

**Part I**

**Children's Ministry,  
Past and Present**



# chapter 1

## God's Children's Ministry

You may know my husband as a preacher or a writer or a speaker; but, let me tell you, deep, deep down, he is a historian! “Look back to gain perspective on where you are now and to avoid pitfalls of the past” is a summary of his motto. Take those novel Nine Marks he’s always talking about! He’ll be the first one to tell you to look back, even just as recently as the 19th century (let alone all the back to the Old and New Testament), and there they are, all in practice. Those of you who have read “Church Polity” will know that. (And those of you aren’t familiar with that not-exactly New York Times bestseller, it’s a compilation of accounts of church polity among 19th century Baptists. tIt might feel like a nerdy yawn written especially for church history geeks, but very instructive, even regarding some elements of the church’s/parents training of their children.)

So, what did my husband tell me to do at the very beginning of this book? “Write a chapter of the history of children’s ministry.” Inwardly I groaned; but let me tell you, it has blown my mind and expanded gloriously my vision of what God has been up to from the beginning. God is amazing... and my husband isn’t too bad, either. (Thanks, Mark!)

### Beginning with God

In going backwards, I came to the beginnings of the modern “Sunday School Movement” in the 18th century when first Hannah Ball in the rural English town of High Wycombe, then Robert Raikes in the urban English city of Gloucester began inviting un-churched children to a special school on Sunday using education as a spring board for the gospel. And, while we will get to that particular, very special turn in the history of children’s ministry in a bit, to start there would be to miss its beginnings by a country mile. Actually, a country eternity, for children’s ministry has its root in God, Himself. He has been involved in children’s ministry from before the beginning of time and planned it out to beyond the end of time. His goal: His glory and the enjoyment of that glory by His adopted children as they gather with Him.

#### **Perfect Wonderfulness Shared**

In eternity past, there was only God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Together they enjoyed delightful, complete fellowship. God did not need anything or anyone else. He was never bored or lonely. Life was perfect; or, as I say in the Praise Factory curriculum, it was “Perfect Wonderfulness.”

Fast forward all the way to eternity future. Once more there is God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, still enjoying perfect fellowship, but now with Him is who? Lots and lots of people!

Revelation 12:9-11 describes the scene:

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

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Revelations 21:2 tells us who they are: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."

This vast multitude is the Church, the great gathering of all of God's adopted children, transformed and glorified. She, His bride purchased by His own blood, to be joined with Him in the Father's house (John 14:2). And from before the beginning, it was the Church, these people, God chose to wrap into the enjoyment of His Own, Perfect Wonderfulness, that they might together know, worship and enjoy Him, and know and enjoy one another forever and ever.

How did all these people come to be His bride? Why do they get to live in His presence enjoying these eternal pleasures? The history that falls between eternity past and eternity future gives us those answers. It is the story of God raising up and preparing His people for that great Gathering Day, from their spiritual childhood to their maturity. The story of their creation, alienation, redemption, adoption, sanctification and ultimately glorification, that God, the first and best Parent and the first and best Teacher, would bring about, Himself, in His children's ministry to gather His Church around His throne.

## The Scope and Sequence of God's Children's Ministry

The scope of God's plans would extend through all history and beyond. The world would be His classroom made for them. History, His lesson plan. His Word, His curriculum. The Church, not only the children He would care for and teach, but also the visual aid of Himself displayed to each other, to all the watching earthly world, and even to those in the heavenly realms. Priests, prophets, kings, and judges, His chosen overseers/under-shepherd and teachers in the Old Testament. Pastors and elders, His chosen leaders in the New Testament. The Father, the Planner and Provider. The Son, the Redeemer and Head. His Spirit and His Word, the inward Tutors who equip and empower. And every earthly gathering Sunday of local churches, filled with His children, would be a dress rehearsal for the Great Gathering Day for all His children, the Church, His Bride, glorified and worshipping as one in His presence, in eternity to come.

*if desired, skip to biblical model on page 19*

Having described the scope of God's planned children's ministry to His people, let's take a closer look at the sequence.

### **Planned before the Beginning**

From before the beginning, God planned and chose a people for Himself. He would be their heavenly Father. They would be His children. He would provide for their needs. He would teach them His ways. He would provide for them lavishly-- all they needed for each day; good works to fill their lives; his fellowship and the fellowship of others. They would know Him and reflect His glory. He planned to create them in His image. He would give them a living spirit so that they could know Him, love Him, and have fellowship with Him. He would reveal Himself to them through this special heart He was given each of them, through the rest of His creation they would see all around them and through His Word. He would give them good laws to live by-- to live together in fellowship and love of Him and each other. Life with their Heavenly Father and with each other would be complete bliss.

### **The Fall and God's Plans**

But God knew this Perfect Wonderfulness humans could enjoy with Him would go no further than Adam and Eve, the very first people. They would quickly discard it for something with a much more bitter taste. The tempter would come, and our first parents would choose to turn away from God and His rule. They would deserve His just and holy wrath. And with them, we would all fall. Humanity's relationship with God would be broken asunder, and the cost of the reparation placed infinitely high, beyond anyone's ability to pay.

### **The Mercy of God**

Anyone, that is, except God, Himself. And so, as our loving kindness to our own, defiant, erring children echoes in the faintest of ways, God, the most merciful parent, planned history to be a glorious demonstration of the unsearchable depths of His love and grace to His defiant, erring children.

"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him."  
--Psalm 103:13, NIV

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."  
--Romans 5:8

### **The Planned Savior through Abraham's Family**

Though they would not deserve it, He would promise them a Savior. He would choose a family—Abraham and his seed. That family would grow into a chosen people, the nation of Israel. Through Moses, He would give them His Word, filled with His mighty works, His sure promises and His good laws. It would tell them how to live as His people and how to stay in fellowship with Him. He would raise up judges, prophets, priests and Levites, scribes and even kings to be loving under-shepherds to lead them and teach them. Prophets and priests would gather the people together to worship Him and hear preaching from His Word, especially at the Temple. Kings in the capitol would lead them by godly rule and example. Levites and judges in their towns would lead them in their everyday life.

### **Visual Aids to Remember**

And everywhere, every day, God would weave visual aids of Himself and His Word into their lives and in the land He gave them. From the Promised Land, itself, to the feasts that followed the cycle of the harvest year, reminding them He was the Creator and giver of all the blessings they enjoyed from it. The great stacks of stones around Israel He commanded them erect near places where He acted mightily on their behalf.

From the tassels that were to sway on the edges of their garments:

"The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: "Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God." --Numbers 15:38-41

To the mezuzahs on their doors or phylacteries on their arms or foreheads:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

--Deuteronomy 6:9 4

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“Remember! Remember!” said God’s laws at every turn. The circumcision of boys at day eight, that would symbolize their part in the broader covenant family from birth that would, by God’s grace, later reflect true membership in the covenant family as a circumcised heart of love for God. The just and merciful laws that would teach them not to show favoritism and to not forget the poor and weak as well as the “do not touch, do not eat, do not wear” laws of Leviticus that made them distinct from the nations around them. The weekly Sabbaths at home or the great gatherings of the nation around first the tabernacle, then the Temple to worship God, hear from His Word, and to renew their fellowship with Him through the sacrifices.

And oh, the sacrifices! All that blood, day after day! What a very visual reminder of their sin and their dependence upon Him, through His mediators, if they were to be His people. All were to help them to remember the holy God who had chosen them and His Word which was to be more important to them than the bread their bodies needed to stay alive. To love Him and live for Him. To love one another. All of these would be part of God’s ministry to teach His children, while at the same time, to bring Him glory in the heavenly world above and in the watching world on earth. to remember would teach them how to live to love God and each other. Remember! Remember! Remember!

### **Loving Discipline for Forgetfulness**

And when they did not remember or obey, the LORD would use these leaders and these laws to warn them of His coming discipline if they did not repent and turn back to Him and His good ways.

“Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.”  
-- Deuteronomy 8:5

Discipline, they would indeed face, because they would indeed choose to forget and disobey, as their first parents had done before them. But in His Fatherly goodness, He would discipline them to turn them back to Him.

### **The Rescuer at Last**

And in His Fatherly, infinite loving-kindness, He would at last send Jesus, His One and only True Son to save them. He would live up to His name: “Yahweh Rescues.” He would come as the good shepherd, the wisest teacher, the perfect law-keeper, the truest prophet, the worthy high priest, and the king of kings. He would live the life they should have lived, perfectly keeping and fulfilling God’s laws. He would die the death they should have died, taking God’s just punishment for their sins upon Himself as He chose to die for them on the cross. He would die that Good Friday and on the third day, Sunday, He would demonstrate to heaven and earth why we call that Friday good. His death purchased our life. He would provide the final sacrifice for sin. He would completely swallow up death for God’s people-- all who would ever turn away from their sins and trust in Jesus as their Savior.

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” --1 John 1:9-10

### **Help from Within to Do the Work throughout the World**

Jesus would ascend to heaven, He would send the Holy Spirit to live inside of their hearts, the good work of spiritual circumcision. The clean heart He had promised to give His people from the time of the exile. He would help them love Him and each other. He would help them live for Him from the inside. Thus empowered, He would send them out with good news to build His Church, the outworking of the new covenant made in His blood.

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’ --Matthew 28:18-20

### **From Every Tribe and Nation**

This would be a kingdom of God that would burst with people from every tribe and nation. Not an earthly kingdom, as He gave Israel, organized around the children of an earthly family, Abraham's physical seed, generation by generation, and allowing any who would come to live under the law, but never including many who were not of his descent. No, this would be a heavenly kingdom, organized around children “born from above,” Abraham's spiritual seed, from every people in the earthly family, those receiving spiritual birth at the hands of God's Spirit, then baptism as the outward sign of that inward birth. The foretaste of this kingdom would reside in the hearts of those who by repentance and faith put their trust in Jesus, with the promise of the great feast of the Great Gathering to come in the new heaven and earth when Jesus would return.

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” -- John 1:12

The gates of this kingdom would swing wide open to people from every tribe and nation. The days of “They may come” under the old covenant, would now be “Go and bring in.” under the new. God would enable His people to “go out, multiply and fill” all of His physical earth with His gospel and by doing so, build His Church in the spiritual hearts of men.

