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Theme: Discipleship and Christian Formation

An Evangelical Perspective on Discipleship in the Home: the Christian Formation of Children

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This paper is written from the context of personal ministry in the church and within the para-church. My personal background is in the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. I grew up in India and moved to the United States at the age of 10 and attended a Mar Thoma Church. The congregation was comprised predominately of Indian-Americans and immigrants. My introduction to Sunday school was in the United States with the North American and European Diocese. Sunday school teachers instilled a memorization of Scriptures and various portions of liturgy. I have extensive experience teaching Sunday school for Pre-K, KG, 5th grade, and youth. My experience with the Evangelical Church began in college and continues today. Over the past decade, my ministry focus has been in supporting the Global Church to reach children and youth through the ministry, OneHope. The mission of OneHope is to affect destiny my providing God’s Word to children and youth throughout the world.

# Biblical View of Children

Children were welcomed by the Lord Jesus. Jesus healed children (Luke 7, 8) and taught adults that they needed to become like little children (trusting dependence) to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:4). Children were worthy of the Lord Jesus’ attention and His time. There are many examples in the Scriptures of children who were chosen by God: Isaac, Joseph (Genesis 37-39), Miriam (Exodus 2:1-10), Moses, Samuel (1 Samuel 3), David (1 Samuel 16, 17), Naaman's young slave girl (2 Kings 5), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1), Daniel and his friends (Daniel 1), Esther, Salome (Matthew 14:1-12), Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1), and the young boy with 2 fish and 5 loaves (John 6:1-14).

### Children are full members of the Body of Christ. Children are capable of giving - like the young boy with loaves and fish, and they are chosen to be leaders, they can pray, they testify and witness. The scriptures say that we are all children of God.

### Margaret Mead said, "the society that neglects its children is one generation away from destruction."

### **Children around the world**

The World Bank estimates that 26% of the world’s population is between the ages of 0-14. Today, the number of children younger than 15 years of age is estimated to be 1.96 billion. For clarity on terminology, throughout this paper, when referring to “child/children,” the inclusive age range is 4-14-years-old. Children are essential to our future in our local and global communities.

Today, children are suicide bombers, child soldiers, sexual slaves, prostitutes, properties, workers (in child labor), and more. Children are dying of hunger, physically abused, neglected, emotionally abused, bullied, raped, peer pressured, indoctrinated, and more. They are vulnerable in impoverished and violent settings. Violence against children persists, and many cases are not reported or investigated. Children are used by adults to create child pornography and exposed to content that is too mature for their age in media.

The receptivity of children is greatest between the ages of 5 and 12. Values, beliefs, attitudes are formed at a young age and are not likely to change as child ages (2004, Lausanne Movement). According to Barna Research:

*For years, church leaders have heard the claim that nearly nine out of ten Christians accept Jesus as their savior before the age of 18. If that statistic was accurate in the past, it no longer depicts U.S. society. The current Barna study indicates that nearly half of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their savior do so before reaching the age of 13 (43%) and that two out of three born again Christians (64%) made that commitment to Christ before their 18th birthday. One out of eight born again people (13%) made their profession of faith while 18 to 21 years old. Less than one out of every four born-again Christians (23%) embraced Christ after their twenty-first birthday. Barna noted that these figures are consistent with similar studies it has conducted during the past twenty years* (2004, Barna).

Children are at a critical age to be reached with the Gospel. Many Bible agencies and movements have focused on evangelization and discipleship of children. Lausanne has established Issue Networks on Children and Evangelism and Children at Risk. Additional networks such as the Global Children’s Forum and 4/14 Window Movement are focused on evangelization and discipleship resources. With all the resources that are being created and the research being conducted, a parent still holds the most influential spot in a child's life.

OneHope's research project, *Attitudes and Behavior of Youth* looked at 152,000 teens, ages 13-19-years-old, in 44 countries, on 5 continents. The key findings of the study:

Positive family experience, involvement in a faith community, and engagement in religious texts all contribute to positive outcomes and increased vibrancy in teens. Although they are all important and differ by country, the family is key. In fact, positive family experience increases the likelihood of standing strong by 128%. Both engagements with religious texts and involvement in a faith community increases the likelihood of standing strong 71% (2012, OneHope).

