

JARED KENNEDY

Keeping
Your

PRACTICAL
STRATEGIES
for DISCIPLING
the NEXT
GENERATION

CHILDREN'S

MINISTRY

on
Mission

SAMPLE CHAPTER
NOT FOR RESALE

Keeping Your Children's Ministry on Mission

*Practical Strategies for
Discipling the Next Generation*

Jared Kennedy

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Keeping Your Children's Ministry on Mission

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PART 1

A GOSPEL-CENTERED VISION FOR CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

Stop! Believe! Christ Sent Me.

*Our Both-And Mission to
the Next Generation*

THERE'S A LEGEND about John the apostle that's tucked away in a book you may have never read, especially if you're a children's or student minister. Musty second-century sermon manuscripts aren't top-shelf reading material for those of us who spend our days shopping at Costco for Goldfish crackers, leading early morning discipleship at Chick-fil-A, sanitizing toys in the nursery, or ordering pizza for Wednesday night gatherings. But if you've missed this story, you've missed a treasure.

At the conclusion of one of his sermons, Clement of Alexandria provides a beautiful account of ministry to the next generation. The story begins shortly after John, the beloved and now elderly disciple, was released from prison on the isle of Patmos:

After the tyrant's death [likely Clement is referring to the Roman emperor, Domitian], John returned from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus and used to go, when asked, to neighboring Gentile districts to appoint pastors, reconcile churches, or ordain someone designated by the Spirit. Arriving at a city nearby [probably the city of Smyrna in modern-day Turkey], he settled disputes among the brethren and then, noticing a spirited youth of superior physique and handsome appearance, commended him to the appointed pastor with the words: "I leave this young man in your keeping with Christ as my witness."¹

In his later years, John served the church as an itinerant preacher and traveling advisor. As a wise senior saint, John was also on the lookout for young talent. After finding a young man with some leadership potential, he commended the boy to the local pastor for training. Then, John returned to his home church, and the local pastor took the young man home, raised him, and when he had confessed faith, baptized him.

During Christ's earthly ministry, he made his heart for children clear (Matt. 18:1–6; 19:13–15). Though his disciples missed the point at first, Clement's story about John encourages us to believe they eventually came around. John, after all, was on the lookout for future leaders who would continue his ministry in the next generation. And if you picked up this book, I imagine this passion to see the next generation know, trust, and follow God's ways has been passed along to you too. Children's ministry exists so that kids might hear the good news about Jesus and follow him all their days.

Children Need the Good News

We can summarize the gospel story as a fourfold movement: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. What does this storyline teach us about kids?

First, we discover that God *created* children for himself. Kids are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14). Their lives are imbued with the glory of a universe that reflects God's beauty; they've been endowed with imagination and an ability to think and know. A child's life has value because he or she is made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27). As image-bearers, children are also made for worship. From childhood, every human is fashioned for giving praise. Our desire as Christians is to bring up a generation that is dazzled by God, captured by his world and his works and always talking about them to one another (Ps. 145:3–7).²

Second, our children are *fallen* and sinful. They inhabit a world marred by sin, abuse, suffering, and death; they feel its pain. "Sometimes, people talk about coming from dysfunctional families," writes Robert Plummer. "The reality is that, because of sin, we are all 'dysfunctional' at the deepest level."³ You've probably seen that children's program where the woolly mammoth, vampire, monsters, aliens, and an overgrown canary have all invaded a side street in Manhattan. In his brilliance, Jim Henson took some of our greatest fears and made them cute and educational. The child-friendly terrors that live together on Sesame Street should remind us of the hidden reality of childhood. Children are glorious and beautiful gifts from God and yet within each child—behind the cuteness—there's a fallen heart that's twisted from the moment of conception.

More often than not, our kids act like the monsters that destroy poor Guy Smiley's stage set. Every child is a sinner. It can be difficult for us to shoot straight with kids about this, but even they need to be faced with the reality of their brokenness. Charles Spurgeon says it well:

Do not flatter the child with delusive rubbish about his nature being good and needing to be developed. Tell him he must be born again. Don't bolster him up with the fancy of his own innocence, but show him his sin. Mention the childish sins to which he is prone, and pray the Holy Spirit to work conviction in his heart and conscience.⁴

Even kids exchange delight in God's glory for delight in the pleasures of the moment (Rom. 1:21; 3:23). Just think about what happens when kids are called away from their toys to bath time or bed. There is a battle for affections going on in kids' hearts. Yes, children need comfort, care, and a healing touch. But they also need honest correction, because it's only when kids see the terror of their sin that they'll see their need for redemption. We need to hear Spurgeon's warning: "Do not hesitate to tell the child his ruin; he will not else desire the remedy."⁵

Third, *redemption* comes for children through Jesus. Remember, Jesus himself said, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are like these children" (Matt. 19:14 NLT). Jesus's rebuke of his friends who would've kept kids at a distance should inspire us to include children in the life of our church communities. We must call even the youngest children to faith. We need to help each child

see that Christ is his or her only hope. Children need us to help them to look outside of themselves to the salvation Jesus offers.