“The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among

### **The Church Is Built**

God would raise up apostles, pastors, elders to lead and teach His children His Word and His ways. But not only would they be taught by these godly men, but they would all, themselves, be God's holy priesthood, encouraging one another and seeking to present everyone mature.

“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” --1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10

“He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.” --Colossians 1:28-29

And His Spirit would continue to work inside them, transforming them into the likeness of Christ.

“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. --2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV

### **God's Plans Accomplished, God's People Gathered In**

Like this, God planned to build His Church up into His Son, the Head, helping them live for Him until His

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plans would be all accomplished and His children all brought in. When Jesus will return to do away with sin and death and this old, broken world order to an end and bring home His children to live forever with Him and feast together on that Great Gathering Day where He and all of God's children, now His fully mature, perfectly radiant bride, would at last see Him in His glory and at last enjoy each other and glorify Him, forever in a perfect new heaven and earth of His making.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” --John 14:1-3

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. --John 17:24

Hallelujah, what a plan! Hallelujah, what a God! Hallelujah, what a Savior!

### **The Children's Ministry Plans that Always Succeed**

These were the plans of God from before the beginning. And as Psalm 33:11 reminds us, the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations. As God planned, He has carried out, and is continuing to carry out even today. And so He will continue to carry out until every plan and purpose comes to completion.

Isn't it marvelous to see the children's ministry that God has planned as He would “raise up His children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”? And isn't it even more amazing to consider the great Gathering Day that His children's ministry is preparing them for? All history, all eternity, echoes with the unfathomable love of God for His children! And eternity will not be too long to praise Him for what He planned and did in parenting us, His redeemed people, adopted children.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” --1 John 3:1



## chapter 2

# Children's Ministry in the Bible

But God never does just one thing at a time. His plans have layers of riches to them. So, into this amazing children's ministry program, God planned for His people not to just be children and students, but parents and teachers, too.

### **Children Teaching Children**

Now, perhaps God created the children of sea turtles to know how to crack out of their shells, dig their way out of their sand beds, waddle down to the sea and swim away without any parental aid, but not so did He create the children of men. They come out of the womb helpless and needy, physically, mentally and spiritually. They are made to be cared for and taught over long periods of time by their parents. As they grow, parents teach them what they need to know for both life and godliness until they reach maturity. Perhaps one of the reasons God chose for human babies to be so dependent for so long is to use the act of parenting to help the parents continue to remember, learn, and grow. It's no wonder that this God who loves for us to grow and change as we learn, wove His people into the very fiber of His children's ministry, generation by generation, for their good and His glory. Let's look at how God uses His children to teach their children about Him in both Old Testament and New Testament times.

### **Parents Are Primary: Grown Kids Teaching Their Own Kids**

As early as the book of Genesis is the parents' responsibility to teach their children about God mentioned. "For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." --Genesis 18:18

While this passage directly deals with what the Lord was calling Abraham to do, similar commands are given to all of God's people over and over in Scripture: from Israel as Abraham's physical offspring in the Old Testament:

"He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God." --Psalm 78:5-8

And to Abraham's spiritual offspring, the Church, in the New Testament:

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." --Ephesians 6:1-4

These are just two of over thirty biblical references urging parents to teach the next generation about Him. It seems clear: the biblical instruction and nurture parents provide their children is the root of children's ministry. They are the God-ordained, primary spiritual caregivers--disciplers.

### **Parents: Primary But Not Alone**

But that being said, nowhere in Scripture does it say that parents are called to do this alone. Far from it. If the teaching of godly parents is the root of children's ministry, the soil in which God has ordained for that root to receive the nutrients necessary to feed its little off shoots is God's people gathered to worship God, to be equipped through the preaching of God's Word, and to build one another up through fellowship.

Deuteronomy 4:10 "The Lord said to me, "Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so."

This is the basic, biblical model.

*Skip to page 27 if you want the condensed overview of the biblical model*

## Children's Ministry in the Old Testament

Let's look at the Old Testament model of this.

### **God's People Gather to Be Equipped and Lead by Godly Leaders**

The Old Testament model most clearly appears with the giving of the God's law to Moses. Through it, the LORD instituted regular times of worship, from the Sabbaths each week to the national festivals each year. He instructed them in making the tabernacle where they could gather together and worship Him. He raised up priests as well as prophets to speak His Word to them.

Remember: there was no easy access to God's Word. Even kings were instructed to write down their own copy. (Deuteronomy 17:18) Hearing God's Word read and explained by these leaders; remembering and meditating upon it, was how most of the people of Israel learned. The ear was pretty much the only gate to receive what they needed to live godly lives and to instruct their children in God's ways, too. They listened to learn what God is like and how He was to be worshipped. They memorized to hold onto His laws that were to cover every aspect of life. This was how they might love Him and love each other; and in doing so, reflect His character back to Him, to each other, and even to the watching world.

### **Children Welcome**

Assemblies were not only for adults. Children would have been present as well, hearing the Law read and explained, watching and taking part in the prayers and songs. Seeing the sacrifices offered for sin and in thanksgiving. Resting from work on the Sabbath. Actively participating in the annual festivals (Exodus 12:24-28). They saw God answer His people's prayers and act on their behalf in remarkable ways. Even the use of acrostic psalms like Psalm 34 (each verse begins a letter of the Hebrew alphabet sequentially) would have been easier for the children (as well as the adults) to remember. It even directly addresses children: "Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD." (v.11)

### **Land and Law**

Abraham's seed was a physical nation enjoying a physical land filled with physical blessings and physical protection from the LORD. His laws required many physical regulations for life. All of these were to point and reflect a spiritual reality of love for the LORD and love for neighbor unlike anything they would have seen from any of the surrounding nations. God's laws were exquisitely different from any other law code of its day. The unbiased justice for rich and poor alike, native-born and sojourner. The care for the weak and needy. Laws for a distinct way of life from birth to death, from food, hair and clothing, to health and

sexuality, worship at home and as a community, work and rest... down to the animals.

When God's people kept His laws, the clear community witness made all of life a time of teaching about God and His good ways. When God's people lived by His Book, they would be distinct from the world.

Holy and set apart to the glory of God, for the good of the community and even as a display to the world. God's laws filled God's community with practices and symbols begging for questions, even down to the tassels that hung from their clothing.

No wonder the LORD instructs the people of Israel through Moses to "impress [these commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." --Deuteronomy 6:7

When the community of Israel kept God's laws, it provided a rich, living, three-dimension set of talking points about the one, true God who loved them and made them His people. Here was the regulative principle "Preach the Bible, Read the Bible, Sing the Bible, Pray the Bible and See the Bible" expanded physically out to every area of life. There was much for a child of Israel to learn as he or she gathered alongside their parents with the assembled people of Israel or even lived among them in everyday life.

### **Home School Teachers?**

It might be easy to imagine the typical family in ancient Israel to looked the same as our small, nuclear family units today. However, that was not the case. Generations of families lived in compounds that expanded as children grew into adulthood and got married. Daughters would marry and go to join the compounds of their husband's family. Sons engaged to be married would build an addition on his family's compound as the new home for his bride. Grandparents, aunt and uncles, nieces and nephews, servants and sometimes even sojourners would live together and share the tasks of life on these compounds. This would even include the instruction of children.

And it's important to remember that passages like Deuteronomy 6:7 were spoken by Moses to the whole assembly of Israel gathered together. This the manuscript of a parenting workshop for parents on raising their biological kids. It was a sermon to the whole community that told them repeatedly to be deliberate in instructing the next generation. So while "Mommy Aschah" and "Daddy Lemuel" most certainly should have been taking notes of Prophet Moses' sermon, "Uncle Zechariah" who lived on the family compound, and "Rachel" the elderly woman on the next compound over, or even "Zechariah" the God-fearing servant should very well have been thinking of how they could help teach the children in their midst, too. The high rates of mortality of men, women and children, imade it even more important for the everyone to consider it their responsibility to help bring up the next generation in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

### **World of Witness**

And if the whole community was gathering together to worship God, and encouraging each other to remember and live out His good laws, what a beautiful picture of God and His goodness it created! What an amazing illustration to the children that the God of their fathers was indeed the one, true God, worthy of worship and the fount of every blessing!

### **The Model that Was Mostly Just a Model**

But the times when this Old Testament, Mosaic-law based model was a reality were all too few. The people did not stay true to their God or the covenant they made with Him. Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy are filled with warnings against following the idols of the nations. Most every other book in the Old Testament references the people running after them. False prophets, unfaithful priests, idolatrous kings

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led the people astray in worship and in life. Sometimes they did not just lead, but actually demanded the people abandon the LORD. The Temple was used to pay tribute to Asherah and Baal or abandoned for the altars to these gods in the high places. Precious children who were to be treasured and taught in the ways of the LORD were instead sacrificed by their parents in the fires to Molech. The biblical model lay largely forgotten and as covered in dust as the law of God which told of it. The fountain of the Word of Life was replaced with broken cisterns leaking false teaching, or dried cisterns offering no teaching at all.

Where did this leave parents who needed to hear God's Word to know how to worship and live for Him? What was there to pass on to the next generation but lies and idolatry? Very little. Only when the LORD disciplined His people; when prophets and scribes preached God's Word; when priests revived the Temple worship; or when a king read the Law and enforced it did glimmers of the beautiful community centered around the Law shine for both parents and children to see and learn.

“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him.” --Judges 10:6

### **The Exile**

The demolish of the Temple and the deportment of the people of Judah to Babylon was in many ways a terrible time for the nation as an entity. But it was a good and measured discipline in the wise hands of their God. The LORD sent faithful prophets with the people into captivity to preach to them. Stripped of land, culture and possessions, hearts were softened and repentant.

Through the prophet Jeremiah the LORD warned the people not to listen to the false prophets who promised a speedy return and quick fix to their problems. They would be in exile seventy years before He brought them back home. They should settle down and have big families (Jeremiah 29:6). And while there was no Temple, the people could still gather together for worship and to hear God's Word from prophets like Ezekiel. This exile would last almost double the forty years of the wanderings in the wilderness before the people were allowed to enter the Promised Land the first time. This would have been enough time for most of those who came to Babylon in the exile to die, and their children and children's children to be raised up in their place.

