influenced a mother to lead her child to Christ, and the child passed away the next day, Corrie writes, "I sat for a long time with that letter on my lap, realizing that I must have a new sense of urgency to talk to parents about the joy of leading their children to the Lord."[58] Because of her parent's devotion to educating and guiding their children in a life of faith, Corrie's life impacted countless others.

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[57] Eric Metaxas, *Seven Women and the Secret of Their Greatness* (Nashville, TN; Nelson Books, 2015), 38.

[58] Carole C. Carlson, *In My Father's House* (Eureka, Montana; Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2011), 28.

Conclusion

These examples of parental faith and devotion are just a few among thousands of similar stories. As one reads these powerful stories of faith, love, and deliverance in the midst of difficult circumstances, it is hard to argue that parents are not influential on their child's faith. If history shows such a credible account of parental influence, then today's parents should be convinced of their abilities to disciple their children. However, the numbers of the church are telling a different story. The following research sought to understand if parents are choosing to ignore their God-given responsibility, are unsure of how to approach discipleship, or have other factors of which the church is unaware.

Chapter 3

Using Applied Research to Equip Parents to Lead

The biblical evidence for the importance of discipling children is strong. The Bible gives firm instruction on this subject as explained in the previous chapter. The historical accounts of parental influence in the lives of notable Christians is encouraging. The goal of this thesis is not to argue for the discipleship of children. Instead, the intent is to identify issues that distract or prevent parents from taking their place as spiritual leader in the lives of their children. Then the researcher desires to take these identified issues and build ministry ideas that will help the church come alongside the parents and guide them rather than replace them in the teaching of their children. To review there are three goals for this research. First, to highlight current programs and approaches that are counterproductive to equipping parents to be spiritual leaders in the home. Second, to develop a broad vision statement that will help churches move toward a successful family ministry that puts parents back in the leading role of growing spiritual faith in children. Third, to outline several approaches that can be used by a variety of churches to help families become stronger units that can be mobilized for the missional purpose of the church. These specific goals can be beneficial to many churches that may be struggling to include parents, build family ministry, or remove harmful or time consuming programs that do not serve the purpose of building and equipping parents.

There are several reasons why this matters. First, the family is foundational for the church and all society. The United States has been tracking the breakdown of families, the rise of single-parent homes, and the rise of crime, pregnant teens, and drug use for decades. All of these are related on some level. Broken families lead to unhealthy, unhappy children who make risky and unhealthy decisions. If the church can structure effective ministries that help support, equip, and

love these struggling parents, an entire generation can benefit. "It was no surprise that Jesus had built the church on the family model…for mankind is predicated on and propagated by the functions, interactions, and actions in the natural family."[59]

Secondly, churches do have an impact on the spiritual growth of children and teens. Barna found that past church attendance as a teen or young child had direct influence on the decision to return to church as an adult (Figure 1).[60]

AMERICAN FAITH ENGAGEMENT AS CHILDREN					
ATTENDED CHILDREN'S RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS WHILE UNDER AGE 12	CURRENT ENGAGEMENT AS ADULTS				
frequency of attending during childhood years	attended church in the past week	active faith*	unchurched**	changed from childhood faith***	sample size
every week	50%	32%	26%	22%	689
2-3 times / month	46%	28%	36%	18%	128
less often	35%	25%	36%	47%	91
never	26%	17%	61%	24%	78

AMERICAN FAITH ENGAGEMENT AS TEENAGERS					
ATTENDED RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS AS A TEENAGER	CURRENT ENGAGEMENT AS ADULTS				
frequency of attending during teen years	attended church in the past week	active faith*	unchurched**	changed from childhood faith***	sample size
every week	58%	39%	19%	21%	501
2-3 times / month	58%	35%	17%	20%	154
less often	30%	19%	42%	28%	176
never	19%	11%	69%	30%	163

NATIONAL AVERAGE	46%	30%	32%	24%	

* active faith = prayed, read the Bible, and attended church in the last week, as adults
** unchurched = individuals who have not attended a church worship service in the last six months, not including holidays or special events.
*** changed faith = response to the following survey question:
Question posed: Some people have the same faith perspective for their entire life while other people change faiths or significantly change their faith views as they get older. Thinking about your life, are you part of the same religious faith today as you were when you were a child or have you ever changed to a different faith or significantly changed your faith views since then?

Figure 1

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[59] Yat Lau, "Doctor of Ministry Thesis Project: The Church is Familial and is Built on Spiritually Strong Families." (Order No. 10243114, Liberty University, 2016) 38, In PROQUESTMS Dissertations & Theses @ Liberty University; ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1867759749?accountid=12085.+

[60] Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-explores-the-long-term-effect-of-spiritual-activity-among-children-and-teens/

From this survey of attendance habits, the Barna group concludes, "When it comes to church engagement, those who attended Sunday school or other religious programs as children or as teens were much more likely than those without such experiences to attend church and to have an active faith as adults."[61] Those that are children and youth in the church grow up to be the future parents who bring their children. Therefore, understanding their perspectives and needs will have a great impact on future

<div align="center">Applied Research</div>

The researcher attempted to survey one hundred parents, grandparents, and guardians that were currently raising children between the ages of five and eighteen. These parents were required to professing Christians and regularly attend church. This survey was sent out in the format of a Facebook event that allowed participants privacy in their choice to participate in the project. The survey received eighty-nine of the desired one hundred responses.

Though limiting the survey to those who are actively parenting may leave out many participants with valuable perspectives, the researcher felt this was necessary to get a true understanding of the parenting landscape. The parents, grandparents, and guardians who are working to raise children in the church are the ones who can tell us if the church is effectively helping them become spiritual leaders for their children. They can help us understand the mindset of the current generation of parents rather than those who might be answering from what they have learned from their past mistakes. The parents who can offer advice from experience are a very valuable set of mentors, but they are not the focus of this research. The church's impact on the current generation of parenting is important and is the focus as the researcher moves forward.

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[61] Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-explores-the-long-term-effect-of-spiritual-activity-among-children-and-teens/

The start of the survey simply asks for basic information to confirm that the respondents fall into the prescribed parameters for the research. The first four questions were: 1.) Are you a believer in Jesus Christ and have accepted Him as your Lord and Savior? 2.) Do you regularly attend church including one of the following: worship services, Bible study, or small group fellowship? 3.) Are you a parent, grandparent, adoptive parent, or legal guardian raising children in your home? 4.) Are the children in your home currently between the ages of five and eighteen? These questions were designed to reach a specific group of parents. They were parents that were active in their faith, part of a larger church community, and were currently raising children. This allowed for answers from parents who were experiencing the current environment in children's and youth ministry. They would be able to give insight about their own personal experiences and struggles.

The researcher chose to keep this survey anonymous because of the sensitive state of these issues. How parents chose to raise their children, talk about their weaknesses in parenting, and fear of criticism for their choices might lead to false answers or lack of participation. The nature of this survey allowed parents to be honest without risk of exposure to criticism or ridicule.

Once the initial criteria had been verified, the next step in this survey was to get the parental perspective of how they view the responsibility of discipling children. The survey already assumes that discipleship of children is an important and commanded task supported by biblical evidence. But, the initial assumption for parental neglect in the spiritual formation of children is that parents are unaware of their calling to the disciple-makers. However, this was not the case. When asked who was primarily responsible for the discipleship training of children, over ninety-seven percent of respondents said the parents.

Our national surveys have shown that while more than 4 out of 5 parents (85 percent) believe they have the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children, more than two out of three of them abdicate that responsibility to their church.[62]

Figure 2 below shows the other two answers, pastor and children's director, fall far behind. Other potential answers were church family, teachers at a Christian school, and Sunday school teachers. None of these were chosen. These answers tell us that lack of understanding of biblical commands is not the problem. Many ministry officials may have the wrong idea as to why parents are not embracing their role as disciple-makers in a more obvious manner.

Figure 2

One ministry leader writes, "At first our thought is that they are being lazy or stubborn, or even apathetic, but I've come to realize that most parents do want to assume their spiritual role—they

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[62] Barna, *Transforming Children,* 85.

just don't know how."[63] Tim Kimmel offers another perspective as to why parents are handing

the responsibility to the churches. It is not their ignorance to the importance of the job. Instead,

he says,

> When it's done effectively, it requires a lot of time, commitment, and focus by the
> parent. But if you're already out of wind, out of ideas, and at your wits end
> emotionally, the professionals at church suddenly become more than someone
> you feel has your back. You'd prefer they have your job.[64]

This attitude represents fear and uncertainty, but definitely not ignorance or apathy.