Through vacation Bible school programs, many of us have been trained to emphasize the ABCs with kids: *admit* you are a sinner, *believe* in Jesus, and *confess* faith in Him. We find this pattern in Scripture (Rom. 10:9–10), and there's nothing wrong with it so long as we make clear that salvation isn't about what we do but about what Christ has done.⁶ If we only talk to kids about what they should do, we run the risk of confusing or discouraging them. When a child becomes aware of personal sin, he may become introspective and worry, "Did I do enough? How can Jesus live in my heart when I still get so angry?" What Jesus has done for us is the most important thing—so much more important than what we do. He saves us; we don't save ourselves. We must teach kids to look to the forgiveness that comes as a result of Christ's substitutionary death.

Finally, in light of the coming *consummation*, our children are potential brothers and sisters in Christ. When we get to glory, the most enduring relational reality will be our relationship to the Savior (Matt. 22:30). To be embraced by God's redemption is to be adopted as God's child, gaining a new identity, which transcends every earthly status and relationship. Plummer describes it this way: "If our children stand beside us in eternity, it will not be as our children but as our blood-redeemed brothers and sisters (Rev. 7:9–12)."⁷ But if our children are going to join us as brothers and sisters in glory, they must hear the gospel now.

Our Both-And Responsibility

John knew this, and that's why he left the newly converted young man in the care of the local pastor in Smyrna. Sadly, things didn't

go as the old apostle had hoped. We don't know all the details. Clement just says that after the young man was saved and baptized, the pastor "relaxed his oversight." At that point, as Clement explains, things went sideways:

Some idle and morally lax youths corrupted the young man with lavish entertainment and then took him with them when they went out at night to commit robbery or worse crimes. Soon, he joined them and like a stallion taking the bit in mouth, he dashed off the straight road and down the cliff. Renouncing God's salvation, he went from petty offenses to major crimes and formed the young renegades into a gang of bandits with himself as chief, surpassing them all in violence and bloody cruelty.⁸

How should we respond when a young person turns away from the faith? Certainly, the fallen youth bears responsibility. But can we say each prodigal is just a bad seed? That's what the pastor in Smyrna thought:

Time passed, and some necessity having emerged, they send again for John. He, when he had settled the other matters on account of which he came, said, "Come now, O bishop, restore to us the deposit which I and the Savior committed to thee. . . . I demand the young man, and the soul of the brother."

The old [bishop], groaning deeply, and bursting into tears, said, "He is dead."

"How and what kind of death?"

"He is dead," [the bishop] said, "to God. For he turned

wicked and abandoned, and at last a robber; and now he has taken possession of the mountain in front of the church, along with a band like him."⁹

The pastor in Smyrna adopts a blame-the-kid approach. As we'll see in a moment, the story makes clear this is wrong. But before we learn how the story ends, consider the assumption that John makes about the young man's faith. He sees it as a deposit that he and Christ have "committed to *thee*."

So who is it that is responsible for the faith of youth and children?

The kids in our children's ministry on an average Sunday are, by God's grace, the next generation of pastors, church planters, worship leaders, counselors, small group leaders, and parents; they're the next generation of Christians. And if you're a parent or a church member, the Bible says that teaching the gospel to these children is your responsibility:

[Things] that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

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. (Ps. 78:3–7)

This psalm reminds us how God, throughout Israel's history, had children in mind (cf. Deut. 6:7–9). God wanted Israel's children to remember what he'd done to rescue and save. He wanted them to remember his laws and commands. He wanted the kids to hope and trust in him. And God gave the responsibility for training kids in the faith to two distinct groups: to Israelite *parents* and to their *covenant community*.