### **Settle Down and Seek Me**

This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” – Jeremiah 29:10-14

The teaching of the prophets watered the hearts of this new generation preparing them to return and rebuild the Temple and re-establish the nation. God sought and found by those who seek with all their hearts. The preaching of God's Word will always be God's chosen well-spring of instruction for life and godliness among His people.

### **Return from Exile**

In 2 Samuel 7:23, David praised God for rescuing the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt: “And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt?”

Ah, but how much greater it was for the LORD to choose to rescue His people from captivity in Babylon, having broken His covenant over and over again. How wonderful was His patient loving kindness to them! No wonder when the people assembled together in Jerusalem for the laying of the foundation of the new Temple there was both weeping for joy by the young and for sorrow by the old. The young rejoiced to see the happiness of fellowship with God according to the Law renewed. The old could only watch this less beautiful building be erected with deep sting of sorrow over the sin that had caused its fall and the breach in fellowship in the first place. (Ezra 3:11-13)

### **Structured Schooling**

Not only did this post-exilic period see an attempt at return to life under the Mosaic law, but also the rise of the first, clear case for anything like “formal, church-provided, education” for both adults and children: the synagogue movement. Most scholars believe that the idea of synagogues sprang up during the Babylonian exile among the Diaspora Jews where they could continue to gather on Sabbaths for instruction and community. They were not to be a replacement for Temple worship, but local “instruction centers” for the Jews. This showed even in their basic structure: they were always built facing towards the Temple in Jerusalem. They were established in towns where there was a “minyan” of ten or more men. By Jesus’ day it is estimated there were over 400 synagogues in Israel alone. Outside of Israel, many synagogues were formed as well—wherever clusters of Jews stayed in Diaspora instead of returning back to native Israel.

### **Society Central**

Synagogues were hubs of Jewish community. Some were very large and elaborate, even including kitchens and rooms for communal meals, meetings and even some living quarters. Many had charity collection boxes. Some had libraries and study rooms. Here, all the people could encourage one another in living as God’s people.

### **God’s People Gather for Preaching and Worship**

But far more important to the gathering community than any of those buildings was the synagogue sanctuary. This was where instruction in God’s Law took place. It was here where the scrolls of the Torah were carefully stored in a special cabinet. It was here on the Sabbath and worship days, that Jewish families and even god-fearing Gentiles, gathered to worship God, sing, pray and to hear a portion of God’s law read and explained, usually by a rabbi.

There was no “pick your own passage” approach to these Sabbath readings. The Jewish leaders created a lectionary to be followed, Sabbath by Sabbath so that the whole Torah (as well as some of the books of the prophets) was expounded on in order with synagogues preaching from the same passage. What a far cry these days of copies of the Torah to be read and expounded in many towns throughout Israel and neighboring countries were from the days of Moses when even kings had to write their own copy and when the Temple copy was lost, God’s Word vanished but for the word of the few faithful prophets.

### **Sabbath School Throughout the Week**

But the Sabbath gatherings were just the tip of the iceberg of the instruction that went on in the synagogues. During the week, boys ages six and older went to the synagogue school to receive instruction in the Torah,

## CHILDREN'S MINISTRY IN THE BIBLE

as well as learn to read and write. Instruction centered on memorization, which was particularly important since very few families/no families would have even a portion of God's Word at home. But the higher a student progressed in the synagogue school, the further away from anything that looked like pure Scripture memory he got.

These synagogues instruction in God's Word much more systematic and readily available all across Israel. Actually, all across the Near Middle East--wherever the Jews stayed in Diaspora instead of returning to Israel. Jewish and God-fearing Greek families everywhere were being exposed to God's Word more readily and more regularly. And now, children from common families, not just those from rich, scholarly or priestly families, were being filled with a depth of biblical knowledge rarely known before.

Fathers still bore the responsibility of training their boys after the age of six, but these schools were a great support to their efforts. Girls would get the benefit of the Sabbath day teaching in synagogue and any additional instruction parents (usually her mother) could give. This instruction certainly bore rich fruit in some. Just look at Mary's Magnificat, in Luke 1:46-55. It is full of the knowledge of Scripture.

### **The Hedge that Choked the Plants**

But unfortunately, the green plants that sprung up through the synagogues became increasingly choked out by the extra-biblical, incessant rules of the Pharisees. This movement developed in the century or so before Jesus' birth. The Pharisees' teaching multiplied and took hold of many synagogues. The hedge of protection these serious teachers of the law hoped their rulings would bring to honor the LORD and His good laws, had the opposite effect. They muddied the truths of God's Word and stripped it of its meaning, as Jesus would soon prove repeatedly in His teaching. But even so, the rise of the synagogue set the stage for the true preaching of the Son of God and the spread of the Church throughout the world.

## **Jesus and Children's Ministry**

### **Jesus as a Student**

Jesus would have received instruction in God's laws from Joseph and even Mary,. He would have participated in worship assemblies at the Temple, and kept the Sabbath and the feasts. It is also very likely that Jesus went to his local synagogue on Sabbaths for worship and on weekdays for school, like many boys his age did. One hint of this is that Jesus is called "rabbi" (teacher) by His disciples, the crowds, and even the Pharisees and Sadducees. Usually, one received the title of rabbi only having been taught by a rabbi himself. Even the passage when Jesus, at age twelve, is conversing with the teachers of the law at the Temple, is an off-shoot of this regular teaching interaction between teacher and older, brighter boys who were allowed to progress through to the more exclusive higher education offered only to bright boys showing promise as future rabbis.

### **Collaborative Community**

This passage also hints to the naturalness of community in Jesus' life as a boy. When Mary and Joseph first couldn't find Jesus they assumed it was because He was somewhere in the large crowd from Nazareth who had all travelled together up the Feast in Jerusalem. If Jesus had been a boy with parents who was expected be raised exclusively by their influence, He would have been kept at their side. And if He wasn't their first thought would not have been that he was simply somewhere in the crowd walking home to Galilee. Jesus was raised in community. Apparently a very large one.

### **General Opinion of Children in Jesus' Day**

The Jews in Jesus' day, considered children as a treasured gift from the LORD (Psalm 127:3). Outside the Jewish culture, children received every kind of treatment from tender love to abuse. Under Roman law, a father could even command his son be executed by simple command! In neither Jewish and non-Jewish

cultures were children treated with public importance, as we might today. A boy was considered a man at age thirteen, but didn't enter the world of public respect until age thirty. For women, this respect remained rare indeed even after the age of thirty.

### **Jesus' Interactions with Children: Included and Cherished**

But in many ways, Jesus acted in contrast to the culture around Him. He placed God's importance upon them, both in value themselves and as a teaching example to the adults around them. We know that He welcomed and blessed children. And when the disciples tried to put an end to this, Jesus gave them a stern rebuke. He pointed to the helpless neediness of children as being a necessary attitude we must have towards God if we are to be His people. (Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15; Matthew 18:3-4) We know that children were present when Jesus taught the crowds in the open air (John 6:9' Luke 9:37-48; Matthew 18:10) and received His healing (John 4:46-54;

### **Children Listening to Jesus' Teaching**

Children would have been present with their parents in the synagogue services when Jesus preached. Outside of these synagogue services, children were also present when Jesus was teaching the Twelve as well as the large crowds that gathered. Jesus taught those who listened to not despise, but to welcome children in His name. (Mark 9:36-37; Luke 9:37-48; Matthew 18:1-10) These were words of encouragement directed to the whole community, not just parents: children had valued and were worth their care and attention.

## **🌀 Children's Ministry in the New Testament Church 🌀**

In very noticeable ways, the Old Testament/synagogue pattern of God's people gathering together for worship and instruction, fellowship and encouragement that then flowed out into the individual households of believers continued in the early church. Matter of fact, many of the first believers would have still gone to synagogue on the Sabbath for instruction in God's Word (see Acts 9:1) , or to the Temple to pray (Acts 3:1; Acts 2:46).

### **Synagogues Had the Scriptures**

Remember: the synagogues were the local guardians of the Torah. The believers would not have had the same access to the Scriptures, but by memory in these early days. Children who attended Sabbath services with their parents like these could still benefit from hearing God's laws read and preached. They could have learned from the prayers prayed and the psalms sung. Observed the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles seeking after the Lord. It also appears likely that boys from these newly believing families still would have gone to the synagogue schools during the week.

### **The New Wine and Wineskins**

"They are filled with new wine." Mocked some of the onlookers when the Jesus' 120 followers burst out into the streets of Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news of Jesus in unlearned, foreign tongues to the crowds who had come from other countries to celebrate the Pentecost, the giving of God's Law.(Acts 2:12-13) And while they were wrong to think these men were under the influence of alcohol, they were right to think what they saw had to do with new wine. Only this was new wine being poured into the new wineskins of the church, as Jesus foretold. (Matthew 9:16-17) The Law, celebrated on that day of Pentecost had been fulfilled by Christ. He had ascended into heaven and sent His Spirit, promised to transform hearts of God's people from the inside and help them walk in obedience to that Law as they never had before.