These findings coincide with research done by George Barna and the Barna Group. "The

Barna study found that close to nine out of ten parents of children under age 13 (85%) believe

they have the primary responsibility for teaching their children about religious beliefs and

spiritual matters."[65] Since this question and its results remove lack of biblical understanding from

the list of reasons parents might neglect this responsibility, this allows ministry workers to look

for other issues within the subject of discipling children.

There are many other factors that may keep parents from fulfilling their God-given duty

to help their children build faith. The Barna group listed five specific findings from their

research.

> According to the research, parents typically have no plan for the spiritual
> development of their children; do not consider it a priority, have little or no
> training in how to nurture a child's faith, have no related standards or goals that
> they are seeking to satisfy, and experience no accountability for their efforts.[66]

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[63] Michelle Anthony, *Seven Family Ministry Essentials: A Strategy for Culture Change in Children's and Student Ministries* (Colorado Springs, CO; David C. Cook, 2012), 35.

[64] Ibid.

[65] George Barna, "Parents Accept Responsibility for the Child's Development But Struggle with Effectiveness," (accessed February 16, 2019), https://www.barna.com/research/parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childs-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness/

[66] Ibid.

Each of these reason is valid and probable in the parental struggle to disciple children, however, are they the only reasons why parents are not taking the lead in their child's spiritual formation? If Barna's research holds that eighty-five percent of parents know that they are responsible for child's spiritual development but are not acting on that responsibility, there is a strong possibility that other factors are interfering with the discipleship process. The researcher decided to explore other aspects of discipleship training to see if parents were struggling with anything specific.

Parental Understanding of Discipleship

The first step of this pursuit for answers was to test the parental understanding or perspective of discipleship. As noted in the beginning on this research, one must be able to understand discipleship in order to build it. The researcher questioned parents about what they hoped to see as evidence of discipleship in their children. Possible answers were biblical knowledge, loving others, loving God, accepting Christ as Savior and putting God before others in their lives. Parents were allowed to choose as many of these answers that they felt were relevant to discipleship. Ninety-seven percent of respondents chose teaching them to love God as a possible choice followed by ninety-four percent choosing teaching them Bible knowledge. Both of these are great choices, but the surprising result was that only eighty-five percent chose leading their children to salvation in Christ as a possible answer. In fact, leading a child to salvation was the least chosen answer out of eighty-seven respondents.

The responses of this question produce an interesting conundrum. The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God (Luke 10:27). Therefore, teaching children to love and know God is part of discipleship. Biblical knowledge is the foundation of knowing God and fulfilling His commandments. However, it is only one part of the equation. For Jesus came to earth with the sole intention of bridging the gap in the relationship between humans and God.

This relationship is healed only through the saving power of His sacrifice on the cross. This power is only received by the acknowledgment that we are sinners and are in need of His presence in our lives. It is possible that many parents include salvation as part of loving God. But, the responses beg the question if parents might be focused on following commands rather than actual spiritual formation.

In his book, *Reset for Parents,* Todd Friel explores the concept that parents are more focused on discipline and compliance than on discipling their children. This is not a jab at parents, but an observation based on the cultural norms. Friel writes, "The salvation of your child is eternally more important than compliance."[67] This author is not suggesting that discipline is out of order in child rearing. His point is that discipling and guiding children toward the knowledge of Christ, our place as sinners, and the saving work of His sacrifice must be the focus of every lesson. This is intentional day-to-day work. "Our children need to see that faith matters, that it's relevant to our daily situations, that it's real. We need to model how our lives are spiritual in every decision, erasing the divide between sacred and secular."[68] Therefore, parents must look beyond teaching memorization and shallow obedience and help children see the deeper truths of the Bible by living the example in their own lives.

This type of focus will not come without preparation and intention. However, the survey showed that many parents are suffering from lack of time and preparation. This supports the results of Barna's research and conclusion. But, time and preparations were not the whole story. When asked about personal barriers in teaching their children, time and work/school events took the top choices. In fact, over sixty percent of respondents chose time as their primary barrier.

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[67] Todd Friel, *Reset for Parents* (Forest, AR; New Leaf Press, 2017), 13.

[68] Michelle Anthony, *Spiritual Parenting,* (Colorado Springs, CO; David C. Cook, 2010), 21.

This is not surprising in the current culture of exhausted children that are tasked with homework, youth groups, sports, and many other activities that leave precious little time for parental engagement. Research on the issue of kids leaving the church is not nearly as concrete as those that show that parents are withdrawing from family talks and quality time that would enable them to lead children in spiritual matters. "What the current research suggests, however, is that the greater crisis is parental disengagement from children in the area of biblical discipleship."[69] Just as important, though, are the less frequent but very crucial responses that might otherwise go unnoticed. According to Figure 3, twenty-five percent of respondents said an uninterested spouse or lack of confidence were significant barriers. These are not problems the church can solve with curriculum, parents' night out, or Vacation Bible School. There are real emotional and spiritual issues that must be addressed in intentional ways.

Figure 3

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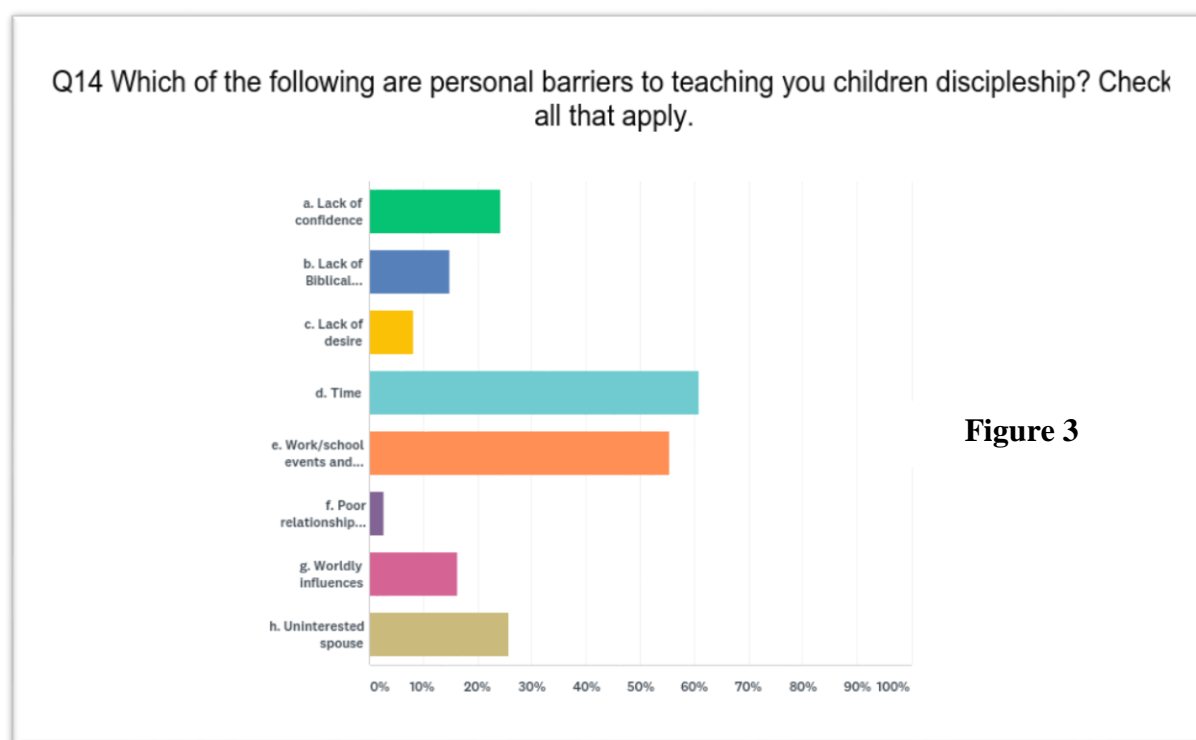[69] Wesley Ryan Steenburg. "Effective Practices for Training Parents in Family Discipleship: A Mixed Methods Study." Order No. 3454211, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011. In PROQUESTMS ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/868493909?accountid=12085.