The key to Spiritual Vibrancy is the Family. How can we help Christian parents nurture the faith of their children?

# Biblical Families

Regardless of the social, political, economic, and financial situations, the Bible gives us an image of family. Before we consider the challenges faced by families, let us consider what Scripture says about the family and the home.

The Bible has a lot to say about “home” as it relates to parents and their responsibilities. The Bible instructs parents on their behavior and how to raise their children. Christian parents desire to raise their children in a "Christian home" in a "Kingdom culture." Parents want their children to be raised in the knowledge of the Lord and come to follow the Lord the rest of their lives. On the journey of faith, parents want their children to commit their lives to Jesus and be led by the Holy Spirit. Parents are not responsible for the transformation of the child's heart. However, parents are responsible for living and leading a life that shares the love of God and to hear the voice of God.

In Scripture, parents have been chosen to instruct their children. Scriptures related to the parent's responsibility: (all Scripture is from ESV, except where noted)

* In Genesis 18:19, “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.”
* In Deuteronomy 6:4-9, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today **shall be on your heart**. You **shall teach them diligently to your children** and shall **talk of them** when you **sit in your house**, and when you **walk by the** **way**, and when you **lie do**wn, and **when you rise**. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”
* In Deuteronomy 11:18-19, “You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You **shall teach them to your children**, talking of them when you are **sitting in your house**, and when you are **walking by the way**, and when you **lie down**, and when you **rise**.
* In Joel 1:3, “**Tell your children of it**, and let your **children tell their children**, and their children to another generation.”
* In Isaiah 38:19, “The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; **the father makes known to the children your faithfulness**.”

Psalms and Proverbs are filled with examples of instructions given for parents.

* Psalm 78:5, “He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded **our fathers to teach to their children**”
* Proverbs 22:6, “**Train up a child** in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.”
* Proverbs 29:15,17, “The **rod and reproof** give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings his mother to shame…. Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart.”

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul wrote to the churches on the management of the household to build and establish the household of God.

* Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, **do not provoke your children** to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (MEV).
* Colossians 3:21, “Fathers**, do not provoke your children**, lest they become discouraged.”
* 2 Corinthians 12:14, “Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but **parents for their children**.”
* Titus 2:2-5, “Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. 3Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are **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.
* 1 Timothy 3:4-5, He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how **to manage his own household**, how will he care for God's church?

These Scriptures admonish parents to love their children, pass their faith from one generation to the next, to explain to their children about who God is, what God has done, and to correct their children.

Proverbs 3:11-12, “My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.” Parents are directed to love the child during the correction and not to provoke the child. Parents are to care for their children and provide for them.

Throughout the Scriptures, there are examples of families who are far from perfect but who are instructed to depend on the Holy Spirit to guide them. A family is made up of those who are part of each other's lives. This includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, immediate family members and those under a physical household's care. This imagery of the family is much fuller than we imagine and it is hard to find a picture of a healthy family in the Bible. The Bible speaks about many dysfunctional families.

To name a few:

* **The first family**. Adam and Eve disobedience. Then, fratricide follows with Cain and Abel (Genesis 3,4)
* **The family of Noah**. Noah rescues the family. Then Noah is drunk and naked and curses his son, Ham. The rescued family ends in brokenness.
* **The family of Abraham**. The promise of a nation. A barren womb. Jealousy and infertility led to a child from a handmaiden. A son, Ishmael, not of the promise. Blessing of the promised son. Casting out of Ishmael and Hagar.
* **The family of Lot**. Living in sexual perversity. Lost home to destruction by God. Lost wife to pillar of salt. Daughter seduced her father. Incest.
* **The family of Isaac**. Parents have favorites. Jacob manipulates Esau for birthright and blessing. Brotherly feud between Jacob and Esau. Brother runs for life. Mother dies without seeing son.
* **The family of Jacob**. Laban manipulates Jacob to marry Leah. Rachel is barren. Dinah is raped. Simeon and Levi disobey their father and massacre the men of Shechem. Reuben is incestuous with father’s concubines. Brother feud continues with 12 sons of Jacob. Brothers selling brother. Judah dishonors Tamar. A broken heart of the father. Loss of son.
* **The family of Moses**. Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu die for offering strange fire before the Lord (Leviticus 10).

