

WE AFFIRM BIBLICAL YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

GBC DISTINCTIVE SERIES | DEUTERONOMY 6:1-7 | AUG. 8, 2018

As we continue our series on the distinctive marks of our church, I must start this week with a confession. We have given mixed signals as to our beliefs regarding this week's distinctive, resulting in probably the most inconsistent principle practiced at our church. Only recently have your elders seriously come to question a philosophy that we've always taken for granted: *all churches should have a children and youth ministry.*

To question this philosophy may seem radical, but consider the problem all churches face. Overall, youth or student ministries have been failing in their task. Whole books are dedicated to the subject, like *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* by Ken Ham and Britt Beemer. According to various sources, anywhere between 7 to 9 out of 10 kids active in youth groups drop out of church by their sophomore year in college. Don't assume that this results from the mean, secularist college professors ruining our children's faith; professors with these agendas exist, but young people decide to give up on God years beforehand—some as early as elementary school. With a near 90% attrition rate, it seems safe to say that these ministries have dropped the ball.

What's the cause of the problem? To paint with a broad brush, we've been giving our young people gross-out games, poorly imitated pop-music, pep talks, and therapy circles. They then go to school on Monday and learn about mathematics and history and science, and we wonder why they ultimately reject the trivial for a secular worldview. Of course, that broad brush doesn't include those churches with *much* better children's and youth ministries, but the numbers show that the good are not counterbalancing the bad.

Where have we gone wrong? Part of this is the relatively new category of adolescence in Western society; beforehand, much more was expected from young people, especially when life expectancy was lower. People got started at life earlier, completing any education they could, getting married young, and earning a living much sooner. A young man at the age of twelve would begin to learn a trade, perhaps the family business, so that he would be able to support his own family in a few years. Daughters as young as fourteen were prepared to be betrothed to future husbands. I'm not suggesting a simple return to such times and practices, ignoring our blessed advances in history, but we need to question whether our culture today is right to have now such low expectations for young people.

This brief sociological excursion doesn't consider theological implications. Scripture has no category akin to our teenage or adolescent descriptor. It's not that a lack of categories exists; there are terms for infants, small children, and children in general, but the next age bracket is adult. Again, the real world met both male and female years before it does today, whereas now, teenagers learn more about video games and social media.

What does this have to do with children's and youth ministries? Well, as our society developed its theory of adolescence in the past century, our churches did the same. High schools started holding pep rallies, and churches introduced youth groups and children's churches. Churches were asking each other, "We need to get them in—what

works?" Such pragmatism began to direct the philosophy of the church, and student ministries became more attractional, featuring music, games, food, and light, feelings-oriented teaching.

These children and youth ministries are novel and, based on the numbers, don't work. One would think that a pragmatically-minded church would stop and question here, but the result has been to double-down. As youth continued to grow up away from the main church services, they had no taste for formalized religion. So, churches began building entertainment-driven *adult* services with lights, popular music, and shorter preaching. We're seeing, as Thomas Bergler wrote, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*—obviously, a step in the wrong direction.

Of course, many churches, also noticing these trends, have been trying to redeem the system. Many have admirable ministries that not only preach the gospel but seek to instill biblical literacy and a Christian worldview in their young people. We have many friends at these churches, and we should pray that God would continue to bless their work.

Even so, we want to be as biblical as possible, so let's consider a more foundational question—*should we even have a separate children and youth ministry?* Radical, I know. The sermon today will explore this question from a scriptural perspective, moving through several different texts. If you will stay with me, I'm sure you will agree that instead of segregating children and youth in their own department, we should involve them in adult ministry. Let's consider what God presents throughout the counsel of His Word.

FIRST, CONSIDER HOW THE BIBLE PRESENTS CHILDREN

Deuteronomy 6 is the central text for the Jewish people. Of course, we are no longer under the Law, but as all of Scripture is profitable, we should consider the principles that this text sets forth for God's people. The primary point of consideration for us this morning is the generational language of the text—"so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the LORD" (v. 2); "that you may multiply greatly" (v. 3); "teach ... your sons" (v. 7).

When God would bless His people with children, He called parents to take the responsibility of them. Again, in vv. 6-7, we read, "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." This ongoing duty is no different in our New Testament era. The Lord says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). It shouldn't be controversial to say, but Scripture presents children as the responsibility of the parents.

Here's where the statement becomes controversial—delivering children to a children's and youth ministry is not fulfilling that task. It may be the common sight in any given church—families go different directions in the church lobby, not to meet again until it's time for lunch at Cracker Barrel or Carey Hilliards. Yet, it's also common for parents to assume that fulfills their spiritual duty for the week, and they are wrong.