Candid Answers from Parents

Within the survey, parents were allowed to add their own answers to the question if the most appropriate response wasn't listed. Their responses were very revealing:

> *Poor time management and lack of experience*
>
> *Lack of example because I didn't grow up in believing family*
>
> *Not sure how to really go about it*
>
> *I travel*
>
> *I'm always overwhelmed and behind and it can be difficult at 9pm to "add one more thing" to the list. I'm falling asleep on their bed while we pray and read the Bible.*

These answers reveal real issues faced by many Christian parents every day. This question and its answers reveal an important message for the church. If the church strives to equip parents to become spiritual leaders for their children, there are several barriers that leader must understand. First, if the goal is to help parents disciple their children, leaders must understand why parents aren't following through with that task. If parents feel belittled, criticized, or misunderstood by their ministry leaders, any effort to teach or guide them will fall flat. Parents have a tough job. If they are struggling with issues like a bad marriage, lack of confidence, or a poor relationship with their child, they will struggle to do the basic biblical teaching. As a result, the church much learn to meet parents where they are. Parents must become disciples to be spiritual leaders for their children. "The church must be intentional in developing all of God's children to reach their full potential."[70]

Many churches become frustrated as they try to motivate parents so they begin to fill in the gaps left by discouraged parents. Jim Burns and Mike DeVries call this the hero mentality.

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[70] Dave Earley, *Disciple Making Is.* (Nashville, TN; B&H Publishing, 2013), Kindle.

"It's as if we youth workers think all of heaven is looking to us to step forward at just the right time, with just the right words, to change the course of eternity for our students."[71] In fact, Sunday school is the top-rated program among parents, with over fifty-five percent of parents saying it was the best church program for discipling children. Churches have used Sunday school as a way of bringing parents into the teaching process without actually giving them any leadership. Children get entertained and learn a Bible story. Then they take home a paper in which parents are to follow the church's lead on teaching. Though this method is not at fault, the church takes the lead rather than the parents. Rather than help the parents teach the material, they rely on their own hour of teaching to carry students through the week. However, this is not the job of the church. "The Church is called alongside to train, equip, and support the parents, not compete with or replace them."[72] Therefore, these answers show that parents are struggling, that they are discouraged and unsure in many ways and the church must find ways to encourage and strengthen these parents.

Second, these answers can help leaders identify places in their ministries that are not supporting the vision to equip parents. Children and youth ministries must have a clear vision of how to build a ministry that will equip and empower parents. Many children and youth programs have become glorified babysitting times. Events revolve around entertainment and pleasure rather than true biblical teaching and accountability. "Virtually every church has a children's ministry…but the activities implemented tend to be ritualistic and of questionable quality, and the outcomes usually are not measured, tracked or interpreted."[73] These types of ministries

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[71] Jim Burns and Mike DeVries, *Partnering with Parents in Youth Ministry: The Practical Guide to Today's Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Bloomington, MN; Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 54.

[72] Klick, 2.

[73] George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Books, 2003), 103-104.
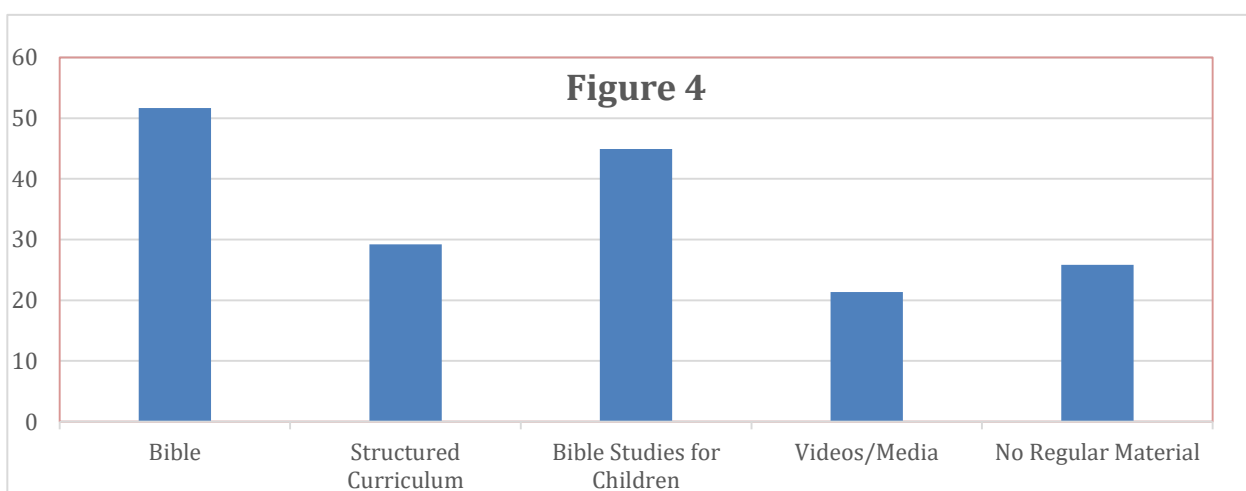
activities have their place, such as providing parents with a night out or helping children learn to fellowship. However, if they are used as the backbone of the ministry for children and youth, they may miss the mark. One author quotes, "Win them with entertainment, and you have to keep them there by entertaining them."[74] This is the dangerous phenomenon many churches have created within their ministries. Parents and children go home happy and entertained, but with no deeper understanding of God's Word.

Thus far the research shows that the majority of parents in the church are aware of their God-given directive to raise their children in knowledge and fear of the Lord. The results also show that parents struggle with emotional and time related issues that create roadblocks to successfully teaching their children about Jesus. But, the researcher wanted to examine parental confidence in teaching their children about faith and God. When parents were asked about their level of confidence in discussing Bible knowledge with their children, their responses indicated that more than sixty-seven percent were extremely or very confident in their abilities. When asked about their level of confidence in guiding their children through decision making using biblical guidance; almost seventy-three percent indicated strong confidence in themselves. These numbers are very encouraging, but perhaps misleading. Though parents feel confident in their abilities, are they engaging their children with those abilities? Since time and work/school related pressures were perceived as the greatest barriers to parent-led discipleship, the possible culprit of lack of parental involvement might be misplaced priorities. To know examine this idea, the researcher asked about actual events within the home.

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[74] Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO; David C. Cook, 2018), 51.

Materials

First, the survey questioned parents on their preferred methods and materials for

discipling children. With available materials listed as the Bible, Bible studies for children,

structured curriculum, and videos or media presentations. The most used resources were the

Bible and Bible studies for children. Figure 4 shows the responses regarding for material in home

discipleship. The most encouraging conclusion of these responses is that parents are engaging

their children with the Bible and other helpful materials. However, one cannot ignore the fact

that almost twenty-five percent of parents are not using anything at all or anything consistently.

"God's Word is truth, so it should come as no surprise that reading and studying the Bible are

still the activities that have the most statistical influence on growth in this attribute of spiritual

maturity.[75] The lack of consistent Bible reading not only stunts the spiritual growth and

understanding of the children, but it diminishes the parent's ability to teach on a knowledgeable

level. Despite most parents believing the Bible is the best choice for teaching, Ed Stetzer's

research found that many do not every touch it. "We've released new research as part of the

Figure 4

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[75] Ed Stetzer, "New Research: Less Than 20% of Churchgoers Read the Bible Daily," *Christianity Today* (September 13, 2012), https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/september/new-research-less-than-20-of-churchgoers-read-bible-daily.html

Transformational Discipleship study that shows only 19% of churchgoers personally (not as part of a church worship service) read the Bible every day."[76]

Methods of Teaching Discipleship

After surveying what parents are using, the researcher explored how the parents were approaching teaching and praying with their children. The idea was to examine how parents presented discipleship lessons to their children. When asked about methods of teaching, such as life application, book by book reading, daily verse focus, daily devotional, or character studies; over sixty-nine percent of parents said they use a life application approach to teaching. Daily devotions was the next preferred methods. These methods coincide with the findings that teachable moments were the preferred methods of using biblical knowledge as show in Fig. 5.

Overall, these methods can offer great conversations between parents and children. They are the methods that would be supported by Deuteronomy 6 in that we are to talk about God and His law throughout the day. However, will deeper biblical knowledge and discipleship methods be translated through avenues that require only a few minutes to engage? That would depend on the frequency and focus of the discussion. Since most parents admitted to being pressed for time, one would assume these conversations might not take place every day. In fact, when surveyed on their Bible reading and praying habits, only thirty-two percent said they read the Bible three or more days a week with their children. However, over seventy percent said they pray as a family three or more times per week. These numbers combined with the previous questions begin to show a pattern of approach among parents.