There are examples after examples of dysfunction in the Bible - from Eli and Samuel's worthless sons (1 Samuel 8, 11-18) to King Saul’s relationship with his son Jonathan to King David's sins of adultery, murder, and his broken relationship with his son Absalom and his son, Solomon's reign with foreign wives. These are just some of the families that we find in Scripture, and while they are wrought with dysfunction, we see clearly that God love them. This should be a source of hope for today’s families who struggle with wanting to be “picture perfect.” While God instructs parents in the Bible, the Scriptures rarely show us a “perfect family.”

# Biblical Church

As the Body of Christ, we have a responsibility to the 1.96 billion children of this world. "Children represent arguably the largest unreached people group and the most receptive people group in the world. The church is largely unprepared to take up the huge opportunities for mission to children" (2004). The Church has not taken to heart the Scriptures about what God says about children, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6.21). If Children are essential, then your treasure, which is your money, your time, your people, and your resources, will be put aside to strength the ministry to children.

**The Church will need to take into account what God says about children**. Scriptures reveal that children are God's blessing (Psalm 127:3), and God sees us as His children. God does not see us as adults. We are children of God who are thinkers, healers, and doers in the Kingdom of God. Each child has the resources of the Kingdom of God present in them waiting to be unleashed. Scripture reveals that God's plan for the raising of children is primarily through the family and secondarily through the Church (Body of Christ). Each child has been given to their parents as a gift from God. Children have the opportunity to hear the voice of God through His Word and to acknowledge His voice from a young age and to respond to the call of God even as young as three or four years of age.

**Churches have a role in a Christian child's life**. The local church is where the Body of Christ meets to worship, pray, hear the preaching of the Word, exhort, send, build up, and encourage each other as they grow and flourish to be God's hands, feet, and voice in the home and in the marketplace. The Church, therefore, plays a significant role in teaching the children and coming alongside parents to help build the foundation of faith.

**Families who are under His love come together in the Household of God**. Each of the five-fold gifts of the Church of evangelists, preachers, teachers, prophets, and pastors (Ephesians 4:11) are part of a family before being part of the family of God. When God selected Abram, He selected for Himself a people who would love Him and follow him. He wanted to commune and have fellowship with the family of Israel. He made a covenant with a family. God was not signing a business agreement but made a covenant with His people. However, God is planning a family to be joined to Him. His heart is a family plan. Churches that behave more like a business than a family will have a harder time instilling the importance of family.

# Challenges to discipleship in the Home

## **Time**

Amount of time parents spend with the children has been up and down in the past 40 years.

In 2001, a study revealed that children 3-12 years old, who lived with two-parents spent 31 hours per week with their mothers in 1997 compared to 25 hours in 1980 (2000, Sandberg). This study gave hope that parents were still spending time with their children and the articles written in 2001 focused on guiding and helping parents to use the time wisely.

In 2017, a global travel company in the U.K., Thomas Cook Group conducted research between December 13 and December 20. The research revealed, "Throughout the working week, parents say they spend less than 35 minutes reading with their children, fewer than 40 minutes sitting down around the table as a family and less than 45 minutes playing" (2018, Thomas Cook Group).

Pew Research Center stated that “for many working parents, there’s just not enough time.” Fathers are more likely to say that they don’t spend enough time with their kids versus mothers (2015, Patten).

Today, parents are struggling to find time.

## The struggle is even greater for two-career families, where both parents work full-time. In an effort to ensure that our children are properly cared for, we turn to daycare and afterschool programs to fill the need. However, these solutions might have lasting impact on the child at the critical time of discipleship. As parents relinquish responsibility for care to trusted care programs, the child will learn the teaching from another adult. The tensions rise as children at the young age are connecting faith and works in the adult life.

