

Youth Ministry or Family Ministry?

By Phillip Sessa



(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. 7 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. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

As we read these words from Moses, the first question that must be asked is who does "your children" refer to? This was no doubt a message to all of Israel during the time of writing, but contextually and specifically it is a message for the family. It seems that today "family as you understand it" is the mantra by which society raises children. This is something way off the train tracks of Scripture, which has the very blueprints of the family.

There are countless man-hours, millions of dollars, and a plethora of energy put into youth ministry and Sunday School for youth. Evangelicals have bought into this, by and large, hook-line-and-sinker, but does Scripture command the church to do this? As we look at the above verse we can see it is the mandate from God, especially of fathers to disciple, train, and instruct their own children. I have heard from some that the position of having no youth group, training parents, and expecting them to follow the scriptural precedent given to them is extreme. But as my friend Scott Brown asks, "extreme compared to what?"

Principle of Worship?

According to the 1689 confession's original "Letter to the Reader," they trace much of the "decay of religion" to a father's neglect of family worship and instruction and appeal for doctrinal purity to "begin at home." **The goal of worship** is to give to the one you are worshipping that which pleases Him. Cain gave that which did not please God, while Able did give that which pleased God.

Regulative v. Normative Worship

The Regulative Principle of worship calls worshippers to look at the Scriptural guidelines in the corporate worship of God. This principle is founded specifically upon the blueprints in the Scripture and nothing was to be added. Moses was to follow specific guidelines concerning dimensions, materials, personnel, location, etc... when God instructed him to construct the tabernacle in the wilderness. Moses couldn't "get creative" and add his own "voice" or flair to what God commanded. God demanded to be worshiped in an orderly, God-directed, God-pleasing manner, and the leaders of God were obedient to those directions. Apply this to today, and one can rightly ask: is it not the whole-of-life-itself to be lived according to the rule of Scripture?

The normative principle of corporate worship also uses the Bible as the final authority but teaches that anything not expressly forbidden may be incorporated into services. Under this principle, one can have clowns mime the expository preaching during Sunday service.

We look at the state of youth in the church today and see that the training of youth overall does not adhere to the Scriptures. There are many youth groups, youth camps, and youth conferences. But how many conferences are centered on fathers being taught to look into Scripture for their biblical parental mandate concerning their children?

Many evangelicals tend to follow the normative principle when it comes to youth ministry. The mindset is: parents are doing their job in the home, so we will do their spiritual job for them. In other words, even for parents who don't train their children at home, the modern church seeks to supplement family worship and discipleship.

Grim Youth Statistics

Why are 75-88% of the youth leaving the church by the age of 18 or the end of freshman year of college? According to The Nehemiah Institute PEERS Testing, among professing Christian homes the statistics resulting in youth growing up in the church are alarming:

- 85% going to public school do not embrace a biblical worldview
- 6% going to Christian schools embrace a biblical worldview
- 63% don't believe Jesus is the Son of God
- 58% believe all faiths teach equally valid truths
- 51% don't believe the resurrection
- 65% don't believe Satan is real
- 68% don't believe the Holy Spirit is a real person

The consequences of youth **not** embracing a biblical worldview are staggering and equally alarming as youth from professing Christian homes are...

- 225% more likely to steal
- 216% more likely to be resentful
- 210% to lack life purpose

- 200% more likely to steal (in general) & 48% to cheat (Steal answers) on exams
- 300% more likely to use illegal drugs
- 600% more likely to attempt suicide (#2 leading teen killer)

Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry?

Perhaps the most frightening reality check is that up to 88% are leaving the church by the age of 18 years old, just after high school, or just after their freshman year in college. What is happening? Many parents are puzzled since they dropped their kids off on Friday nights to a youth pastor that was supposed to teach their children, and instead of seeing children on the solid rock of Christ, they are seeing their children on the shifting sands of this world. The book Purpose Driven Youth Ministry suggests each youth ministry creates a mission statement with goals. However, youth ministries have not been able to live up to their own vision and goals. The youth ministry purpose statement and goals have crashed and burned before even getting off the runway.