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[76] Ibid.

First, though parents are confident in their ability to teach or use biblical information with their children, they do not use the Bible as a regular source, though it is their preferred material. This may come from feeling inadequate about the material or the lack of time to read and study. In 2017, Barna found that "More than half of all adults wish they read the Bible more often (58%)."[77]

Second, the preferred methods of engaging children in spiritual training are those that do not require a lot of time or preparations; such as daily devotions, church attendance, and prayer. All of these are very important to the discipleship process. But, equally important is biblical knowledge, in-depth reading, worship and service. Parents are human. They cannot carry the load alone, nor was this ever expected of them.
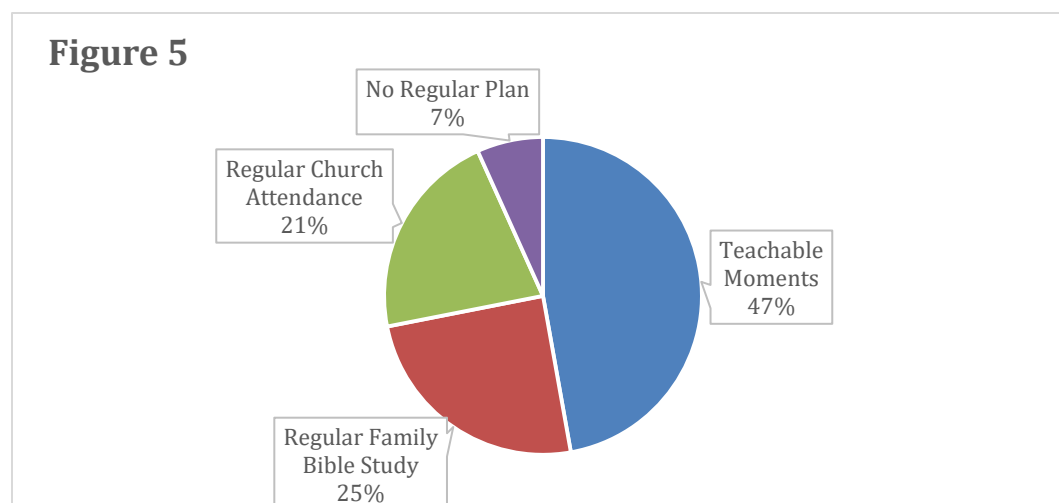
> Throughout the earliest centuries of Christianity, households remained central to Christian practices, and parents were expected to play a primary and personal role in the formation of their children's faith. This primary parental role did not, however, require every event of spiritual formation to occur in nuclear or even extended family units. In churches of the third century AD—perhaps even earlier—all the generations worshipped together, but men, women, and young people sat separately.[78]

Parents should not feel pressured in carrying the burden alone. The Bible says that they are to be the leaders, but there should be whole team of disciples behind them. The church plays a vital role in supporting parents with the exhausting but important task of discipling children. "It is the duty of the church to provide biblical teaching in relevant and practical ways so that parents are able to know and understand God's Word on every subject pertaining to life."[79]

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[77] Barna Group, "State of the Bible 2017, To Findings," *Research Releases in Culture and Media* (April 4, 2017) https://www.barna.com/research/state-bible-2017-top-findings/

[78] Anthony, Kindle Edition.

[79] Mark Edwin Smith, "Discipleship Within the Home," (Doctorate thesis, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Lynchburg, 2011) 67, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1451&context=doctoral
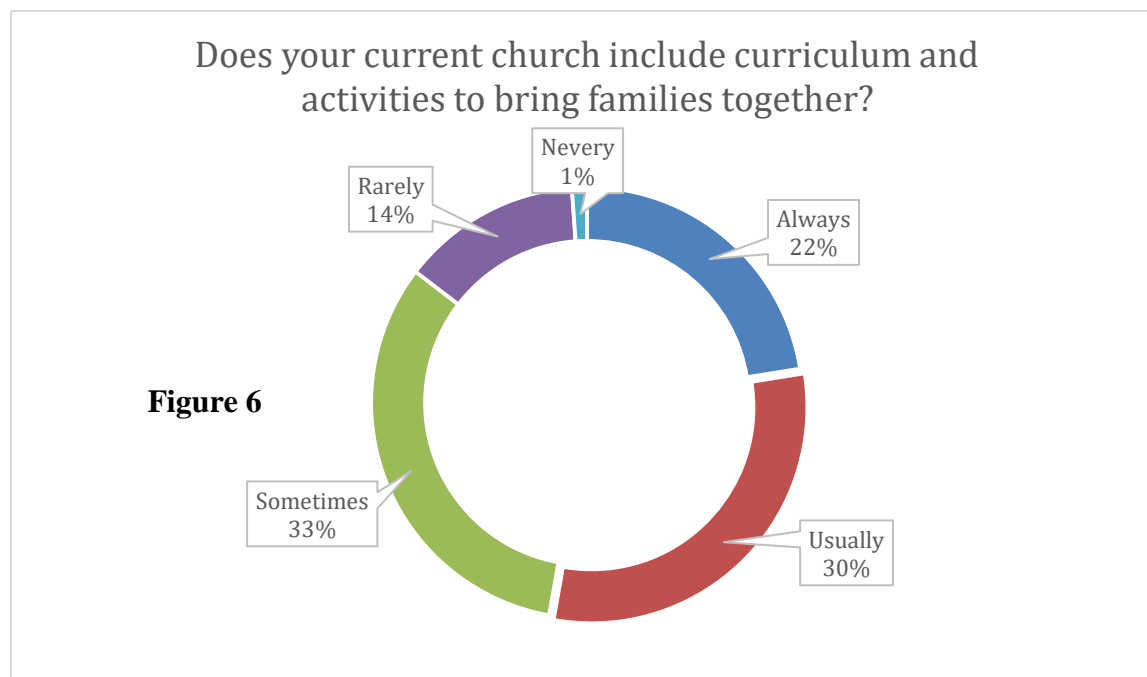
Figure 5

Pie chart:
- Teachable Moments 47%
- Regular Family Bible Study 25%
- Regular Church Attendance 21%
- No Regular Plan 7%

Churches and Parents

When asked about the partnership between churches and parents, parents almost unanimously agreed that the church is their partner in discipling children. However, the parental responses were almost split down the middle on their perception of the church's effectiveness in teaching and equipping parents to be spiritual leaders in their families. Sixty percent said the church is effective in helping parents, leaving forty percent feeling the church is not addressing these issues. This is a disheartening number. It doesn't mean the church isn't trying, or that the church doesn't care. It could mean the programs, vision, or method chosen by any particular church has not been structured to equip parents.

To better understand what parents are saying about the church programs, the next questions of the survey asked, "Does your current church include curriculum and activities to bring families together in worship, Bible study, service, and prayer?" Figure 6 below shows a better response about church effort. Over eighty percent of the respondents chose always, usually, or sometimes. Very few said rarely or never. This is a great indication that even if a church is only hitting the mark sometimes, they are aware of the importance of bringing families

together.

Does your current church include curriculum and activities to bring families together?

Nevery 1%
Rarely 14%
Always 22%
Sometimes 33%
Usually 30%

Figure 6

However, since these questions cannot tell us the kinds of programs parents are approving, it is difficult to know what ministry approach is the most successful. Since the majority chose "sometimes" as their response, it is probable that many churches try to organize periodic family events or special days. Typically these are created to stress a special theme or relationship. Jeff Strother, a proponent of family-equipping ministry, calls this sometimes approach a "Band-Aid" function of family ministry. He writes, "A Band-Aid approach to family ministry is attempting to reconnect church and home with merely a ministry aimed at parents here, a father-son event there, and an intergenerational mission effort somewhere else."[80] Churches must be careful not to confuse activity planning with a long range vision of family discipleship.

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[80] Paul Renfro, Brandon Shields, and Jay Strother, *Perspectives on Family Ministry: 3 Views* (Nashville, TN; B&H Publishing, 2009), 178.

One of the final questions of the survey was designed to allow parents to offer ideas on how the churches could help them in more efficient ways. The offered answers were: better children and youth programs, more parenting classes, more family events, sermons focused on discipleship, and better Bible study curriculum. Surprisingly, almost sixty percent of respondents said they wanted more sermons on discipleship. Fifty-three percent chose more parenting classes. These answers suggest that parents are looking for instruction and guidance on helping their children become disciples in Christ. They are not trying to give this load to the churches. However, if there is no one to teach them, they will let the church take the lead in an effort to help their children learn. The honest answers to this question seem to confirm this point.