## **Technology**

We also have the challenge of technology. Too often, parents are utilizing technology as a “babysitter” when the child is fussy or is not cooperating and needs to be quiet. Instead of intentionally teaching the child, they instead give them a phone or an iPad to distract them. Technology acts as a ‘quick fix' and pilfers opportunities for parents to interact with their children.

"Technology has facilitated the evolution of the social self" for today's teens. "More than 75% of teens today feel comfortable having multiple online personas," and they are redefining identity. The teens are curating identities for public consumption (2017, Barkley).

How do parents and churches integrate technology healthily into their children’s lives?

## **Time and Technology**

Lack of time with parents and too much access to technology causes children to be isolated. There are limited organic opportunities for parents to intentionally engage in the spiritual development of their children. So, they are increasingly relying on the Church to develop their children. With this limited time together, children today lack knowledge of the doctrines, how to pray, biblical literacy, understanding the importance of Scripture, and the person of Jesus Christ. The basic foundations of the faith are absent, even in children from Christian homes. Parents need to engage their children to help them understand and create meaning about the love of God, God as creator, and the importance of Scripture. When the simple foundational truth of our biblical faith is missing, children grow up confused about their faith, identity, and morality.

*Today's families are different. Technology's impact on the 21st-century family is fracturing its very foundation and causing disintegration of core values that long ago were the fabric that held families together. Juggling school, work, home, and community lives, parents now rely heavily on communication, information, and transportation technology to make their lives faster and more efficient. Entertainment technology (TV, Internet, video games, iPads, cell phones) has advanced so rapidly, that families have scarcely noticed the significant impact and changes to their family structure and lifestyles. A 2010 Kaiser Foundation study showed that elementary aged children use on average 7.5 hours per day of entertainment technology, 75 percent of these children have TV's in their bedrooms, and 50 percent of North American homes have the TV on all day. Gone is dining room table conversation, replaced by the "big screen" and take out* (2013, Rowan).

Children are isolated, neglected, sedentary, and overstimulated. Technology is not all bad, but parents are not aware of the impact of technology and position of importance they have placed on technology in their own homes. Engaged parents who are aware of the impact of technology limit the use of technology. Child health advocates warn against the "addictive power of social media" (2018, Gibbs). However, unengaged parents are unlikely to limit or even discipline themselves from the use of technology and media in their home.

## **Culture**

Our culture today as compared to the past is not friendly toward our faith. Therefore, our children are being raised in a countercultural environment. To be a Christian living in America 20 years ago is very different than today. What would have been considered taboo, is now the norm.

An example is how children were exposed to culture. Christian children 20 years ago lived in world where they were surrounded at home and school with Christians and were not exposed to the knowledge and practices of different faith or cultural issues. One testimony is of a friend who lived in suburban area of New Jersey. She grew up with her friends and families who were Christians. She didn’t interact with other faiths until she was in her 20s. If she was moved out of U.S lived in Middle East or Asia, she would have lived in community of family and friends who are Christians. But, she would have been exposed to classmates and her neighborhood with individuals who worship other gods. In today’s culture, children are exposed to more diversity in faith and values of others who are not Christian.

Before children have entered the teen years, they are increasingly familiar with different religions, atheism, social status, sex (gender identity), feminism, LGBTQ rights, gender equality, women's rights, gun control, racism, terrorism, and more. A secular world draws young people into a subtle and subconscious awareness of pluralism and relativism. Children today are aware of social activism and the impact on their world and the globe. Children have classmates who have two mommies and two daddies. They have neighbors and family members who do not believe what they believe. They are raised with fewer biases regarding human rights, same-sex, LGBTQ issues, bullying and more that are being perpetrated through their schools, friends, and media.

The culture creates tension to give voice to the media of what is popular. Three-year-olds can sing Lady Gaga songs and know every line of Ed Sheeran’s song "Shape of You." Children are growing up with ideologies and philosophies found in music and movies. The hours of exposure that children receive in the culture without understanding can expose them to values that stand in opposition of the Christian faith (2015, Massaro).