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." --Ezekiel 26:36-37

## CHILDREN'S MINISTRY IN THE BIBLE

Peter preached to the gathered crowd, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:38-41)

### **New Covenant Community**

Radical changes were under way. On that Pentecost, the circumcision that welcomed by flesh into membership in old covenant community built upon observance of the Mosaic law, was set aside by baptism which welcomed by repentance and faith into membership into the new covenant community sealed in the blood of the Lamb.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." --John 13:34-35

So, the Holy Spirit worked His fruit in their hearts, and it poured out into their lives for all to see: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." --Acts 2:42-47

### **From Sabbath to Sunday**

Sunday, Jesus' resurrection day became the gathering day of the church, not in the synagogues, but in the homes of fellow believers. Gradually these services completely replaced gatherings at the Temple or at the synagogue, especially as the Jerusalem leaders began to threaten and persecute Jesus' followers. These Jewish Christians were losing their old identity, but this was to find a new one in Christ, their Head, and the Church, His body. And God used the growing persecution they faced to send them out from Jerusalem to be His witnesses in "all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

### **The Church Spreads**

They preached God's Word everywhere they went: first in the synagogue assemblies, already rich with Bible knowledge and ripe for faith. But also in the marketplaces, along the roads, near the pagan temples and even in jail. In Judea, in Samaria, in Asia, in Europe, and beyond, the Holy Spirit worked in hearts of both Jews and Gentiles to respond with repentance and faith. Churches sprang up. Believer baptism continued to replace circumcision as the outward sign of membership into the church; just as the Lord's Supper replaced the Passover as the outward sign of the Lord's great rescue of His people from sin and death. Elders were called to pastor and preach not only God's Laws but now the gospel accounts and letters from the apostles. Together, they were called The goal: to proclaim Christ, to warn and teach everyone with all wisdom, that "we may present everyone mature in Christ." (Colossians 1:27-28)

### **Children in the Church**

What would it have been like to be a child growing up among believers in times like these? Those from Jewish backgrounds would have recognized the familiar pattern of reading and preaching the Bible, praying the Bible, and singing the Bible so like the synagogue assemblies. But how very different to see baptism of believing adults, instead of the circumcision of children, and the observance of the Lord's Supper (perhaps



weekly) instead of celebrating the Passover annually. Children would have directly participated in these old, outward feasts directly. They were included long before they understood them. But now, personal faith and believer baptism was necessary before they could do more than watch the church. Circumcision of the flesh had no place. Only the circumcision of a new heart, born of the Spirit.

### **Believer's Baptism**

This was an important radical difference. Jesus charged His followers to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:18) Making a disciple particularly of children, infamously known in Scripture to tend toward folly (Proverbs 22:15) would take time. Now, they would wait and observe the church in these observances until they had believing faith of their own and the elders deemed them ready for baptism and membership into the church, themselves.

### **Parents Still Primary**

As for their instruction, we see Paul in places like Ephesians 6:1-4 still upholding the parents' duty to train up their children: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

### **Children Addressed in Church**

But also, directly addressing the children who were present in the assembly, reminding them to: "Obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

### **Community Still Supports**

And in Titus 2: 3-5, Paul tells Pastor Titus to teach the older women to "teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled," which points to the community helping each other raise their children well. Parent, pastor, members were involved in the raising of children.

### **The Beautiful Witness**

But perhaps most deeply affecting upon the hearts of these children would have been seeing in action the remarkable love these believers had for their Savior and for each. To see your parents choosing steadfastness to Christ over avoiding suffering. To see them choose the needs of their fellow church members over their own possessions. To hear the prayers of the saints, full of the Holy Spirit, praising God despite terrible persecution; and to see God answer prayers prayed in dire circumstances in the most amazing ways. When the Body of Christ reflects her Head, the reflection is gloriously compelling.

## **Summary of the Biblical Model**

The basic, biblical model in both Old Testament and New Testament of raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord starts with the Church gathered.

God gave priests and prophets (Old Testament) and pastors/elders (New Testament) the primary role of nurturing and training up His spiritual children in these gathered assemblies. (Leviticus 10:11; 1 Timothy 4:11-16) They would read and preach from God's Word. They would lead in worshipping God (Nehemiah 8:2,5- 6). They would encourage the people to spur one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10: (Hebrews 10:24-25). It was here that children watch and learn from from God's Word and from God's people in worship. It was here that parents along with all of God's people, received the equipping they needed. It was here where children who received the gift of faith themselves, one day, would come to be baptized and be recognized as part of God's people, too.



**God's Children's Ministry:  
A Beautiful Partnership  
Between Church and Home,  
Between Pastors and God's People**



**God's People Gathered at Church: The Soil for the Roots**

**LED:** Gathers under the leadership of godly pastors, the church gathers to worship God and love one another.

**FED:** God's Word is central to their gatherings, whether they preach the Bible, read the Bible, sing the Bible, pray the Bible and see the Bible in the sacraments.

**EMBED:** God's Word is used by the Holy Spirit to equip God's people to live as God calls them to live. God's people support and build one another up for these callings by their mutual aid and encouragement.

**SHED (Light):** As they worship God and love each other, they reflect God's character and are a winsome testimony to the unconverted in their midst (including their own children) and in the watching world.

**SPREAD:** That these, too, might become God's adopted children, knowing, obeying and enjoying Him now and forever.

***From the nurture and admonition they receive at church,  
God's people are equipped to extend this to their homes and to their children.***

**God's People at Home: The Nurtured Roots Send Out Shoots that Extend and Reflect**

**LEAD:** Parents are called to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Some of this will be as they gather at church. Much of this will be as they live their daily lives at home.

**PRECEDE:** They do not do this alone. Their ability to teach their children flows out of what they receive from the body of Christ. They are first equipped to carry out this task through instruction in God's Word, the witness of gospel-transformed lives, and the encouragement of the church community, gathered together.

**PROCEED:** Thus equipped, they take these home and live these out, to please God, continue to grow themselves, to commend the gospel, and to train their children that they might be "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:15)

**SEED:** They know that this spiritual care of their children pleases God; and is often the seed that God uses to bring their children to repentance and faith in Christ.

**SPEED:** Conversion is the gift of God and a work of His Holy Spirit. They plant the seeds, but God must make them grow.

# chapter 3

## Children's Ministry in Church History

How did the church live out the biblical models of children's ministry in the centuries that followed? Let's take a broadbrush-look through the ages up to our day.

*skip to page 43 for overview of lessons from church history*

### The Radical Church (70-310 A.D.)

#### **Faithful Model of Church**

Christians continued the model of gathering at church to worship God and love one another. Godly pastors fed the congregation on God's Word and equipped them for their life tasks, including raising their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Members continued to encourage and equip each other, too. Children themselves sat under the teaching of God's Word in the assemblies and saw the reflection of Christ in His body. Those who received Christ in repentance and faith would have been baptized and become members themselves when deemed appropriate by the pastors/elders. As time went on, there was usually a period of special training in the central doctrines of the Church and scripture for those wishing to be baptized and join the church. Hippolytus (150-225) mentions a three-year instruction period in God's Word. Baptism and church membership was not considered lightly. It was known to sometimes be even a three-year process.

#### **Parents Teach with Increasing Help from Creeds**

Most instruction continued at home by the parents. Wealthier families might have hired a tutor to help teach their children, particularly their boys. Summaries of key Christian beliefs, such as "The Rule of Faith" and "The Apostles' Creed" began to be used widely as the basis for instruction. These were sometimes called "baptismal creeds" because they contained the truths essential to understand and belief to be baptized. Teaching on the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, baptism and the Lord's Supper were also taught. With copies of the Bible as well as the gospels and letters of the apostles unavailable to most, these summaries were of great help to parents. In a few major cities, especially Alexandria, Egypt, there were "catechetical" schools that taught adults and sometimes boys and even girls, key Christian beliefs necessary to baptism and church membership.

#### **Orphans Included**

Christians became renown for rescuing and bringing up thousands of babies cast-off by Roman biological parents. Roman law gave husbands/fathers the right to kill their wives and their children. Christians found and adopted these infants and children, bringing them up in their homes and in their churches.

#### **The Power of Persecution**

Persecution of Christians ebbed and flowed in severity during this time, but on the whole it made the decision to become a Christian a very serious, even life-threatening one. This most certainly helped in protecting the church from many false conversions. Children of believing parents would know on a firsthand basis what it meant to count the cost to follow Christ as well as the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of those who did count that cost to help them endure to the very end.

## 🌀 The Received Church (October 29, 312-476 A.D.) 🌀

### **Constantine Outlaws Persecution**

Constantine's enthusiasm, then conversion to Christianity led to churches enjoyed not just a calming of persecution but positive, State support. Church leaders were even given "tax breaks" to make their lives easier. As Christ's resurrection day, Sundays were made a weekly, public holiday. Production of copies of the Bibles and construction of church buildings were encouraged and financially supported by Constantine, himself. By 600, the New Testament had been translated into eight different languages.

### **Leaders with Lasting Effects**

Some very influential church leaders arose during this time, men like Augustine, whose view of salvation the Reformation would continue to appreciate centuries later. This new, welcoming climate helped spread the gospel even if simply by making going to church and hearing God's Word more accessible to many. It also fueled major missionary thrusts further across the globe with the gospel.

Churches formed in southern Arabia, North Africa, and Ethiopia to the south, across Eastern Europe, Mesopotamia and Persia in the Near East, throughout Asia and even into China to the Far East, and all the way up to Ireland in the North. Constantine also encouraged unity in important matters of doctrine by hosting, almost overseeing, the Council of Nicea—the first ecumenical council of church leaders from every country.

### **Easier Access**

The benefits to instructing children in God's ways would echo the benefits to the church in general. Sundays were now days of rest, making church attendance easier. More copies of Bibles meant more who could read and hear God's Word. And, as the gospel went out to new lands, more parents and more children could hear and believe.

### **Power that Corrupts**

But unfortunately, Roman patronage of the church also did much harm. The State was given say over church matters that should have been decided by church leaders only. The emperor's favor of Christianity made it the popular religion. Many who were not truly converted sought and received baptism and church membership. Others desired to be pastors just to enjoy the special tax status, without having faith, themselves. Even truly converted church leaders sorely tempted to make the biblical message more palatable to influential politicians. This gravely impacted the purity of the church's witness as well as the clarity of its message. And as time would soon tell, Constantine was just the beginning of the hand of the State reaching over to control the reins of the Church for their own political uses rather than the good of the gospel.

### **Discernment Needed**

But with the State's new influence over the Church, there was more occasions when the biblical message was compromised, and the witness of the body of Christ obscured with unconverted members. It made what parents and children could learn at church, as well as take home for further training, less immediately helpful and sometimes downright heretical. Thoughtful parents would need seek out the godlier leaders and rely more heavily upon any of their own, solid understanding of the Scriptures to discern how to teach their children in gospel truth. And, when faith becomes a matter of assent to doctrine rather than an act of repentance and faith, false assurance of salvation becomes prevalent.