In the category that allowed parents to add their own answers, several parents wrote that the church needs to stop separating children and parents for all church programs and events. They indicate that discipleship within the church should bring families together, not separate them.

> In our well-intentioned efforts to reach students for Jesus Christ, we had developed ministry models failing to call parents to embrace their role as primary disciple-makers in their children's lives. The church had tacitly encouraged this parental abdication by relentlessly promoting benefits and life changes that would accompany increased participation in ministry activities. As a result, the church and families were being split spiritually along too many key fault lines.[81]

However, the fact is that though most churches are set up this way, parents are never required to utilize the programs. If they wish to have their children in services with them, most places allow them to do so. Some of the responsibility for supporting these programs does fall to the parents. But, if the church is set up to run a certain way, many parents will follow the program, whether they agree or not.

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[81] Renfro, *Family Ministry,* 142-143.

Summary of Research

The purpose of this research was to seek answers to the problem that it seems many parents are not embracing their God-given role to disciple their children. Ministry leader, churches, researchers, denominational leaders, and many others have been alarmed at the rate in which young people are leaving the church. Also weighing on the minds of these leaders are the churches that are suffering because of lack of participation from families, programs that do not seek to fulfill the commission of the church, and children and youth that never seem to develop a deep faith despite their attendance to church activities.

This researcher has reached nine conclusions from this research. First, parents that are regular attenders to church activities are most likely aware that they are commanded within Scripture to be the leaders in their child's spiritual education. Second, these same parents report a relatively high confidence in their ability to know and use biblical information to teach their children. Third, parents are not utilizing this information on a daily basis due to time restrictions, emotional issues, family and work events, relational problems, or uncertainty of how to start. Fourth, parents do pray with their children a great deal more than engaging in regular Bible study or discussion. Fifth, parents do see the church as their partners in developing strong spiritual faith in their children. Sixth, churches more often than not, take the lead in the spiritual education, curriculum choices, and spiritual guidance for children and youth despite their belief that parents should be leading this categories of spiritual development. Seventh, churches tend to lean on age-divided programs that fit the cultural expectation. Eight, parents do not necessarily agree with the programs that separate families for Bible study and worship, but will continue to utilize the programs if this is what is offered by the church. Ninth, parents are looking to the church to help them learn to disciple their children.

Conclusion

This research has yielded an interesting view of family discipleship and the views of the parents within the church. For decades the church has worried about the rising number of young adults that wander away from the church each year. Church leaders have wondered how they can attract and keep more of the younger generation for longer periods of commitment. However, as many of the parents expressed in the open comments, it must start at home.[82] These parents realize the influence of family life on the outcome of spiritual maturation in their children. However, this does not mean it's easy. Parents burn out. Some do not know Christ as their own Savior. Because of the imperfect and sinful nature of humans, there is no perfect answer to every problem. However, if the church can be aware of the issues of struggling parents, it can evaluate its programs and visions to become more obedient to its position in the lives of families. Once every program and ministry has been evaluated for effectiveness, the church can then devise a plan to move forward to helping parents retake their place as spiritual leaders in the home.

- [82] Some parental responses from the research: *I believe it is first and foremost the parent's responsibility to disciple children, I do think the church (whatever that looks like- a large church with many people pouring into children or small) plays a secondary role. As a Sunday School teacher myself, I know I am to love these children, teach them the Word of God and pour into them. So it does extend beyond the parents, It has to start in the home, Family devotions/teaching/training - at home and in community Church is a secondary - and should not be expected to be the only source, I believe it's how they see their parents live. And having other Christ following adults they can watch live. It's not a program that is going to save them*

Chapter 4

Applications for Family Ministry

The goal of this research project is to determine the primary issue in regards to parents failing to disciple their children in the home. Are parents neglectful? Has the church usurped parental authority? Is the issue beyond repair? Depending on the location, denomination, or individual situation; the answer to the first two questions may be yes. But, because nothing is impossible with God, the last question is an absolute no. However, there are some significant issues the church will face if it intends to develop a plan for family ministry.

Once significant issue is that parents are tired, worried, and hurried.[83] They know their responsibilities. "Parents believe that they are primarily responsible for the spiritual development of their children, but few parents spend time during a typical week interacting with their children on spiritual matters."[84] Discipling children is very important to most Christian parents, but it falls to wayside because of working, doctor and dentist appointments, vet appointments, broken down cars, bad grades, and a host of other reasons. This doesn't even include the extremely difficult circumstances many families face such as caring for aging parents, cancer, death, and divorce. This research has shown that parents do care. However, life becomes busy and spiritual training falls to the wayside. The research of this project shows parents believe the home is the primary place to learn discipleship.[85] However, the Barna Group finds a different reaction in

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[83] Appendix B.

[84] Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childs-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness/

[85] Appendix B.

their broader research. Parents still felt they are responsible for their children's spiritual teaching,

but the research also shows that:

> …a majority of parents do not spend any time during a typical week discussing religious matters or studying religious materials with their children…Most of those parents are willing to let their church or religious center provide all of the direct religious teaching and related religious experiences that their children receive.[86]

From these difference we see that there must be a balance in the approach of the church.

If churches make it easy for parents to turn over responsibility of leading children and

youth to spiritual maturity, then they have done a disservice to these families. "Faith must

be nourished in the rich soil of a God-honoring family. The church's role is to provide the

water. But lifelong faith requires deep, abiding roots."[87] The family is where those roots

begin and strengthen.

Another significant problem facing the development of family ministry in the

church is the limitation of the word "family." For this research, family was defined as any

combination of parents and extended family. But, the state of the family has shifted

dramatically over the last several decades. The church must be aware of the situational

issues that affect the families they serve. Parents face a great deal of stress from daily life.

Broken homes, failed marriages, financial issues, and many other situations can lead to

emotional frustrations and the breakdown of the family. "Conflict sometimes leads

families to times of confrontation, and for some it leads to withdrawal. If issues are not

effectively addressed, parents can become passive or be plagued by conflict."[88] These are

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[86] Barna Group, hhttps://www.barna.com/research/parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childs-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness/.

[87] Kurt Bruner, *It Starts at Home* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2010), 23.

[88] Anthony, *Family Ministries,* Kindle.

 the situations in which the church can help parents avoid burn out and withdrawal despite of difficult life circumstances.

As noted in the historical accounts, the church cannot take over the duties of the parents. It will not help the situation. "No matter how creatively we proclaim God's Word to children at church, they are more likely to believe their experience of the faith at home."[89] Though qualified leaders and loving ministry workers can have a tremendous impact on the lives of children and youth, it will not solve the home issue. Parents might be able to simply drop of their kids each week to be discipled, but they will be just as stressed and tired when they return for them.. The church needs a way to help these parents. Their programs or visions should be to build up, support, love, and equip parents. But, above all there should be grace.

The church and parents are to be partners in the spiritual development of the younger generations. However, with the issues noted above, even parents that are aware of their responsibility are missing the point on many levels In another research survey, when asked about the role and strengths of a youth programs for teens, parents seemed more focused on social interactions than spiritual growth.

> Providing a place for teens to worship together (42%) and creating a place for teens to develop positive peer relationships (34%) rank at the top, with "providing a place for teens to ask serious questions about the Bible or foundational Christian beliefs" (23%) at the bottom of the list.[90]

This attitude corresponds with this research showing that leading a child to Christ was the least chosen answer as a goal for discipleship.[91] "One of the most startling observations, according to

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[89] Bruner, 21.

[90] Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/parents-and-pastors-partners-in-gen-z-discipleship/

[91] Appendix B

 Barna, was how few born again parents indicated that one of the most important outcomes parents needed to help their children grasp was salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."[92] Education, happiness, ambition, friendship, successful marriages, and other cultural norms have taken priority over spiritual formation. "Yet when it comes to raising our children, Americans have created a matrix of measurements based upon what our society defines to be significant."[93] In the process, we have children growing up to strive for worldly outcomes rather than spiritual fruit.