In his book Raising the Bar, Allen Reed writes, “Over the last 30 years we have seen the largest increase in the number of professional youth ministers, and youth ministry degrees being handed out, and parachurch organizations designed to reach youth and we have seen the greatest decline in youth baptisms ever.” I couldn’t agree more as I heard many fellow students in Bible college with me proclaim they were “called into youth ministry”. I personally served in a youth pastor role in several churches, and 90-95% of those youths are not in the church today.

Is Youth Ministry Biblical?

Voddie Baucham posits the following concerning youth ministry. “First it is unbiblical [that should be enough], secondly, it is antithetical to the biblical model to evangelize and disciple young people, and thirdly, it does not and is NOT working! 75-88% is our failure rate. Some want to be youth ministry reformers, but I am a youth ministry abolitionist.”

How can we get back on track?” We must get back to the basics, back to adhering to the regulative principle of worship as relates to the home and training the next generation or we will lose them.

Applying the Shema

We must look. This is called the Shema which means “hear”. We must hear from God’s Word, because when the Bible speaks, God speaks. Voddie Bachaum offers three components, which I have expounded upon to help us see the outworking of these poignant truths.

1. **Target the centrality of the home.** We miss 100% of the shots we never take. In our very sinful nature, we have already missed the target of God’s righteousness and glory. How much more have we naturally failed to set our sights with a laser focus on our homes? Understand if you don’t target your home the world will target your children, and like wolves roaming after a flock of sheep, they will pick off the little lambs that are most vulnerable. Hence if you don’t disciple your children, the world will do it for you, and you won’t like the outcome.

2. **Train the atmosphere of the home diligently.** It seems when children are first born there is much attention given to their physical needs because they cannot fend for themselves. However, as they grow in age, they don't require the same amount of attention. We feed them with a spoon until they could feed themselves. We are to diligently, constantly, and daily create a Gospel atmosphere in our homes. The centralities of Christ and His Gospel should be the character of our homes above all else. This atmosphere is not a begrudging one, not a Pharisaical atmosphere, but a joyous, Christ-saturated one.
3. **Teach and model the Gospel by word and deed.** Similar to training the atmosphere, we are to train our children in family worship (singing together, reading Scripture together, and Scripture exposition with discussion, application, and prayer.) Furthermore, both children and adults should be catechized in the home as well using one of the historic catechisms. Our homes should be a place where we gather and fellowship with the saints, especially from our local church. As our families experience God's people, other pastors, missionaries, and evangelists in our homes do you not think that impacts our children? We are not to be Sunday morning-only Christians. It should be a place where the lost are evangelized. As trains are free to move on train tracks, our homes should joyously stay within the confines of God's Word.

Christian or modern day Pharisees

We are training their hearts to the worship of Christ, not toward becoming modern-day Pharisees. John Piper said, "***We are all born legalists, but we are made into Pharisees.***" Pharisees were Jesus's greatest human enemies. Our homes are not to be a place of pride, where we put down the saints, complain about the church, and have "roast pastor" for lunch on Sunday, criticizing his sermon. Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). We may speak of evil leaders in our government, wicked organizations, and world views, but we must also pray for them to come to repentance, and go to them, as Jesus did to reach them.

You only have one opportunity to raise your children and there are no do-overs. Many evangelicals have regulated their children to a young man, perhaps that just graduated from Bible college with a youth ministry degree, who has never raised a child in his life. Can this young man better relate to, understand, and minister to your child than you? Many youth groups are nothing more than pizza, games, music, and a little devotional message. Young people do not tend to carry and distribute biblical wisdom to one another. I have to imagine that Joseph, Daniel, and the three Jewish boys in the book of Daniel were all well-trained by godly parents. Young people are to learn from the mature in Christ, and that means fathers and mothers must grow and mature in Christ to pass the torch of truth, and of a joyous Christian life off to their children.