## The Romanized Church (476-1500 A.D.)

### **Biblical Truth Undermined by Tradition's of Men**

From the fall of Rome to the eve of the Reformation there was a gradual evolution of the power of the Roman bishop and the tradition and false doctrine that were to be so vehemently protested by reformers like Luther. Pastor replaced by priest and mediator, conferrer of forgiveness and grace; baptism to wash away sins; the Eucharist, the actual body and blood of Christ; the existence of purgatory; penance and indulgences instead of repentance; acceptance of the apocryphal books into the canon of Scripture; Mary venerated as Mother of God and mediatrix; the Roman bishop as Pope, Head of the Christian Church and infallible; Church tradition given the same weight as Scripture; faith a matter of assent to a set of beliefs, rather than a gift of God shown in repentance and personal trust in Christ. All of these sprung up increasingly during these years.

### **Heresy's Unhealthful Effects**

Where do we begin to consider the impact these false doctrines had on the health of the church, at large, as well as parents and children in particular!? Practically every area of Biblical truth was clouded by heresy. As goes knowledge of Scripture, so goes the health of the Church. There were many who had false assurance of faith through dependence on the Church traditions rather than on Christ for salvation. How could parents live out or teach to their children what they, themselves, did not know?

### **Opinions Welcome Until 1547**

Fortunately, it would not be until the Council of Trent in 1547 that all of these false doctrines were taught and enforced in every church. Some priests, such as Wycliffe and others, disagreed. Really, until the Council of Trent in 1547, priests could hold and preach according to their conscience on these traditions without being removed from their church.

During this time there were yet other men, who called themselves the Free Church, who pulled out of the Catholic Church completely because of the rising pressure to uphold these unbiblical teachings. Families who sat under the preaching of these men would have had the benefit of sound teaching for themselves and to pass on to their children at home, as in fact they did. Family worship including memorizing Bible verses was prevalent among these believers. And, in local churches like these, the gospel witness would have been much more clearly reflected in the congregation, teaching the children by example what it meant to be part of the body of Christ.

### **More Bibles in Hands**

In the early Middle Ages, monasteries took on the task of hand printing copies of the Bible. Later in this period professional copyists situated in university towns began to do much of the copy work. They would even rent out manuscripts to students who wanted to create their own copy.

Then, in the 1380's John Wycliffe, a priest in England, bucked the Catholic establishment by translating the Bible into English and distributing them. He wanted the common English people to be able to read God's Word, themselves. Up to this point, most people relied on hearing and remembering God's Word in sermons or in memorized verses, and these in Latin, not their native language. "Every Christian ought to study this book because it is the whole truth!" Wycliffe declared. "It helpeth Christian men to study the Gospel in that tongue in which they know best Christ's sentence".

At the end of the Middle Ages in 1450, there was an explosion in Bible manufacturing with the introduction of the wonderful Guttenberg printing press. Bible prices began to drop to levels more people could afford. All of these Bibles were beautifully illustrated so that even the illiterate could learn.

### **Traditions Tested against Truth**

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” –Romans 10:17 With the influx of more Bibles, especially with the advent of the printing press, the opportunity for men to read, hear, repent and believe, even when sound preaching became more scarce. This was especially true for Bibles being printed in native languages, like Wycliffe's English Bible. Parents might not get anything that sounded like the “whole truth” at church; but those who could afford to buy a Bible of their own were beginning to be able to get it for themselves and for their children. With daughters of these wealthier families more frequently being educated as well as sons, the possible impact of the written text upon all children grew. The Catholic church was not pleased at all with this development. But it was the just the first tremors that were about to shake the established church.

### **Schools on the Rise**

During this time, there were also growing opportunities for Christian schooling for boy). Gerhard Groote, priest, preacher, teacher, was especially of note. From mid 14th century to mid 16th century, he and his followers, called the Brethren of the Common Life, founded hundreds of quality elementary and secondary schools throughout Europe. Boys first copied the Latin Bible, then memorized Bible verses that were incorporate into the subjects they were learning. These schools became a model for the schools of Calvin and others in the 17th century in Europe and even among the Puritans in the American colonies after that.

While girls would still only receive their teaching at home, the growth in materials for use in schools meant that better materials would be available for parents or tutors to use with girls at home. At a time when the Bible was out of the hands of many commoners and rarely spoken of in the Catholic pulpits, these schools were keeping it alive in their students.

## The Reclaimed Church (1500-1730 A.D.)

### **Mass Production Is Megaphone**

The Reformation began with a solitary monk nailing a hand-written list of ninety-five theses to the door of Wittenberg Church. But it would be the mass production technology of the printing press that would turn Martin Luther's spark into a raging bonfire of contention among Christians in Europe and would affect change across the world. The Free Church denominations spread and grew, but not without persecution. This was especially true of the Puritans and the Anabaptists in the 1600's. The many members of the persecuted Free Church denominations sailed to America where there was the promise of religious freedom, ushering in a vibrant period of Puritan churches and writings.

### **Free Churches: Back to Healthy, Biblical Basics**

The resulting new Presbyterian, Lutheran and Anabaptists "Free Church" denominations were a major turn back to primacy of Scripture for life and godliness among believers. And, as the blueprint for church structure, church leaders and church life. And these changes were great for the health of the church in general, and as I would like to highlight, communicating the gospel to children, in particular.

### **Well-Fed Congregations: Preaching and Worship**

The expositional preaching nourished congregations with God's Word. Membership based on repentance and faith clarified the gospel and strengthened the witness of the church and its ability to spiritually encourage one another. Congregational hymns were being written and sung as a regular part of services, not only in Latin, but in native languages. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German.

### **Catechism Explosion**

Luther, Calvin, the Westminster Divines, Isaac Watts and others wrote catechisms for adults and for children. Isaac Watts even setting some of his truths to music. There were distributing them widely through the printing press. This made it much easier for parents to learn and teach Bible truths to their children at home. This was especially important since they were correcting the commonly held heretical views of the Catholic Church.

### **The First Sunday Schools**

Sunday afternoons became time for Catechism School for adults seeking membership as well as the children of current children's members. These would frequently be led by the pastor. These classes supported the parents' instruction of their children and gave the pastors an opportunity to observe firsthand a child's maturing understanding of truth and readiness for baptism and membership-- something that did not occur until the teen years at the youngest. There was great care taken in not baptizing anyone until they were clearly converted.

### **The Empire Strikes Back... With Impact Even Today**

Unfortunately, the Catholic Church fought back by creating its own catechism around 1555 as part of its written response to the Reformers (the Council of Trent/Counter-Reformation). This catechism set in stone the heretical doctrines that had been left up for debate until the Reformation. On top of this, priests were discouraged from teaching from the Bible. Bishop Hooper of Gloucester polled 311 priests during this time and found 168 "were unable to repeat the Ten Commandments. Thirty-one did not know where to find them. Forty could not tell where the Lord's Prayer is to be found and thirty-one did not know the Author." This was a terrible turn, for the Catholic church. Now every child, every adult in the Catholic Church would be receiving the full dose of these false teachings, yet very little teaching in the Bible. We see the impact of these around us even today.

## The Revived Church (1730-1920 A.D.)

### **Revive Us Again**

Life in a fallen world full of fallen people mean the gospel must continually be contended for. (Jude 1:3-4) So, the great highs of the Reformation were followed not by simply a plateau, but deep dips into valleys even as soon as the mid 1730's. And into these lows comes a wave of revivals that would send shockwaves to the ends of the earth in breadth and even into the mid 20th century in length with the First, Second and Third Great Awakenings, and in some ways, all the way up to today.

While men like Griffith Jones were forerunners of this movement, it was primarily the preaching of John Wesley and George Whitefield that stoked the revival fires in the First Great Awakening. Their preaching from Church of England pulpits emphasized true conversion and holiness and revitalized many already in the pews. Their open-air preaching to thousands upon thousands of unchurched people brought many to repentance and faith as well. Converts were urged to join a local church as well as attend the local "Holy Club." While this may have been the pattern at first, it would gradually lead to the formation of the Methodist Church as its own, separate denomination.

### **Holiness Helps**

For the truly converted who followed through by going to church, the outcome was encouraging. Change of heart equipped by regular biblical preaching from the pulpit, and fellow members to live a life of godliness would in turn help create a change in the home, too. Bringing their children to the regular children's catechism time on Sunday afternoons with pastors helped these new Christian parents teach their children what they were only learning themselves. Family worship times were encouraged and included bible reading, hymn singing and heart-felt, extemporaneous prayers. The testimony of parents seeking to live their lives in holiness did not go unnoticed by their children.

### **Holiness Holes**

But there were problems with conversions from these open-air gatherings, too. There was no congregation surrounding these new converts to wrap them into church life or make sure they truly understood the gospel. Conversion could be seen as something separate from discipleship and church membership. It would be easy to simply live a "personal faith" and not go to church. We still see the sad effects of this even today.

### **Three Waves**

The Methodists dominated Revivalism in the First Great Awakening, but especially in the Second and Third Great Awakenings, were not alone. Lyman Beecher (Presbyterian) and Asahel Nettleton (Congregationalist) as well as staunch Arminian-Presbyterian-gone-astray Charles Finney would be important names in the Second Great Awakening. Holiness preacher D.L Moody to Salvation Army William Booth (and in some ways, even up Baptist Billy Graham), in the Third.

### **Modern Machines Multiply the Good and the Bad**

20th century leaps in transportation (trains, planes and automobiles) and in communication (radio, television and the internet) significantly increased the impact of these men's ministry. The gospel message could reach millions at a time. But because of the "down-grade" of the gospel shared, which significantly lessened the tie of conversion to discipleship and discipleship to membership at the local church. Many people could say they "prayed a prayer" and receive assurance of faith that was not theirs to have. The consistent, solid teaching and body life so important to both recognize true conversion and to persevere in discipleship was increasingly missing. The attention to the theology and church history which had reformed the church was increasingly replaced with emphasis on experience as well as Arminianism and Dispensationalism. The process of church membership by careful examination of each believers would be something only a minority



of churches would retain. This was not only terrible for the individuals involved, but also for their ability to know, teach and raise up children in true Christian instruction. It was terrible for the pure witness of the church.