Doubt and questioning is part of the western culture where individualistic ideas are expressed through media, and especially social media. The faith foundation for children is like wet cement that doesn't get enough sun to dry. Instead, the rains of distraction, doubts, lack of trust to ask questions, and lack of practice to match the knowledge creates a foundation with cracks. Or, the foundation is not mixed well and creates instability. The house that is built will crack in this secular culture.

Our culture is dismantling our children's faith. Their doubts and contradictions are being shared and questioned by and with their peers. The Christian faith is mocked in the media since faith is seen to be blind and not rational. Raising children to be strong and courageous about their faith at a younger age is critical. Therefore, children need a secure environment where their faith is built upon rock - not sand, since the tsunami is inevitable. The Scripture says, "do not be conformed to this world but be separated from this world" (Romans 12:2).

We need to understand the spirit of this age and what children are being conformed to and confronted by at a young age and how these realities are forming them into adolescence. If we miss those critical years between 0-14, research has shown that once they are teenagers, they are predisposed to doubt, questioning their faith, and separating from the Church. Our children are losing their faith because the cracked foundation cannot hold cultural pressures.

In many countries, evangelism to children is not a possibility, due to legal constraints. Thus, the perspective of today’s culture is to protect children from religious education while indoctrinating them with cultural norms of acceptance and tolerance while teaching them intolerance of religion and faith.

# Paradigm Shift for discipleship

So far, we’ve looked at the importance of children and what the Bible can tell us about their value and potential, the biblical view of the ‘home’ and the church, and the challenges that they face in today’s culture.

Faith and family is being deconstructed. Families are broken. Not only broken from dysfunction, but because marriages disintegrate, and families live apart. While we can easily blame the culture for the decline, blaming does not provide a solution. The solution needs to involve believers seeking God for the answers to today's social issues. We must be teaching our children the norms of the Kingdom and how to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Faith has been moved from the public square to behind closed doors.

For Christian formation of children in the home, there are many challenges. For discipleship to be useful in the home, there must be a symbiotic relationship between parents and the Church. It will take a combined effort by both the household of God and the household of the family to see that children come to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and are renewed by a faith which is practiced, as well as taught. To develop the partnership between the parents and the Church, a theology of the family needs to be reintroduced to the Church and its members.

# Theology of the family

Churches need to create an environment where the family is ministered together rather than in parts. Children have Children's Ministry. Youth have Youth Ministry. The women have Women's Ministry. The Men have Men's ministry. If the Church ministered to the whole as much as the parts of the family, churches would begin to help families and parents grow in their responsibility.

By ministering to families, the Church will promote the importance of the parent in the lives of children, and involvement of parents in the Church with children.

## **Working with the Family of God**

The Church needs to involve parents in their children's ministry while in church. Grabbing the interest of the parent earlier in the ministry to the child is key to the discipleship of the child in the home and the Church. Children's ministry leaders, pastors, and teachers need to see the importance of parental involvement and support from the leaders of the church. The ministry to children is different from children's ministry. Ministry to children will take the family involvement and the support of the family of God. The Church needs to believe and share the value and essence of family life and parental involvement in the future of their children. A practical way to keep parents involved is to have a senior pastor and leaders of the church share from the pulpit the biblical views of the family.

School and Church look the same to children. Children have Sunday school, and then they have school from Monday to Friday. A school has a form that teachers follow. The classroom model incorporates teacher, curriculum, and learning styles that structure to teach rather than experience. If churches could develop another model for ministry, this would create a paradigm for engagement.

## **Remembrances laid down for children**

Biblical families celebrated together. It is crucial to develop milestones of remembering how God has answered prayers. God wanted Israel to celebrate feasts and critical events during the year to come together as a family. In Leon M. Blanchette, Jr’s, *A Theology for Family Ministry* he says, “Spiritual milestones serve the Christian in much the same way a scrapbook serves as a reminder of important moments in one’s life…. these mementos remind the child who they are and where they are from” (2011, Blanchette).

Israel had markers like the twelve stones (Joshua 4:8), the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), and the feasts and festivals (Leviticus 23:2). The Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles are milestones of faith for the family of Israel where God was present.