The church simply can't take this responsibility on itself. Youth pastors obviously can't be with young people when they sit at home and when they walk by the way and when they lie down and when they rise. If your child is in public school, getting 14,000 hours of secular indoctrination by the time they graduate, a thirty-minute Veggie

Tales video and a juice box on Sunday mornings isn't going to counter that. Only parents can provide the kind of discipline, instruction, and admonishment Scripture commands.

The Bible presents children as part of the parent's spiritual stewardship. Now, if that was the only problem, I could say that parents simply need to practice daily home worship and the sermon would end here. That's true, but lunch will have to wait a bit longer. We must consider how the Bible talks about children in ministry.

SECOND, CONSIDER HOW THE BIBLE PRESENTS CHILDREN IN MINISTRY

Before I go any further, I want to be clear. Some of you or some who might be listening to this might already know where I'm going with this. If that is the case, then we should also note a movement out there that teaches these points but with whom we have no association—family-integrated churches (FIC). I've indeed benefited from the teaching ministry of a couple of pastors who are associated with the movement. However, we should not embrace all their conclusions on this matter. Though we may share similar philosophies, we are not identifying ourselves with these brethren. If you don't know what I'm talking about here, since we are not joining them, it doesn't matter.

We come now to consider what Scripture presents in regards to children in ministry, and our first example is here. This section started back in chapter five, where we read that "Moses summoned all Israel" (v. 1). We can presume that means that youth and children were present while Moses gave these commands. Later, on Moses's final day, he commands, "Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law" (31:12). Let's consider other examples in the Law.

Before the Exodus, remember that Moses tried to persuade Pharaoh into allowing Israel to go and worship the Lord. Pharaoh asks at one point who is going (Ex 10:8), and Moses replies, "We shall go with our young and our old; with our sons and our daughters, with our flocks and our herds we shall go, for we must hold a feast to the LORD" (v. 9). The children would be involved in the worship, and the feasts a couple of chapters later had in mind the questions of the children, instructing parents to teach their little ones about the faith (12:25–27; 13:14–15).

Consider the generational aspects first giving of the Ten Commandments. The children are included in the warning against idolatry (20:4–5). The children were also to participate in Sabbath observance (vv. 8–10). Finally, obviously, children were commanded to honor their parents (v. 12), meaning that they were present during this giving of the Law, as well. We see them involved in worship throughout the Torah, then.

This pattern continues into the rest of the Old Testament. In Joshua 8:34, the reading of the Law included children. Later, a national fast under King Jehoshaphat included infants and children (2 Chr 20:3, 13). After reconstruction of the temple, when the people reconciled to God, we read, "Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly" (Ezra 10:1). During the dedication of the wall, we read "God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar" (Neh 12:43).

Let's now turn to the New Testament. You may recall back in our study of Mark, in Mark 9, Jesus was teaching the disciples in Peter's home. In v. 36, we read, "Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms...." What does this mean? Obviously, there were children (plural) moving about in the home, because Jesus takes one of them in His arms. He involves the child in the teaching, and He says, "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me." Let me ask: how do we model that as a church?

The disciples certainly didn't model it in Mark 10:10-12. Remember, the disciples arrived in a home after Jesus had been teaching and they were seeking more instruction from Christ. That's a good plan! Meanwhile, parents began bringing their children to the door, hoping to see Jesus. However, the disciples were rebuking them (v. 13), almost as though they were saying the adults are talking – keep those noisy brats outside! How soon they forget what Jesus said, and you see how He reacted when He sees this. "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Not only does Jesus command them to permit the children to come, He holds the children up the image of the kingdom, not the pride-filled disciples. This shames our modern church culture.

In case this application to the local church isn't clear, let's consider Paul's epistles for a moment. Notice in Colossians 4:16 that he expected his letters to be circulated and read. Who would be there to hear his letters? Look at 3:18 – "wives." Next, look to v. 19 – "husbands." Now, look at the very next verse – "children" (v. 20). And he moves from there to v. 21 – "fathers." It seems the whole family was involved in the reading at least at Colossae, but again, his letters were meant to be circulated to other churches.

We see this with his letter to the Ephesians, as well. Paul repeats the fifth commandment in Ephesians 6:1-3. He doesn't then turn to address the children's ministry, the youth pastor, or any elder in the church – just fathers. Notice that he doesn't say, "Fathers, when you pick up your children today from the Noah's Ark room, be sure to remind them of this." Children were there with the adults, a reflection of ministry in both the Old Testament and Christ.