### **Gospel Gimmicks**

Men like D.L. Moody offered children candy and pony rides as an opportunity to tell them the gospel. Moody would add pragmatism to revivalism, the ends justifying the means. "Practical solutions to spiritual problems." And, "If you can make a man believe you truly love him, you have won him," he was known to say. But were the responses to his message for love of God and hatred of sin or love of fun and hatred of boredom?

### **Keep It Simple, Keep It Easy**

Belief, without the mention of repentance or waiting for the fruit of repentance became increasingly the gospel going around, thanks in part to revivalism. Both conversion and church membership in some churches would slide from careful catechism and membership classes of the Reformation and Puritan eras, to just a walk down the aisle and a handshake that is not infrequently the case even today. This was enough for the revivalists. Why should churches make it any "harder"?

This "easy believe-ism" has it's been called was an especially bad idea with children. Many children sincerely are converted at a young age, but many may be persuaded out to pray a prayer of love of parent or teacher or pressure of peers. All children are best served by adults taking seriously their seeking God, but wait for maturity in thought, consistency in discipleship, perseverance in trial and readiness for the duties of membership before baptizing. The storms of young adulthood often are enough to clarify true conversion from false conversion.. This was the rule of thumb in baptistic churches for centuries, but was increasingly discarded during this period, as it is largely forgotten, even today. Baptism numbers soared as baptismal ages dropped as a result. Sadly, many of these children would go on to abandon their childhood faith as they grew up or ask to be "re-baptized" as an adult when they were of the age to truly feel the tug of the world, turn away to put their faith in Christ authentically. This is one wave of revivalism that still is lapping the shores of many baptistic churches even today.

### **Reaching the Unreached**

This new-found fervor fueled many new outreaches to the unreached. The neglected and over-worked in cities; the American pioneers pushing their way to the West; the African slaves; and peoples in faraway lands where the gospel had never gone were all of particular concern. Each of these groups included children and often received special attention.

### **Unreached around the World**

Missionary societies sprung up and trained many to take the gospel to foreign lands. How and who trained them made a huge difference in how churches were established among these new places. Men like John Paton did this well. "Take the gospel; write down the Bible; teach the people; establish churches" was the model he used, reflecting the Matthew 28 mandate to make disciples and baptize them, teaching them to obey. Lives of adults and children in new parts of the world were being transformed by the preaching of the gospel. Learning to read the Bible in their own language gave these new churches the tools they needed to equip parents and children for worship in church as well as life at home.

### **Unreached Streets**

Care for orphans had long been a hallmark of the Christian church, but during this era, there were a number of men throughout Europe who impacted thousands of orphans. George Muller of Bristol, England is especially of note. These men tended to the physical needs of the children and educated them with an eye

for the gospel and the good of society. Not only were they taught the Bible in class, but they witnessed the living God whose Word it was in the lives of fervent prayer and joyful dependence upon an amazing, prayer-answering God every day. When a child was old enough to leave the orphanage, Muller placed a Bible in his right hand and a coin in his left hand. Telling them “hold on to the teaching in that book and you will always have something for your left hand to hold.” 10,000+ children came and left through the doors of Mueller’s orphanage. All were heard the gospel and learned the Bible. Many were converted and became church members. Some pastors and missionaries.

### **Sunday Schools: Unreached Unchurched**

The Sunday School Movement was a product of these times, too. While there were others before him, Robert Raikes’ outreach to non-Christian children in the slums of Gloucester, England in 1757 was one of the most important catalysts. These first “Sunday School” classes were held on Sunday because this was the only day off for these children who worked in factories the other six days of the week.

At Raikes’ Sunday School, boys and girls were not only taught a catechism of Bible truth and taken to church but were also taught how to read (and write). This would be the only formal instruction many of these children would ever receive. Raikes’ goals were moral and spiritual in nature. He hoped that these classes would not only bring the gospel to these children, but in doing so, might also stem the staggering rise in crime and immorality in his city that was tied to these unchurched, unschooled children when they grew up.

### **Surprising Results**

Though controversial among Sabbatarians who saw these schools as work, rather than an act of mercy and an aid to worship, the classes were nonetheless hugely successful and spread throughout the rest of Great Britain. By 1831 it is estimated that over a million children attended Sunday School weekly in England—a staggering 25% of the population. Sunday Schools were frequently held in homes and were often taught by women. Some of these women were volunteers, some were paid. This appears to be the first time when women played a regular, major teaching role in children’s Christian education outside of the home or the convent. Women, even today, are still often the ones providing this role in children’s Sunday School classes in churches.

### **Public Education Brings Changes to Sunday School**

In 1870, public education for all children was legislated in Great Britain. From this time, Sunday Schools gradually came to focus only on Bible teaching, as well as increasingly included the children from church member families, more like what we find in churches today.

The goals were to:

- to share the gospel that the lost might be saved
- to make disciples of all who trust in Christ
- to supplement any Bible teaching parents provided at home and to provide such teaching for children without Christian parents at home
- to provide children with a testimony of life with God in the lives of their teachers
- to leave a legacy of Bible truths and knowledge of Scripture in the minds
- to prepare them to gather together in worship with the members of a local church.

### **Sunday School Shift**

By the 1900’s, Sunday School hour was changing, too. Now they were for not only the unchurched children, but for the children of church members, too. They became dual purpose: bringing gospel truths to those who would never hear at home and reinforcing gospel truths to those whose parents did.

Sunday School continued to be held before the church worship service during this time. This not only created an opportunity for there to be classes for adults to be going on at the same time as the children's classes, but it held onto the idea that the worship service was the main point of the Sunday gathering.

### **Sunday School Spread and Systematized**

Sunday Schools began in England, but their popularity and influence quickly spread, especially to America. And by going to America, it would be institutionalized by the "Sunday School Boards" of many denominations in the late 1800's that would each be churning out first special, graded curriculum for children in their churches in Sunday Schools, followed by special occasion curriculum, such as Vacation Bible Schools, by the end of the 19th century. These establishments would be writing the Bible teaching script for teachers of millions of children in each denomination. The majority of churches in the United States still rely heavily on them.

### **Child-centered Teaching Influences Curriculum Dramatically**

The early days of catechism based Sunday School was changing during this time, too. Influencing this trend was the rising popularity of "child-centered" teaching. While actually, John Comenius (1592-1670) ushered in the modern era of developmentally friendly, "child-centered" teaching years earlier, it was in the early 20th century that this philosophy of education was very much coming of age. These included ideas like: "Children are children. They aren't little adults. They need teaching that is appropriate for them. Education must be pleasant to be effective. Children of similar ages should be grouped together so they can best understand what is being taught. Multi-sensory activities are the most beneficial means of teaching. Even play is educational."

All of these teaching concepts, which seem so very modern to us, actually have their roots centuries ago in this man. John Dewey's writings at the turn of the 20th century catapulted Comenius' thought to the forefront of public education front where it has held a leading role ever since.

Christian educators have taken these ideas and applied them to the church. In everything from how curriculum and books are written, to how children's classes are graded and structured, to what can children understand about God is affected. Bible related, kid-engaging activities such as crafts and games appear where only catechism instruction existed before.

### **"Every Church, Every Child" Curriculum**

Methodist John Heyl Vincent and Baptist B. F. Jacobs took the Sunday School Movement to even great heights of impact by establishing a "Uniform Lesson Plan" for Sunday Schools. Keith Drury, professor at Indiana Wesleyan University explains this plan: "As Sunday school developed thinkers saw the need for a more uniform plan of study that carefully covered the whole Bible in a set number of years, say eight. The incredible solution was the "Uniform Lesson plan" also called the "International Sunday school Lessons." This was a plan to have everybody of all ages in all denominations in the entire Christian world to study the same passage of Scripture on the same Sunday. It worked!

Professor Keith Drury experienced this and writes: "The idea spread so much that by 100 years ago virtually every Sunday school class of every denomination in the world studied the story of Jesus' temptation on the same day—every age in every denomination studying the same passage! This practice lasted well into the 1950's in many churches, including my own...when I was a kid the Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Wesleyan students in my high school all had the same Sunday school lesson last weekend. We could talk about our week's lesson at school like we'd been to the same church last Sunday. And, since virtually everyone had the same Bible lesson, people could tune in the radio every week to hear "the lesson" taught by an expert. Indeed, many Sunday school teachers prepared by listening to these expert teachers teaching what would be an identical lesson in all churches."

### **Uniform Buildings**

With Sunday School taking the same form throughout many denominations, the same building needs arose, too. Lewis Miller working with John Heyl Vincent and Jacob Snyder came up with the “Akron Plan” for Sunday School building layouts—a central assembly hall surrounded by small classrooms.

### **The Format Is Still Alive Today**

The uniform lesson plan is still available in some denominations. Even among many of the new curriculum publishers today have chosen to echo elements of this format. Curriculums put out by Treasuring Christ and Gospel Project are two such publishers. They have chosen for everyone, from toddler to teen, to have teaching on the same Bible passage every week. Many families and churches have found this approach helpful in guiding discussion in family worship times at home. However, this approach does have its drawbacks. It does not allow for teachers targeting important topics relevant to certain ages; nor does it allow for different learning speeds within each age group. Really, it all comes down to knowing what will best help your church's particular families and children.

### **Pre-packaged Positives and Negatives**

The expansion of children's ministry pre-packaged curriculum and Sunday School offerings during this period brought great good. Parents with very young children could worship, grow and be equipped undistracted when basic, nursery care is provided. Children's classes can provide biblically sound teaching that supports the teaching parents give to their kids at home; while at the same time, provide an opportunity for special, adult classes. Children could be equipped with truths that could help them better connect with the preaching in the worship service. Educators who understand children better than the sweet, but untrained volunteer leading the class can write curriculum that helps these teachers teach well. These are good things.

### **The Gathering and Parental Responsibility Lost**

However, not everything was good. Some theological moorings were lost during this Sunday School explosion. Among the most important set loose was the central importance of the worship gathering, even for children. Sunday School sometimes became a replacement for attending church, not just when the children are small and may not be able to understand or sit quietly, but all the way up into youth years. Sunday School becomes “Children's Church” which becomes “Youth Church” and the children coming to church completely miss church-- the very gathering of God's people that Sunday School was intended to prepare them for. Sunday School classes also began to be seen as the “professionals” parents relied upon to teach the Bible to their kids and even “see to it” that they were saved. They lost their sense of responsibility and opportunity to teach their children at home. These are terrible losses the church today is still trying to restore.