One book I read was entitled The Nursery of The Holy Spirit. Its premise is not to dismiss children to children's church to learn at their own level which keeps them from sitting under the preaching of God's Word from the pastor. This actually follows an evolutionary model - the public school system model - not a biblical one. What I learned while receiving my Master's in Education is what is often seen carried out in evangelical churches, which is to let someone else carry out the parent mandate. This is nothing more than spiritual welfare, and once ingrained in the minds and carried forth through the habits, it is almost impossible to convince otherwise of this golden calf.

Year ago I tried to instruct someone many years ago of these truths only to hear the rebellious words from a father, “You raise your kids your way, and I’ll raise my kids my way.” It was not my way, but God’s way. The fruit of that decision which many Christian parents have chosen has resulted in an 88% failure rate, from doing things “our way”. We are losing our children in church one generation at a time. The church cannot rob or circumvent parents of the authority given to them by God over their children.

Back to the Shema (Deut 6:4-9)

The church is to submit to God to train parents through Scripture to lead their homes, parents are to submit to God to carry out the mandate given to them, and children are to submit to God and their parents. Out of all the Ten Commandments, the first four being our vertical relationship toward God, the first horizontal commandment given is a family commandment for children to honor, not simply obey, their parents and it comes with a promise. Do you obey that command and believe that promise? Have you taught your children God’s Commandments and this promise in commandment number five?

Unfortunately, many don’t look in The Scriptures for what constitutes a healthy church, but to the culture. Some parents simply want programs baby sit and entertain their children which are spiritual and godly in nature. Some even leave healthy churches to attend unhealthy churches because there that church has a youth and children’s program. The real answer is to teach parents to look turn parents to the Scriptures and show them what they seek to be done for them, is something are mandated by God to obey and carry out.

“You shall teach them diligently to your children” Teaching in the home must be diligent, not just when I feel like. **“Talk of them when you sit in your house”** This implies that parents actually have times when they sit down and talk with their children. **“When you walk by the way”** Parent can bring children to evangelize with them and expose them to what interact with and bringing the Gospel to the lost looks like. What a joy would it be to see someone you or your child gave a gospel track to or someone you witnessed to on the street, walk into the church the following Sunday! Children get to engage with other the saints of God, evangelizing together as salt and light in a dark world, and they get to hear the gospel being heralded in their ears as well.

“When you lie down” In the evening, **“and when you rise”**, in the morning. **8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.** The Jews did this literally, but the Lord wanted something spiritual not physical to take place. John MacArthur stated, **“God’s commandments were to be the subject of conversation, both inside and outside the home, from the beginning of the day to its end.”¹**

Selah

There is no clear biblical mandate for the current approach, therefore it would fall under the normative and not regulative principle. Let me close with what is perhaps an eye-opener that took

¹ MacArthur, J., Jr., ed. (1997). [The MacArthur Study Bible](#) (electronic ed., p. 260). Word Pub.

place in Nineveh. Jonah preached and the city repented of their sin. Sadly, the next generation went back to the ways of the Ninevites prior to their repentance, and in the book of Nahum God levels the city under his wrathful judgment. There is much at stake when it comes to our homes. The Word of God is sufficient to show us clearly and unashamedly places discipleship under the jurisdiction of the family. For us to do otherwise is to be pragmatic, which is what Uzzah tried to do when handling the ark from falling into the dirt when it was about to fall from the cart.

To Discuss

1. Are you operating from a biblical worldview concerning ministry in your home?
2. How have you targeted and trained the atmosphere of your home, and are you teaching and modeling the Gospel by word and deed?
3. Have you asked your pastor to help you to carry out your mandate?

Resource (Link): [Youth Ministry](#)

Suggested Resources:

1. [Family Driven Faith](#) and [Family Shepherds](#) by Voddie Baucham
2. [The Nursery of the Holy Spirit: Welcoming Children in Worship](#) by Daniel R. Hyde
3. [Family Worship](#) by Donald Whitney
4. [Family Worship](#) and [The Family Worship Bible Guide](#) by Joel Beeke
5. [Man As Priest in His Home](#) by Sam Waldron