The milestones for children. The naming of a child (for males with circumcision) is the first of the milestones. Examples of this in the Scriptures are when Zechariah and Elizbeth name John and Joseph and Mary with Jesus at the temple. The ‘coming of age’ which is at the age of 13 for boys and 12 for girls, where the young boy or girl is considered an adult. A Bar Mitzvah (for boys) and Bat Mitzvah (for girls) is when the parents no longer hold the sins of their child or responsibility for child adherence to the law and commandments. This is a very significant moment for a young man or woman to be part of the community life by applying all that they have learned in the early years. Instead of being an observer of the law, now is the time of obedience.

In evangelical traditions, children have faith or spiritual milestones. The five biblical and spiritual milestones are Cognition and Conversion, Baptism, Communion, Evangelism (Missions Trip), and Serving in the community (2011). The milestones are opportunities for parents to celebrate and remember their child’s journey of faith. The scrapbook of faith will guide the parent and help their child journey with God (2011).

## **More Caught than Taught**

Discipleship is more caught than taught. As said earlier, children have a strong receptivity and absorb their environment. A child can pick up adult language and behavior quickly. When you hear a 3-year-old say something that is beyond their comprehension, you wonder how they learned that. Children can catch what is happening. "Caught" is natural for the children rather than "taught." Caught is happening all the time, it captures all the moments. Children are watching more than listening to everything being said. So, children can watch character, values, and attitudes of parents and catch it quickly. This is why the Scripture says in Deuteronomy 6:4-9,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God. The Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, **shall be in your heart.** You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (NASB, 1995)

In Proverbs 3.5-6, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight” (NASB, 1995).

The Heavenly Father is interested in the lives of His children. He delights in the temporal and non-eternal parts of our life. In all your ways acknowledge Him, He wants to interact, engage with you in every aspect of your life. We ought to model for our children – when we are in the house, when we are walking, we should speak of God in all things. We need to show how we practice what we teach and what is taught in the Church.

Theory and practice come together in the home. Children’s observations of life and how to deal with people, stressful life circumstances, marriage, and more occur in the home life.

Parents need to have a deep awareness of their behavior and surroundings.

## **Teaching and Practicing the Presence of God in the Home**

Discipleship in the home is critical to the work of the kingdom. God has given parents a piece of the kingdom that is entirely under their influence. Moreover, God has modeled and given us instruction on building a home.

Do parents understand that their child is a temple of God?

How do parents show the image of the God in their home? How do they show the relationship between themselves (individuals) and God and family and God?

Parents are stonecutters. They are given the privilege to cut the stones and polish so that the Lord can build His temple with these living stones (1 Peter 2:5). Stonecutting is not an event which takes place a moment in time or only once. Stonecutting begins after birth by daily exposing their children to Scripture. The Bible says that we are God's temple (1 Cor 3:16) and Jesus is the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Believing children can be God's temple. Parents and those who care for children are building upon the foundation of faith which is upon the chief cornerstone. Parents have the privilege to build the Kingdom of God through their children.

God has given believers an example of Himself as the Father. For we cry out "Abba Father" and we pray "Our Father who art in heaven…" Jesus came, and He said that He did what His Father did (John 6:38). Jesus’ desire was to show us God the Father. The Father revealed Himself through the Son, Jesus Christ. This picture is an accurate model of a family where the image of God has been seen. Adam was created in the image of God. We have not only seen the image of God, but the authentic likeness of God in Jesus Christ. We can only create the image of man, unless we have the Spirit of God in us who can create the likeness of Jesus in us.

Children are likely to show the image of their parents in their mannerisms and behaviors. Children act like their parents - they mimic the way parents walk, sit, and even talk. Children are projecting the image of a parent. Children are observing the hearts of their parents. Children absorb what is seen, heard, and done and do not know the implication of imitation.

Paul says to "follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). This exhortation should be tested in the home. Can my children follow my example? Am I an example of Christ?

Parents who raise their children in the admonition of the Lord and have genuinely come to know the Word of God and Spirit of God will not only see the image of their children to be like them, they will see the likeness of God in them. The likeness will be passed from generation to generation.