All of these issues are important and relevant to the development of family ministry. They present interesting perspectives that the church can choose to address in their ministry goals. If the church wants to strengthen families it must change its vision from simply filling seats and counting attendance numbers to looking for long-term spiritual growth in families. There are many ministry approaches available under the terms of family ministry. Every church, every congregation, and every situation is different; therefore no one way of ministry will fit all. However, choosing a path with the goal of equipping parents and families to become spiritual leaders should be the common foundation of any family ministry. The following section outlines three popular views of family ministry and their possible assets to the church.

<center>Suggested Approaches to Family Ministry</center>

Every church has a model of ministry, whether planned or unplanned. That is to say that every church has developed a structured order to its services and programs that allow it to achieve its vision for reaching people with the Gospel. These models can range from the simplest form of weekly meetings to the most extensive combinations of classes and services. Whatever

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[92] Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/parents-describe-how-they-raise-their-children/

[93] Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting,* Kindle.

the case, the researcher believes there are several actions the church can take to produce a better family ministry mindset. First, the church needs a vision that equips parents to lead and families to grow stronger as a unit. "If a model for family ministry is to be biblical, one essential characteristic of the model must be a prioritized capacity to equip parents…to engage actively and personally in the discipleship of their children in both planned and spontaneous ways."[94] The most popular views of family ministries, as outlined in *Perspectives on Family Ministry: 3 Views,* are family-integrated, family-based, or family-equipping. Each of these perspectives differs in how they view the role of the parents and the role of the church in the ministry approach to families.

Family-Integrated Ministry

Family-integrated ministry has a vision to bring together all generational levels of family and allow them to be the church together. This ministry format does not include any age-divided activities. All families stay together for meals, worship, Bible study, and fellowship. Men, women, boys, and girls of all ages help with greeting, leading prayer, music, and welcoming guests. The congregation seeks to follow the teachings of Titus 2 as to having the younger and older generations together to be taught and guided through life circumstances. This not only happens within the family, but also in the church activities. In this manner, the church is helping parents received discipleship while learning to disciple their own families and those around them. "The family is the evangelism and discipleship arm of the family-integrated church."[95]

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[94] Anthony, *Family Ministry,* Kindle.

[95] Voddie Baucham, Jr., *Family Driven Faith,* (Wheaton, IL; Crossway, 2007), 197.

The family-integrated model is not without its critics. Because of the lack of age-divided activities, many believe that this model alienates all families that don't fall into the nuclear family category. "Others would caution the family-integrated model about the tendency to idolize the nuclear family and to ignore the spiritual family of God."[96] This lends itself to a less diversified congregation that may detract from the purpose of building disciples. The idea of family-integrated ministry may seem ideal due to lack of segregation among the congregants, however, churches must realize that even this ministry form segregates to some degree. Men and women are separated due to the Titus 2 instruction. This should not be seen as a negative aspect of ministry. One writer asserts,

> Because it is virtually impossible to engage in targeted learning without some form of age-organized instruction. If segmentation by age or gender is indeed the root cause of family fragmentation and high church dropout rates among young adults, any system or activity that excludes family members because of their age or gender comes up short.[97]

Churches that may look to developing a family-integrated ministry should take into account the need for different learning environments among different ages and genders depending on the spiritual needs of the congregants.

Family-Based Ministry

Family-based ministry is a mindset that age-divided activities are still useful and needed, but family oriented times need to be included in the balance. This ministry focus tries to bring families together through scheduled programs or events that allow them to experience time together outside the normal church schedule. Rather than taking away from the norm, the family-

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[96] Jason E. Mitchell, "Family Ministry: A Quantitative Analysis of Three Models from a Missional Perspective," (Order No. 10101005, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016) In PROQUESTMS ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1785396231?accountid=12085

[97] Jones, *Perspectives*, 83.

based ministry adds parent and family focused methods. This means encouraging parents, extended family members, and church leaders to take part in multi-generational events that allow children and youth to be exposed to a variety of teachers and spiritual guidance. "Family-based churches work consistently and intentionally to build intergenerational relationships. In a family-based church, seasoned adult mentors contact, care for, and connect with students week after week."[98] This particular approach allows the church to reach and guide many different families and children without participating parents.

While this ministry format sees no issues with an age-segregated approach to discipling families, it does stress that the focus of each ministry is highly important to the desired results. For family-based ministry, the focus must not be to solely entertain, attract numbers, and fit in with the culture. "At the same time, if any ministry becomes enamored with drawing crowds or with entertaining students at the expense of disciple-making, the results will be disastrous."[99] Using entertainment and attractions to draw in crowds will lead to shallow or absent faith. Instead, family-based ministry is focused on evangelism as a leading role in all planned ministry events and programs.

Family-Equipping Ministry

This ministry format keeps some of the age-divided classes and activities, but parents are brought into the forward position of learning to lead and disciple their children. Every plan for activities and events are designed to help the parents learn to be better spiritual leaders. Worship and bible study can include all ages. These churches usually completely overhaul their children's and youth ministries to refocus their programs to a family-equipping model. This model

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[98] Renfro, *Family Ministry,* 109.

[99] Jones, *Perspectives,* 108.

demonstrates that the ministry focus must be more than evangelism. True discipleship is leading children and youth to life changing faith in Christ and giving them the tools to walk and grow in their faith throughout their lives. Every part of family-equipping model programs connects the teams of workers in the church with the parents.

> To impact the emerging generations, we had to guide parents to a simple but critical conclusion about our ministry that our ultimate goal is to bring the home and the church together in a biblical partnership to raise up a generation that loves God and loves others.[100]

The key to family-equipping ministry is that every ministry within the church is planned and developed with families and their spiritual growth in mind. There are no separate side activities that don't include family perspective. Instead, the church's mission is build families, all kinds of families, through education, service, fellowship, classes, and more. Any new ideas must be evaluated within this mission and discarded if they do not fit the agenda to equip parents and families.

Building any kind of family ministry takes prayer, planning, change, and perseverance. This can seem to be a daunting task, especially for churches who have never done ministry in this manner. However, there are many ideas and resources for building family ministry. The following section is a small view of different ideas that can be used in any of the three ministry approaches described above.

<div align="center">Changing the Vision of Church Ministry</div>

Building a Vision

The three approaches to family ministry mentioned above are not the only options for churches. None of these are wrong or right, they are just options. The biggest factor in the

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[100] Jones, *Perspectives,* 149.

mission of the church will be the vision laid out by the staff and ministry leaders. This chapter will use George Barna's definition of vision: "Vision for ministry is a clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants and is based upon an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances."[101] Gleaning insight from the applied research in this paper, the researcher believes that every church needs to vocalize and write out a vision that will meet the guidelines of Barna's definition in regards to family ministry. The first step would be prayer for God's vision for each church. Then, church leaders should follow the guidance within God's Word. Chapter 2 outlined God's commands for parental and church roles in the lives of children and spiritual formation. Therefore, the church should know that they are to help parents lead their families, call fathers to be the spiritual leaders of their homes, and the church is to make disciples of all.

The next part of the vision process is for each church to know themselves and their circumstances. Churches needs to analyze and understand the families that attend their activities. Are they primarily nuclear families? Are there many single parents or grandparents raising children? What is the culture of the community around them? All of these factors are important in designing a family ministry that will draw in and support the families around and within the church. "You must…have a firm grasp on existing and potential needs, conditions, competition, opportunities, barriers and potential if you wish to absorb His vision for your ministry."[102] Once the church lays down a foundation of how they will do family ministry, including the vision and the needs, they can begin building their ministry around the vision.

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[101] Ibid. 26.

[102] Barna, *Vision,* 29.

Evaluating Programs

The next step would be to evaluate existing programs and activities. As each program is evaluated, ministry leaders may find that the purpose of many of the children's and youth programs is simply to entertain or babysit. These programs waste resources and time; but further; they are detrimental to the purpose of building up families and parents. There are some important questions to ask. First, does the program or activity promote the vision established by the church? Second, who does the program or activity serve and what is the desired outcome? Third, does the program or activity support biblical education and enrichment over entertainment? Fourth, how are parents supported, taught, or equipped through the program? Fifth, should the program or activity be removed or modified?