There is one more passage to consider with this – Titus 2. We have instructions to the older among us in vv. 2-3: "Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good." Why? Verse four begins, "so that they may encourage the young women," and v. 6, "Likewise urge the young men to be sensible." We obviously think of this in terms of adult ministry, but do children and teenagers not also benefit from praying with, singing with, reading with, and interacting with adults in the congregation?

At this point, it seems safe to begin making broader statements. Like Pastor Don Green said when he preached on this subject, the biblical example has a positive and negative side. On the positive side, we always see children involved in the worship. On the negative side, we don't see any hint of age-segregated ministry in Scripture. Scripture models multi-generational ministry, and it doesn't model any kind of children's or youth ministry.

Now, proponents of good children and youth ministries – those at churches we can affirm – will confess all this. They will agree that there is no biblical precedent for children and youth ministries and that our focus on children and adolescence is a modern sociological phenomenon. As a result, they try to redeem the model for their churches,

making the aim of their ministries the glory of God (not entertainment) and the exposition of His Word. And we applaud that while praying for their ministries.

Even so, we have a unique opportunity as a new church to consider whether we want to mimic that *or* what Scripture models. Those established churches don't have the freedom to explore this question like we do. And as we said when we started this series, if we want to call ourselves a Bible church, then our ministry should be as biblical as possible. This means that we should consider afresh the implications of the biblical model.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE BIBLICAL MODEL

I want to take care at this point, lest we go beyond Scripture and demand what the Lord has not commanded. Some well-meaning churches can do this if they exclude the possibility of any gathering that doesn't involve father and family. Biblically, there is at least one example when infants were excluded from a public gathering (note "all who could understand" in Neh 8:2). There would be times when women were not present (Lv 15:19-24). So, we must not conclude that every member of each family *must* be present at any gathering or that there might not be times when some are separate.

On the other hand, we don't want to use language of the church or derive a model of ministry that Scripture doesn't use. The church's goal isn't to evangelize or to disciple children, but **to worship God**. Of course, the church can facilitate that, including baptizing young people like we just did, but children and youth are not our focus of Grace Bible Church any more than the adults are. We do not want to run the risk of having a man- (or child-) centered, pragmatic, seeker-sensitive ministry approach, for better or worse.

So, what is the central implication we should glean from Scripture today? As another pastor said, our philosophy of youth ministry is to involve the youth in ministry. In other words, children and youth, like adults, need to be learning and growing together. They need to be with us, praying and singing and hearing the Word. Isn't that consistent with what we've seen modeled?

That means we're not planning on having a separate, full-time ministry for the children or the youth. Of course, a church our size cannot do so anyway, so this is for those wondering what to expect in the future. This doesn't mean that we are excluding all possibility of having, say, a nursery, or activities specifically for children and youth like choirs, or a youth night where important discipleship or worldview issues are taught to those getting ready for college. Yet, we are purposefully avoiding building student ministries. This is no judgment on those who do, nor on those who will decide at this point that this won't be a good fit for their family.

Now, that opens us up to questions of application. I say all of this, and maybe you can each accept the argument intellectually, but you also know that kids can be a distraction. They squirm. They don't always know how to behave like adults. When you're a parent of a child who's being a distraction, you might become consumed with that fact, worrying about everyone else. We all get that. And, if other people are honest, they are sometimes distracted.

Even so, let me encourage you not to lose sight of *why* we are including them in ministry. There are long-term goals for all of us as we worship together, including children. We're helping children live out 1 Timothy 4:7-8, where

Paul commands, “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”

So, parents, don’t let the problems of the moment distract you from this long-term goal. A child may only make it fifteen minutes into the sermon this week, but who knows what investment was earned in that time? Don’t feel shame if you must step out with your fussy child. Maybe next week, he can make it *sixteen* minutes. Maybe in a year, he will be able to sit through the **entire service** – what a thought! And you’ll be surprised what he picks up as he’s scribbling on a piece of paper with a crayon. (We were just talking about that yesterday, weren’t we?) Don’t give into that temptation to give up and go to a church where you can hand your child over to a children’s worker for an hour of peace and quiet.

I think the rest of us can help with this. I want to encourage you to encourage parents who join us. Yes, kids will be distracting, but avoid the temptation to respond with angry glances; give parents an encouraging word. Let the kids know that you’re happy they’re sitting here with us and that you are praying for them. I think everyone here is already good at this, and I’m thankful for the love I’ve already seen. We already have someone who occasionally even takes some kids out to lunch. We have adults encouraging our kids to be in the Word and reading it for themselves. We’re working toward these long-term goals together, knowing that in 10, 20, or 30 years down the road, we’ll be passing the spiritual baton to them.