To have the image and presence of God in the home, parents must believe and practice being a Child of God. As a Child of God, parents must absorb what the Father has said and done. Jesus was our example since He did what His Father did. Parents need to look to Jesus Christ and rely upon the Holy Spirit. How much healthier would families be if parents were following the example of Jesus Christ and led by the Holy Spirit? They would bring up their children in the admonition of the Lord, displaying the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, kindness, self-control and patience. Imagine this being duplicated all over - what a society that would be!

Families have an intentional impact on their children, more than they realize. Eighty-six percent of time outside of school is spent at home (2004, Wherry). Schools are struggling to teach parents their responsibility and the importance of their time with children. "Schools are largely responsible for students' academic learning, but children learn some of their most important lessons at home—lessons that families teach best. What they learn at home provides an essential foundation on which schools can build. Without it, neither students nor schools can reach their full potential. Now is the time to remind parents of their indispensable influence" (2004, Wherry). The importance of parent involvement is critical to the health of the family. Schools encourage parents to be involved in academics.

Many of these situations are current and relevant to the Church and to Christian families. For the continuation of understanding discipleship in the home for Christian formation, I will assume that children are living at a physical place with parents or grandparents or someone who has taken responsibility for nurturing the child.

# Scripture Engagement in the Home and Church

“Bible engagement” is one of the eight attributes of discipleship identified in the Transformational Discipleship study conducted by Nashville-based, LifeWay Research. God’s Word leads believers to know God intimately and live a godly life. Engagement is a process through which children can access God’s Word and encounter God, resulting in transformation of life.

Parents are to "Nurture" and "Feed" their children spiritual food. Scriptures feed children in ways that physical provisions will not. To nurture the heart and develop the understanding of the heart in the love of the Lord, we must take a journey in the Scriptures. Parents need to develop their Scripture engagement practices and behavior that can be modeled by their children.

As mentioned earlier, the business and time constraints that parent put on themselves will cost their children in the long run. Parents have a short window of time with their children to teach and practice the values, attitudes, and characteristics of a Scripture-loving Christian.

To create disciples, parents need to themselves be disciples of Christ. Parents have to test their own thoughts and actions against Scripture. The weeds must be removed from the lives of the parents to create good soil. When a parent has learned how to do this on their own with Scripture, parents can teach their children. Parents need to deal with their own sin and how to bear the cross. Parent need to live by the Scriptures. The heart must be abandoned to the Scriptures so that the Word can take root in the heart and mind. The Word of God will cut the heart and renew the mind by removing the things that are not fruitful to the ministry to the family.

What does it look like when God is first in the family? God will give the wisdom and words to guide the family. Before the Scriptures cut children, Scriptures must cut the parent.

## **Be Intentional with Scripture**

There are many resources available to churches and parents to engage their children with Scripture. Intentionality is about setting time specifically to engage with God’s Word. Just as parents set time to prepare meals, parents need to set time to feed their children the heavenly food. A Bible story in the morning or evening is an example of planning to spend time in Scripture. Again, this will depend on whether or not the parents being present to engage the child with the story, rather than rushing through the story to get to something else that is important to them.

Developing habits like prayer, memorization of Scripture, reading Bible stories, and spontaneous moments to disciple as the child plays, walks, and eats is essential. Living out Scripture must mean living Scripture out in the going and coming - - or, in the ordinary moments of life. The best lessons are taught through dialogues, not through monologues. Remember, children can think and respond. Parents need to spend the time to engage the child so that the child can apply the Scriptures to their own life.

Some suggestions:

* Practice taking the Sabbath with children
* Develop habits of Scripture story time
* Watch what is caught rather than focusing just on what is taught
* Pray and ask God to speak to the child as Scriptures are shared
* Pray with the child
* Pray as a family
* Family worship
* Do not use Scripture to create rules, but Scripture is to draw the child into God's story
* Keep a focus on God and submit oneself to God's authority
* Share Scripture in different forms - art, music, dance, stories and in different media - print, audio, visual, video, apps

## **Heart of the Matter**

Scripture engagement is about the heart. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrew 4:12). The hearer will be convicted by the Spirit of God in the heart.