### **The Consumerized Church**

For some, the church also became the place where you stop and shop for your own Bible knowledge and spiritual needs, instead of being God's people covenanting together to love the Lord and help equip one another to live the lives God has called them to live... including training up their kids. Perhaps these trends were not in the minds of the pioneers of the Sunday School movement, but they have certainly arisen with more prevalence, especially in the second half of the 20th century.

### **Slip in Theology**

Another problem during this period was a change in theology in the boxed curriculum being published. Revivalism had passion, but that passion, over time, was not matched by depth in sound doctrine. Other pastors simply accepted the curriculum their denomination put out. They neglected to be the watchdog of sound doctrine were supposed to provide for their flock.

### **Lite, Not Light**

Teaching often became lighter, to fit the new thoughts on what a child of a specific age could learn or would find interesting to learn. The original meaning of a Bible passage might be replaced with a simpler, often moralistic point instead. Exegesis is out, eisegesis to something more directly kid-friendly is in. On top of this, conversion often was conveyed as simply praying a simple prayer of faith, without the mention of repentance or discipleship.

### **Darkness Masquerading as Light**

Even worse, the major liberal shifts in theology that occurred in the late 1800's oozed out into the curriculum of denominations like the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran churches first, and later into the curriculum of the Methodists and even some of the Baptists during the 20th century. In some cases the gospel was lost completely and remains lost even today. Thank God for the split in these denominations over these important, theological lines that occurred in the 1960's and 70's and the sounder curriculum they produced that followed suit.

Tragically, many thousands of churches and millions of members still live in the darkness, unable to hold out anything but gospelless moralism. How many good-hearted, well-intentioned godly men and women assume that if the materials they are using are printed and the church purchased it, then it must be good? Catechism-based teaching might have been increasingly considered "boring and unfriendly in style to children, but it was tethered closely to Scripture and God's purposes for His people.

### **Unreached Youth**

While Sunday Schools were impacting the American children in the 1880's, Christian Endeavor was reaching out to youth and young adults.

### **Tied to the Church**

Christian Endeavor was a church-based organization, originally started by Francis E. Clark, a minister in Portland, Maine. By the early 1900's there were over 67,000 "societies" around the world. The tone was intentional in these youth-led, adult-mentored chapters. "For Christ and the Church" was the motto.

Each Christian Endeavor participant made this vow: "Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for strength, I promise Him that I will strive to do whatever He would like to have me do; that I will make it the rule of my life to pray and to read the Bible every day, and to support the work and worship of my own church in every way possible; and that just so far as I know how, throughout my whole life, I will endeavor to lead a Christian life.

As an active member I promise to be true to all my duties, to be present at and to take some part, aside from singing, in every Christian Endeavor meeting, unless hindered by some reason which I can conscientiously give to my Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. If obliged to be absent from the monthly consecration meeting of the society, I will, if possible, send at least a verse of Scripture to be read in response to my name at the roll call."

Unlike many of the youth outreach organizations that would follow, Christian Endeavor was (and still is) dedicated to encouraging young people to gather with God's people at church, in keeping with the biblical model.

### **Impact Even Today on the Gospel**

Much that is good and bad in children's ministry today has its foundation in new thinking and new way of "doing" children's ministry from the Revivalism period. It is important to know how a child learns and teach in a way that they can understand. This is how pastors, parents, teachers can employ what a child enjoy as a "conduit of truth" to make gospel truths something they can grasp and retain. But it this understanding discounts a child's ability to grasp biblical truths and replacing God's Word with only fun activities and morality, then the gospel is lost. We need to try to build on what is good for the sake of the gospel, not at the cost of the gospel.

### **The Church Needs True Conversion, Not Baptismal Statistics**

Equally servious was the growing tendency to dilute the gospel. If teachers are handed curriculum that encourages the unhelpful "pray a simple prayer" variety of conversion, then immediately rings the "bell" of full assurance, this is not good. The urge for "conversions" is still sometimes rewarded with candy when a child prays a prayer today. Quotas for annual number of baptisms can become pressure for false conversions. Some churches have even taken to baptize children in entertaining ways that appeal to a child's sense of fun or an adult's approval, (such as slide down a fire engine into the baptismal pool), instead of pointing to the seriousness of discipleship. This is no game. A number is no replacement for a life.

We absolutely want to regularly share the gospel with children and urge them to repent and believe in Christ. Many children do come to know the Lord from an early age. Praise God. But we need to give the children time to bear the fruit of conversion and discipleship that holds up under the test of time.

## 🌀 The Reactive Church (1920- Present) 🌀

### **Reaction against Liberalism**

What are you going to do about liberalism? Liberalism in theology and view of the Bible. Liberalism in the culture. Much of the past hundred years that has happened among Bible-believing Christians has been the answer to this question: “What are you going to do about the liberalism of theology?”

The late 1880's brought a wave of criticism about the inerrancy of the Bible that affected first the seminaries through teaching, then flowed out into the mainline denominations, especially the Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and the Northern Baptists. By the 1920's, the teaching from the pulpits as well as the curriculum produced by their publishing houses would have lost much of the gospel. Some reacted by separating themselves completely—such as those who would be called “fundamentalists” and those who would come out from their denominations to form new, conservative ones, such as the PCA.

### **The Gospel and Shunned Culture**

The fundamentalists would also decide to separate themselves more fully from the culture, too. Homeschooling was popular within these circles decades before it grew wider following in the 1970's. To support that movement came publishers like Bob Jones to help families educate their children.

They made stricter lifestyle changes apart of their membership requirements (women wearing pants/ men with long hair/dancing and drinking, etc), choice of Bible translation (KJV), as well as upholding to inerrancy of the Bible. Preaching from the pulpit, teaching from Sunday Schools and life at home would have included teaching along both these cultural lines and biblical lines. It would be hard to distinguish between the two in children's minds. The atmosphere for disagreement was restrictive. To disagree would be to separate. It would feel like ostracism. This made the temptation to fake Christianity and sneak in rebellion. This tendency still exists today.

### **The Gospel and Culture Connection**

Neo-evangelicals became the name of those who separated themselves from the liberal denominations but wanted to stay engaged with the American culture. They saw themselves as custodians of biblical Christianity in America (and in Britain), and wanted to push back against liberalism reach and claims against the Bible. Some of these rose up as independent, non-denominational churches, some as new denominations, such as the PCA. New Bible schools and seminaries were established filled with bright, conservative scholars who fought back in their classes and through their commentaries. New finds in archaeology (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls) would only act to affirm these scholar's stance to trust the Bible. These new institutions would train up and feed a new generation of preachers to feed Bible truths to congregations once more. New preaching in these churches would provide families with Bible truths to equip themselves and their children. Some would be expositional. But most of the evangelical churches would be a bit lighter, more topical, in keeping with a desire to “reach people where they were.”

### **Parachurch Paramedics**

Many parachurch organizations sprung up to support these evangelicals who previously received such support from their denominations. Gospel Light, David C. Cook and Moody were the first supports in the curriculum world. Many others have followed in the decades since. These materials provided the biblically-based curriculum no longer being printed in the publishing houses of the mainline denominations. That was good. But, in a desire to stay in business and to please many from different denominations, a happy medium of truth would have to be chosen.

## CHILDREN'S MINISTRY IN CHURCH HISTORY

Non-denominational publishing houses were only the tip of the parachurch iceberg. Parachurch ministries mushroomed. Everything from Focus on the Family on the radio, to AWANAs for kids, Campus Crusade and Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship on the college campuses, World Vision and Compassion International in mercy ministries, TEAM and YWAM in missions. Each had its own statement of faith holding to basic, biblical truths all evangelicals accepted in order to be acceptable to all, leaving out distinctives of differing denominations. These organizations provided an infrastructure that served the many evangelical churches who no longer had a denominational, biblically conservative anchor.

Some of the services they provided have borne great fruit and have been a huge help. Unfortunately, their lack of church affiliation meant less emphasis on the importance of membership in a church. College students might simply attend their campus meetings and consider themselves well fed. Their leaders too frequently did not encourage church attendance, setting their students up for simply leaving off church when they graduated from college, no longer able to find the same “homogenous” fellowship they enjoyed. No wonder many of these students would later be attracted to churches offering niche services to meet their particular needs, instead of a body of believers focused on each other through a strong membership model.

### **Gospel In-Culturated**

This trend to meet people where they are was taken to an explosive, new level with the Church Growth movement. The Church Growth movement during this period sought to build church campuses to attract non-Christians with cultural friendliness. Daycare, gyms, baseball fields, dance classes, coffee shops on site. Video clips, big worship bands, darkened auditoriums that promote anonymity and a concert feel, seeker friendly “keep it gospel light” services. These are some of the strategies used to bring in those not used to church and keep them coming back.

The children's and youth programs are built to please, too. Prolific, entertaining, and custom-built for each age. Children's Church. Youth Church. College Church. But rarely the whole church gathered together. Growth comes and the mega church is born. Multi-site, multi-service. Enough for everyone, but it is hard to get to know much of anyone. The intention is to create a comfortable atmosphere in which to share the gospel that many might be saved. But how hard will it be in this model for the aroma of the gospel in the air to be strong enough to be noticed as a distinct smell?

Parents may join small groups or get connected in interest groups on campus and find accountability and encouragement in raising their children in this way, but it takes extra effort to not melt into anonymity. Big budget programs can support great curriculum that reaches the hearts of children in an understanding, enjoyable and memorable way, but too much entertainment can actually be distracting to the very gospel it hopes to communicate. And seeker-friendly services with simple sermons may be easy for a newcomer to swallow, but how much food do they offer God's people to live and grow from? What do they have to give their kids? Membership is too often seen as unwelcoming instead of a covenant made in a community of love who wants to help you grow in godliness.