These are just suggested evaluating questions. These and other evaluations can be applied to many different programs and activities. One example is the very popular AWANA program utilized by many Protestant churches. The purpose of AWANA is to disciple children and give them a foundation in God's Word. This fits many different vision statements. However, what about family ministry? The program serves children ages 3-17. The desired outcome is Bible memorization and a love for God's Word. Parents are often the volunteers who run the program, but they are not personally equipped unless they are learning the verse with their children. Based on this criteria, churches would need to decide if the program serves the vision they have adopted for family ministry. If the answer is no, the next step is to decide how to help parents use the program in their homes. First, can they use the material for home lessons? Second, can they spend time explaining the memory verse to their children? Third, can they participate in the program as volunteer to help children who have parents that will not disciple them? These

questions can be applied to a variety of programs that do not necessarily quip parents. Modification and additions can be made to bring programs into the church's vision.

Program and activity evaluation will be a hard task. Removing and modifying familiar and favored programs is difficult for many leaders and congregations. Many find comfort in following the routines of old. However, it is a necessary task to allow God to change the face of the church culture to strengthen families and equip parents to become confident in discipling their children. Some of these changes are small and some are large. However, not all have to be painful. The idea is not to take all enjoyment out of the church programs but to use them to meet a goal that is mandated in God's Word. The following are a few ideas that can be used in a variety of churches with many different ministry approaches.

Parent Led Curriculum

Most children's and youth minsters utilize the common "take home page" at the end of every Sunday lesson. Children take the page home and parents use the points to review the lesson learned on that particular week. However, that's the extent of the parental involvement for Sunday school. Many trash cans receive the take home page before the parents ever read it. A family-equipping model of Sunday school would reverse the order. Parents could receive an email or text each week about the upcoming lesson or a take home sheet for the future lesson could be sent home. This page allows the parent to introduce and teach the story before the church does. Then, parents and children can discuss the story and activities before Sunday school. Sunday school would be a time for reviewing what the children learned at home.

Family Integrated Worship and Bible Study

Family integrated worship and Bible study is a great approach for a multi-generational experience. It doesn't have to replace all worship and Bible study groups. Churches could designate once a month for "family days." Bible study could be centered on helping parents learn teaching concepts with their children, including how to do family devotions at home, or how to pray with their children.

Family-integrated worship can be a very fun, creative experience depending on the approach. For certain holidays, such as Easter, the service could be more traditional, but it would allow children and youth to help serve. This allows children and youth to connect with the workings and people of the church. For normal Sundays, ministry leaders could include a variety of music from hymns to children's songs to modern Christian praise to engage all ages present. When serving as Children's Ministry Director in Germany, the researcher organized an integrated worship that alternated different songs with games that required families to compete together. At the end of the service, families joined together for prayer and then congregated around them room gathering prayers for the week from other families. This allowed for the family unit to worship together but for the church family to connect, as well.

Discipleship Classes for Parents

Reaching parents with practical education and guidance is an important part of family ministry. "It is essential for all parents to be made aware of their responsibility and to be equipped to become the primary disciple-maker in their children's lives."[103] Therefore, one way the church can begin to equip and strengthen parents is to add a

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[103] Jones, *Perspectives,* 153.

variety of discipleship classes. These classes can cover many different subjects; marriage, divorce, babies, teens, teaching at home, serving with kids, etc. There is no limit to what the church can offer as long as it is in line with the vision to equip parents to be better leaders for their families.

Since the research has already determined that time is a significant barrier for parents to engage in discipleship; adding more classes may not attract parents that are already burdened with other task. A different idea for offering discipleship triaging is to have an intensive class that parents can attend just once a month or once a quarter. This class can be during a planned children's event such as Vacation Bible School or a game night. These intensives can tackle on aspect of discipleship and send home resources for further learning until the next intensive. This approach seeks to minimize the impact on a busy schedule and still help families learn to grow together.

Mentoring Program

One of the hardest obstacles to forming a family ministry is including those who may not have a family member attending the church with them. The church is called to make disciples of everyone, not just nuclear families. However, a mentoring or adoption type program within the church can be very useful and fulfilling. Children can be "adopted" by the families of a friend during family-integrated activities. Older men and women who are now grandparents can mentor younger couples as they struggle through their first years of parenting. The opposite can also work as younger families can adopt seniors who are far from their grandchildren or have no family at all. These types of connections are vital to the existence and life of the church. Mentoring meets different needs of everyone involved.

Social Media Uses

Ministry leaders need to face the fact that social media is here to stay. Almost every parent, teen, and leader has a phone in his or her back pocket or purse. This ability to reach hundreds at the push of a button is too valuable to ignore. Churches can find ways to use social media to build their family ministries. Parents can sign up for daily reminders to talk to their kids about their Bible stories. Teens can see videos from their youth pastors reminding them of their goals for the week. Mentors can encourage one another through daily prayers written out on Facebook. Churches can tweet songs for the week for family worship. Blogs from pastors and youth leaders can allow parents an insight to the weekly lessons and devotion ideas for family time.

Social media has a negative reputation in the minds of many church leaders. However, to ignore it would be to waste a valuable resource and miss the opportunity to touch many people with the Word of God. "First and foremost, social media should be used to connect with other people."[104] If seen as tool for discipleship training, social media can be a valuable resource for churches. The idea is to connect people with real life issues and solutions. Many parents compare themselves to others and they feel defeated when they don't measure up to what they believe is a certain expectation of parenting. Through social media, parents can connect with each other, support one another, share struggles, and learn from one another. This is the idea of living in community, rather than isolation. This is simply a different kind of fellowship for a changing culture.

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[104] Terrace Crawford, *Going Social: A Practical Guide on Social Media for Church Leaders* (Beacon Hill Press, 2012), Kindle.

These suggested ideas are just the beginning. Programs cannot be the focus of family ministry that equips families. To offer a few programs and a holiday activity can hinder the church's purpose to help families. The danger is that programs become a part of the normal routine to entertain children while parents take a break. This mindset lends itself to developing apathy in the spiritual growth of families. The purpose has to be deeper. The idea of family ministry has to come from the people that are leading the church. They should be living out the example of family discipleship in their own lives. Timothy Paul Jones stresses this point about pastors that must be discipling their own families to be successful in their churches. Because, if the pastor and leaders are not living what they are seeking to accomplish, the congregants will never buy into the idea. "That's why family ministry cannot merely be a series of activities that a congregation does. It must flor from who the leaders and volunteers are with their families, day by day."[105]

<div align="center">Future Research</div>

This research project has revealed some very important points about the needs for family focused ministry within the church. However, it has left many questions. Some of the questions in the survey were too vague or should have been explored further. The researcher would like to explore other aspects of family ministry within the church. First, the researcher would do a new survey to include all Christian parents, grandparents, and guardians regardless of the ages of their children. Since the family of God includes all ages and all believers, the Christian parents that have already raised their children in the church can offer valuable insight into how the church played a part in their child's

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[105] Jones, *Field Guide,* 139.

spiritual education. The research would ask for specific examples of how church ministries have succeeded or failed to equip parents as spiritual leaders.

Second, another research project would examine the views of ministry leaders in regards to transitioning their churches over to some form of family ministry. Children and youth ministers could offer perspectives of how they might have tried to involve or help parents with their children and teens. This research could be compared to the perspective of the parents to see where the churches and home are missing the opportunity to work as partners. Hopefully, the results of any future research of this subject will continue to point the church in the best direction to help parents build a lasting legacy with their children.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

When God created the family, He had a beautiful plan for relationship and spiritual fulfillment. The fall and the beginning of sin distorted that plan. However, since that time, God has provided the plan for His children to bring them back into a relationship of salvation and love. The church and the family still play the most vital roles in the transmission of that plan to each generation. For the plan to work, all of God's children must be obedient to His commands. This means the church must provide for discipleship and spiritual education for all people and the parents must teach their children how to live out their faith.

This research project has shown that parents are aware of this command. There are many reason why parents have chosen to give the responsibility to the church or ignore it altogether. But, none of these excuse the parents from the original plan laid out by God. As a parent, the researcher understands the issues and the exhaustion that often

hinders active participation in disciple-making. Leading three children to know the Lord, largely alone, was no easy task. But, it is possible. Parents must realize that not every day will be perfect. Not every devotion will be heart-throbbing and tear-jerking; not every prayer will word perfect. But, over time, day by day, children will see the life of faith if it is lived consistently. This is key to making disciples in children and youth. It is the daily, authentic faith living that influences children and youth so powerfully. Therefore, the church has the duty and responsibility to exhort and equip parents to be the spiritual leaders of their homes. No matter what ministry model they may choose, the church must find ways to engage parents and families in biblical education, worship, service, and fellowship to develop true discipleship in their hearts. God's plan is still perfect. His church and His children must live together in obedience to His Word to be a blessing to future generations.

Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. Are you a believer of Jesus Christ who has accepted Him as your personal Lord and Savior?

    a. Yes – 100%
    b. No – 0%

2. Do you regularly attend church including one of the following: worship services, bible study or small group fellowship?

    a. Yes -
    b. No

3. Are you a parent, grandparent, adoptive parent, or legal guardian raising children in your home?

    a. Yes
    b. No

4. Are the children in your home currently between the ages of 5-18?

    a. Yes
    b. No

5. This survey assumes the idea that children should be discipled in the Christian life. What does discipleship of children mean to you? Check all that apply.

    a. Teaching them Biblical knowledge
    b. Teaching them to love others
    c. Teaching them to love God
    d. Leading them to salvation
    e. Teaching them to put God first in their lives

6. Who is primarily responsible for teaching discipleship to children?

    a. Pastor
    b. Children's director
    c. Parents
    d. Sunday School teacher
    e. Church family
    f. Teacher in a Christian school

7. What programs are most important in teaching discipleship to children?

    a. Vacation Bible School
    b. Sunday School
    c. Christian School
    d. Sunday services
    e. Community Events
    f. Summer Camps

8. How do you approach discipleship teaching with your children?

    a. Teachable moments
    b. Regular family Bible study
    c. Regular church attendance
    d. I have no regular plan

9. Which of the following materials do you utilize in discipleship with your children?

    a. Bible only
    b. Structured curriculum
    c. Bible studies written for children
    d. Videos/Multimedia presentations
    e. No regular material

10. How do you approach Bible study with your children? Check all that apply.

    a. Book by book
    b. Verse of the day reading
    c. Character study
    d. Life application
    e. Daily devotions

11. Planned or unplanned, how often does your family engage in Bible study together?

    a. Never
    b. Only at church
    c. 1-2 times per week
    d. 3 or more times per week

12. How do you engage in prayer with your children? Check all that apply.

    a. Bedtime prayers
    b. Children spend time praying alone
    c. Dinner prayer
    d. Parents pray for children regularly

13. Planned or unplanned, how often does your family pray together?

    a. Never
    b. Only at church
    c. 1-2 times per week
    d. 3 or more times per week

14. Which of the following are personal barriers to teaching your children discipleship? Check all that apply?

    a. Lack of confidence
    b. Lack of biblical understanding
    c. Lack of desire
    d. Time
    e. Work/school events and schedules
    f. Poor relationship with children
    g. Worldly influences
    h. Uninterested spouse

15. How confident are you in discussing biblical knowledge with your children?

    a. Extremely confident
    b. Very confident
    c. Somewhat confident
    d. Not so confident
    e. Not at all confident

16. How confident are you in helping your children use biblical principles to make decisions?

    a. Extremely confident
    b. Very confident
    c. Somewhat confident
    d. Not so confident
    e. Not at all confident

17. Do you feel that effective discipleship teaching requires formal training?

    a. Yes
    b. No

18. In your opinion, what is the biggest barrier to children becoming disciples of Chirst?

    a. Social media
    b. Video games

    c. Lack of parental involvement
    d. Poor programs at church
    e. Friendships with non-Christians

19. Do you view the church as a partner in helping disciple your children?

    a. Yes
    b. No

20. Is your current church effective in teaching parents to be the primary disciple-makers of their children?

    a. Yes
    b. No

21. Does your current church include curriculum and activities to bring families together in worship, Bible study, service, and prayer?

    a. Always
    b. Usually
    c. Sometimes
    d. Rarely
    e. Never

22. Do you volunteer in your church' child/youth programs?

    a. Yes
    b. No

23. How can the church better equip parents to disciple their children? Check all that apply.

    a. Better children and youth programs
    b. More parenting classes
    c. More family events
    d. Sermons focused on discipleship
    e. Better Bible study curriculum

Appendix B

Tables

Question 1 - Are you a believer of Jesus Christ who has accepted Him as your personal Lord and Savior?

Yes	100%
No	0%

Question 2 - Do you regularly attend church including one of the following: worship services, bible study or small group fellowship?

Yes	100%
No	0%

Question 3 - Are you a parent, grandparent, adoptive parent, or legal guardian raising children in your home?

Yes	100%
No	0%

Question 4 - Are the children in your home currently between the ages of 5-18?

Yes	100%
No	0%

Question 5 - This survey assumes the idea that children should be discipled in the Christian life. What does discipleship of children mean to you? Check all that apply.

Teaching them biblical knowledge	94.25%
Teaching them to love others	94.25%
Teaching them to love God	97.70%
Leading them to salvation	85.06%
Teaching them to put God first in their lives	93.10%

Question 6 - Who is primarily responsible for teaching discipleship to children?

Pastor	1.12%
Children's Director	1.12%
Parents	97.75%
Sunday School teacher	0%
Church family	0%

Teacher in Christian School	0%

Question 7 - What programs are most important in teaching discipleship to children?

Vacation Bible School	2.67%
Sunday School	54.67%
Christian School	6.67%
Sunday services	30.67%
Community events	4.00%
Summer Camps	1.33%

Question 8 - How do you approach discipleship teaching with your children?

Teachable moments	47.19%
Regular family Bible study	24.72%
Regular church attendance	21.35%
I have no regular plan	6.74%

Question 9 - Which of the following materials do you utilize in discipleship with your children?

Bible only	51.69%
Structured curriculum	29.21%
Bible studies written for children	44.945
Videos/Multimedia presentations	21.38%
No regular material	25.84%

Question 10 - How do you approach Bible study with your children? Check all that apply.

Book by book	31.76%
Verse of the day reading	27.08%
Character study	27.06%
Life application	69.41%
Daily devotional reading	48.41%

Question 11 - Planned or unplanned, how often does your family engage in Bible study together?

Never	11.24%
Only at church	22.47%
1-2 times per week	29.21%
3 or more times per week	37.08%

Question 12 - How do you engage in prayer with your children? Check all that apply.

Bedtime prayers	73.81%
Children spend time praying alone	25.00%
Dinner prayers	77.38%
Parents pray for children regularly	82.14%

Question 13 - Planned or unplanned, how often does your family pray together?

Never	8.99%
Only at church	3.37%
1-2 times per week1	15.73%
3 or more times per week	71.91%

Question 14 - Which of the following are personal barriers to teaching your children discipleship? Check all that apply?

Lack of confidence	24.32%
Lack of biblical understanding	14.80%
Lack of desire	8.11%
Time	60.81%
Work/school events and schedules	55.41%
Poor relationship with children	2.70%
Worldly influences	16.22%
Uninterested spouse	25.68%

Question 15 - How confident are you in discussing biblical knowledge with your children?

Extremely confident	32.58%
Very confident	35.96%
Somewhat confident	26.97%
Not so confident	3.37%
Not at all confident	1.12%

Question 16 - How confident are you in helping your children use biblical principles to make decisions?

Extremely confident	38.20%
Very confident	39.33%
Somewhat confident	20.22%
Not so confident	2.25%
Not at all confident	0%

Question 17 - Do you feel that effective discipleship teaching requires formal training?

Yes	16.65%
No	83.15%

Question 18 - In your opinion, what is the biggest barrier to children becoming disciples of Christ?

Social Media	11.5%
Video Games	2.50%
Lack of parental involvement	72.50%
Poor programs at church	0
Friendships with non-Christians	13.75%

Question 19 - Do you view the church as a partner in helping disciple your children?

Yes	95.51%
No	4.49%

Question 20 - Is your current church effective in teaching parents to be the primary disciple-makers of their children?

Yes	60.67%
No	39.32%

Question 21 - Does your current church include curriculum and activities to bring families together in worship, Bible study, service, and prayer?

Always	22.47%
Usually	3.34%
Sometimes	32.58%
Rarely	13.48%
Never	1.12%

Question 22 - Do you volunteer in your church' child/youth programs?

Yes	70.79%
No	29.21%

Question 23 - How can the church better equip parents to disciple their children? Check all that apply.

Better children or youth programs	25.00%
More parenting classes	53.57%
More family events	50.005
Sermons focused on discipleship	59.52%
Better Bible study curriculum	25.00%

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LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

.November 28, 2018

Angela Hazel
IRB Exemption 3538.112818: Professional and Parental Views of Discipling Children and the Role of the Church

Dear Angela Hazel,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

> (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
> (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School