The more you expose and engage with your child in Scriptures, the more the child will reflect upon the Word and learn to identify sin in their own heart. The sword divides and discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. Children, even the very young, can listen and engage Bible stories and understand the implications of the story. Also, the scripture will inform the child about your approach as parent in disciplining and teaching about God

A child’s heart is not neutral to the issues of life. Children are worshipping idols or Gods. The experiences and influences shape a child. They feel fear, confusion, love, isolation, and more. Scriptures speak directly to these situations. In Proverbs 4:23, “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (NKJV, 1982). So your child’s action and words reflect the condition of the heart. A child can change behavior without a transformed heart. Therefore, a child can honor you with their lips while their hearts are far from honor. Parents need to expose the attitude of the heart and deal directly with the heart. The heart and behavior are linked to each other so parents need to be aware the behavior change can train the heart (Tripp, 1995). Behavior modification will not result in heart change. Therefore, engaging in scriptures regular with your child will shape the heart of child.

## **How to share scripture with Children?**

Sharing Scripture can be intimidating for parents. Parents are equipped with technology and the Church to access content on Scripture and Hermeneutics. Also, Bible agencies and Christian book stores have many resources available to parents to listen, watch, and read Scriptures.

First, the message of the Scripture needs to stay **consistent**. The Bible is one story and children need to hear that the Bible is one story. The Bible is God’s Word consistently.

Second, the Bible stories need to be weaved together and connected one to another to build a **metanarrative**. Parents can pick up curriculum or resources that have created the connection.

Third, sharing Scripture means that children can read or interact with Scripture, but engagement is effective in a **community** such as a family.

Fourth, the message/Gospel needs to **thickened** as the child get older. As a child develops, they experience different struggles and have new questions about the Bible. The engagement must increase in quality of the questions being raised or to the questions that will be raised.

Fifth, children need to hear **testimonies** from their parents of the goodness of the Lord. Also, testimonies of other children will strengthen their faith.

Sixth, stick to stories. Children love stories and it is best to share stories with interactive games and activities to increase engagement.

There are many resources for children and parents to increase Bible engagement. A few free resources:

* Bible App for Kids (YouVersion and OneHope)
* Superbook (CBN)
* Max 7

In the world, evangelism to children is critical to passing the faith. Children are instruments of bringing discipleship into the home. God encounters children to reach parents. This is another way to look at discipleship in the home where parents and children are learning the Scriptures together for the first time together. One of those testimonies is Ko’s.

## **Testimony** **Ko's life has transformed**

The puppets and music were great! Ko laughed and sang throughout the presentation.

In her school in Taiwan, she had never before seen an assembly like this — and at the end, she was able to take home her own *Book of Hope*.

She asked her mother to read it with her and tell her about the main character: Jesus. But their family had always followed the traditional religion of Taiwan. They didn’t know what to think about Jesus.

Then Ko’s father came across the *Book of Hope* when he was cleaning the house. He had often wondered about the Bible but didn’t know how to study it ... until he read the *Book of Hope*.

“It guided me ... and with the pictures and words, no matter if you are educated or not, it shares the message of the Bible,” Ko’s father says.

Today, the entire family is following Jesus Christ as Savior, and worshiping together in the local church.

“It’s like my whole family was woke by Jesus!” Ko says today.

# Outcome for Children in Discipleship

How do we know how we are doing on the journey of discipleship? This is a difficult question because discipleship continues from childhood through adolescence. The responsibility of a parent is to pray and continue to share Scripture and live a life that identifies with the person of Christ. This is not a perfect life, but a loving, forgiving, transparent life. A parent needs to live with eternity in mind for their family. To build awareness of themselves and their family, it is important to develop an identity of a Child of God. Identity is shaped and formed through the learning, practicing, participating, and giving. A child can encounter the people of God, the person of Christ, and voice of the Spirit in a community.

Expose yourself to the Scriptures so you can be pruned and cleaned. The Scriptures are in your life to know God and honor God. This will serve as the model for yourself and your child.

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