### **Gospel Plus Experience**

The rise of Pentecostalism and teaching of the need for signs and wonders and a post-conversion second filling of the Holy Spirit has been another very significant influence during the last 100 years. Growing out of the Azusa Street Revival in 1906, came the Holiness and Assemblies of God churches as well as many other independent churches. Others have continued this tradition down to today. They see themselves as the modern Apostolic Church. Experience, not preaching, tends to be “king” in these churches. Christians are expected to speak in tongues as a sign of conversion. Preaching is skewed by this interpretation and has a great impact upon who is considered a Christian, difficult both for parents and for children.



### **Gospel through the Family**

Some reacted to the growing world and church culture by focusing on family-centered training. By 1970's the homeschool movement was more than just a fringe movement of the fundamentalists and a few other groups. More and more Christian families wanted to have more time with their kids before sending them out into the world. Abeka and Bob Jones publishing houses had to make way for dozens of new curriculum providers. As the culture continues to shift, this trend has only increased. This has not only given many families control over their children's general education needs, but their spiritual ones as well. Many of these curriculums are Christian-based and include Bible teaching. Parents have more resources than ever to diligently train up their children. Sunday School curriculum even transfers over to use in home school, blending teaching at church with teaching in the home.

### **Gospel Minus Congregation**

Advocates of the Family-integrated movement have taken parental responsibility for their children's spiritual training one radical step further. These parents believe that they alone are to be their children's teachers. Children do not attend Sunday School or any other classes. They only are to go to church with their parents. I admire the seriousness with which these parents take their God-given responsibility. And, I love the primacy they place on the preaching of God's Word to feed God's people gathered. However, I feel they miss the point that the church is made up of fellow encouragers in the faith. We are made to help equip each other. For some families, the support the church can supply helps them better fulfill what God calls them to do as parents. This model does not allow such families to get that help.

### **Biblical Gospel Gatherings**

Over the years, as the evangelical church has increasingly its taste for a depth of theology or a confidence that children and families either need or want it, has become increasingly shallow. This did not go unnoticed or unaddressed. Enter the reformation resurgence.

### **Remember the Reformation**

During this same time period, 1920's to present, there have been those whose reaction to liberalism has been to look back, learn and restore the biblical model of expositional preaching, sound doctrine, and strong church membership. They looked first of all to the biblical model, but also to the best practices of it through the ages, giving lots of attention to the churches of the reformation. Arminianism as well as liberalism; revivalism as well as Pentecostalism; rejecting the culture and playing too much to the culture, left the church indistinct and unhealthy. These men wanted to bring back the witness and the health of the church.

In my husband's talk, "Where Did All These Calvinists Come From?" my husband mentions the parade of men, organizations, and movements as important in this ideology: J. Gresham Machen, Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Banner of Truth Trust, Evangelism Explosion, Carl Henry, PCA, J.I. Packer, John MacArthur and R.C. Sproul, John Piper, Reformed Rap, influential parachurch ministries (such as Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Nine Marks). Churches like Sovereign Grace have even had an impact of those previously of a Pentecostal bent. These have had a strong impact through their churches, their preaching and speaking more broadly, through the books printed or materials made available online.

### **Impact on Children and Families**

In addition to Banner of Truth, publishers like Crossway, Christian Focus and Children Desiring God have provided many biblically rich resources for families to use at home or as curriculum at church. The renewed use of traditional catechisms as well as creation of new ones, (and these not just in written form but set to music and in apps as well) has helped many families fill their children with a strong legacy of deep truths to last them a lifetime.

### **Healthy Churches**

The return to expositional preaching has provided the nutritious teaching that equips families with what they need to train up their children at home, through their own witness as well as teaching them Bible truths. Strengthened members make better encouragers and nurturers of each other as well as teachers of the children in Bible classes. A careful membership process makes true conversion clearer and the witness of the congregation more Christ-like. Discipline promotes the daily repentance, dependence on God's grace and call to discipleship believers need. Children are treated with respect and their response to the gospel treated with watchful waiting, knowing that they need time to mature before coming into membership, for the sake of their assurance of faith and the witness of the church.

No surprise here, given who I'm married to, that I've seen the good fruit of this particular trend in my lifetime.

## Children's Ministry Lessons from Church History

As goes the church, so goes the family and children's ministry. Church history in the 2000+ year old testimony to the biblical model being the best model for the health of the church, present and future.

### **#1 The Blessing of the Biblical Model**

When the Bible is clearly preached, God is worshiped, and discipleship is taught and lived out, the soil is rich for God's Holy Spirit to bring the gift of repentance and faith to the next generation. History bears witness to this.

### **#2: Harm Where We Go Astray**

But, when the Word is maligned, or mis-used to teach false doctrine, or withheld from the church, the church and its families suffer. When worship of God is replaced with the worship of saints or tradition or popes or false prophets, the church and its families suffer. When the witness of the church is obscured by false conversion, lack of discipleship, undisciplined membership, anonymity and lack of care between members, the church and its families suffer.

### **#3: Don't Stop Fighting the Good Fight**

This is why contending for the faith is the constant work of the church. Every period of church history tends towards different issues in one or more of these areas, showing up as struggles or weaknesses affecting the whole church, including parents and children.

### **#4 Children's Ministry Helps Most When It Supports (Not Supplants) the Gathering of God's People and Children with Them**

Children's ministry can be as simple as God's people being fed in the weekly gatherings of the local church for the equipping of parents to train their children at home. Many times it includes programs in addition to this. At its best, children's ministry always keeps the gathering of the local church in mind and provides support that complements it. At its worst, children's ministry is used to create a separate track for children that carries into youth and even college. There is little opportunity to understand what the church is supposed to be.

### **#5 Take Care with Baptizing Children**

Baptism of children upon their walking down an aisle or praying a simple prayer too often leads to false sense of assurance and hurts the witness of the church. Waiting for the fruit of conversion that comes with maturity is best for all.

### **#6 Only by the Grace of God**

Despite the sinfulness and wanderings of His people, God has and always will be faithful to preserve a remnant of people for Himself. His plans will always succeed and His whole church will be brought in. But if God's people know nothing else that Day as stand there before His throne, it is that they only stand in His presence by His grace, power, and forgiveness. None of them--none of us-- are worthy, but by the blood of the Lamb that covers us. None is faithful, but by the power of His Holy Spirit, for the glory of His name.



# chapter 4

## Where Are We Today?

### **Children's Ministry Today**

The goals of those 1870's Sunday Schools remain largely the same today, though some, like the importance of gathering together with the whole church body, may have retreated to the background or at least not be as clearly articulated. Churches still invite children from non-Christian to take part in their programs. They still hold out the gospel to all, that they might be saved and grow as Christ's disciples. They still hope to leave a legacy of Bible truths in their minds and heart.

But now, in most churches, Children's Ministry often spends far more time on programs and resources for Christian parents and children (perhaps this is because they are spending less time on outreach to children). And most notable of all, most churches have expanded to many more programs than the original Sunday School Bible classes and church attendance. Now, they frequently include safe nursery-care for babies, so parents can go to their own Sunday School classes. They may be recommending resources for parents to use at home with their children; and, they may have added a host of other, now-classic, peripheral programs (such as youth group, children's choir, AWANAs, After school Good News Clubs, Mother's Day Out, Sunday night missions programs, Bible camps, Vacation Bible School, and even Children or Youth Church that caters to a particular, homogenous age group.)

### **All of This Growth Has Led to Mixed Results**

These intentions, and even some of the fruit, of these increased programs of today's typical Children's Ministry has been good. But sometimes the burgeoning list of programs has led to serious fallout for parents, children and the volunteers who people these activities. The motto of "If you make the children happy, then the parents will stay" might bring more families to church, but it can unintentionally lead to malnutrition. Parent can begin to lose their sense of calling as primary, spiritual caregivers, or at least struggle to find time to fulfill it. Children may become so used to being catered for in a custom-fit, homogenous-group style that they lose their taste for the more important influences of family time and/or gathering together to worship with the whole church body. Overused volunteers may struggle with burn-out and suffer from neglect of their own spiritual nourishment at church.

### **More at Any Cost?**

"More is not just better, but necessary" is the even uglier step-sister motto that frequently accompanies the "If you make the children happy, the families will stay" motto. This line of reasoning exacerbates the problems mentioned above, in every size church.

Small, churches and church plants frequently face the frustrations of not enough man-power to keep open the children's programs that visiting families are seeking. Or, even if they do manage to have all the "wishlist" programs in place, they often tend to rely too heavily on too few volunteers. These tireless, big-hearted servants often sacrifice their own spiritual needs, week after week, to make sure the children's programs stay running.

Medium and large churches face their own version of these same problems. As the number of children and volunteers expands, the tendency is for churches to expand their program offerings, instead of first seeking healthier volunteer service limits with the programs they have. This plethora of programs can perpetuate the volunteer crisis. Yes, there are more able volunteers, but now so many more are needed to maintain the large number of programs.

## WHERE ARE WE TODAY

Churches with more pocket money than volunteers find a solution by hiring care-givers who aren't members of their church. Others are tempted to enlist people who aren't really qualified to teach, choose a curriculum because it's an easy fit, even though it lacks biblical soundness; or, "fudge" on safe caregiver-to-child ratios to fit in more children.

And, if parents are not urged to be discerning, their children's schedules may so fill up with programs that the very families you hoped to serve with all these activities, can't find time to just be a family.

Pastors may be so overwhelmed with other aspects of ministry that they leave oversight of these matters in the hands of others who should be helpers, rather than shepherds over this segment of their church's growth.

### **Enter Church-Shaped Children's Ministry**

Church-shaped Children's Ministry is a humble, finite approach to caring well for the families within the context of a healthy church. It acknowledges parents in their role as primary spiritual care-givers of their children and encourages them in ways that are in keeping with the spiritual well-being of all of its membership. It looks to its pastors to set priorities for the spiritual support of parents and children; and, to carefully assess what resources (volunteers, finances, facility space, hours, etc.) the church has to offer towards those priorities. They prayerfully consider the best fit for the good of the whole church, and to the glory of God. Then, they lead the members in carrying it out.

Let's explore what Church-Shaped Children's Ministry looks like.