God commanded Israel's "fathers to teach . . . their children" (Ps. 78:5). No one has more potential to influence a child's spiritual direction than her parents. No Sunday children's ministry will come close to mom or dad's level of influence. Family ministry leader Reggie Joiner once compared the number of hours an average parent spends with a child to the number his church ministry team spent with the kids in their care:

At best, with those who attended our church consistently, we would only have about forty hours in a given year to influence a child. . . . The same fourth-grader who would spend nearly four hundred hours playing video games and studying math would spend forty hours in our environments with our leaders and teachers. That same day we calculated another number that shocked us: the amount of time the average parent had to spend with their children. It was three thousand hours in a single year.¹⁰

Joiner's 3,000/40 ratio is stunning. Family discipleship will happen in planned moments when parents pull out a Bible storybook, and it will happen in unplanned moments when a child is heartbroken, and her parents give comfort. It's in living rooms and cars, at bedsides and the breakfast table when many kids will hear and see their most consistent presentation of the gospel.

But training the next generation isn't limited to homes. God's command for parents to teach their kids was given in the context of a *community* ("in Jacob . . . in Israel," Ps. 78:5). Christian parents won't fulfill their responsibility to be generational disciple makers unless fellow believers support them. Here are a few reasons why church ministry to children and students is necessary:

1. To surround young people with godly adults who can provide love and care, truth they can build their lives on, and a model to follow (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Pet. 5:2).
2. To reinforce a biblical view of the world. A child will sometimes listen to a children's or youth ministry volunteer more fully even though he has consistently heard the same truth from his parent (2 Tim. 4:2).
3. Because the family hasn't been given the keys to the kingdom, the church has. Therefore, the church is needed to affirm the salvation of children, and it's the ultimate spiritual accountability for the family (Matt. 16:19).
4. To be a neutral third party when there is a major family conflict, serving as an impartial advisor between parents and kids (2 Cor. 5:18).
5. To connect believing young people with other Christians, who support, encourage, and keep them accountable (Heb. 10:25).

6. To provide opportunities for young people to use their gifts to serve (1 Corinthians 12).
7. Because the church fights for truth and sound doctrine. It protects families from being drawn away by false teaching (1 Tim. 3:15).
8. Because spiritual growth generally happens within the context of community (Eph. 4:11–16).¹¹

Children and students benefit from the combined influences of godly parents *and* the discipleship ministries of their local church. If kids growing up in Christian homes need the larger church family, how much more is the church needed to reach out and model the gospel for children who do not have Christian parents (Matt. 19:14; 28:19–20)? That seemed to be the case with the young man in Smyrna. Even with the church on his side, the youth's life soon went downhill.

How should we respond when a young person in our care turns away from the faith? Is it a time for self-reflection? Should we ask, "What did we do wrong? Was there something missing in our children's and youth ministry model?" Perhaps. But I find John's response more challenging.

Your Mission: Sharing the Good News with Little Ones

John doesn't lament failed discipleship strategies. His response is more active:

The apostle tore his clothing, beat his head, and groaned. "A fine guardian I left for our brother's soul! But get me a horse and someone to show me the way." He rode off from the church,

just as he was. When he arrived at the hideout and was seized by the outlaws' sentries, he shouted, "This is what I have come for: take me to your leader!"

When John approached and the young leader recognized him, the young man turned and fled in shame. But John ran after him as hard as he could, forgetting his age, and calling out, "Why are you running away from me child—from your own father, unarmed and old? Pity me child, don't fear me! I will give account to Christ for you and, if necessary, gladly suffer death and give my life for yours as the Lord suffered death for us. Stop! Believe! Christ sent me."¹²

As soon as he heard about the straying son, this eighty-year-old minister mounted a horse and rode into the mountains to chase him down! It reminds me of what our Lord taught us in Matthew 18:10–14:

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. (NIV)

What can motivate an old pastor to chase down a rebellious teen in this way? Only a conviction that he himself had once been the

wandering lamb whom the Savior had pursued. As John wrote in one of his letters: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Clement tells us that the young gang leader "stopped, stared at the ground, threw down his weapons, and wept bitterly." He flung his arms around the old apostle and begged for mercy. John assured him that he'd found forgiveness from the Savior, and upon the young man's repentance, the Father rejoiced!

Brothers and sisters who serve in children's or youth ministry, this is your mission. The Savior has pursued and found you. Now you have the privilege of carrying the good news to little ones, and persevering with them throughout their lives. Remember John the apostle's example the next time you're stacking piles of cotton balls for a preschool craft or playing knockout with middle school boys. Allow this good news to move you to action, and call the kids in your care to believe, because Christ sent you!

Keeping Your Children's Ministry on Mission is meant to inspire and encourage you in the task of reaching and discipling the next generation with the gospel. I also want to give you a clear strategy for that task. But, as this book's title suggests, it's easy to get distracted from our simple commission. The truth is, we all come into ministry with experiences and assumptions that form our expectations about what a children's ministry should be. So, before I begin unpacking a strategy for gospel-centered children's ministry, let's look at history and think about how today's children's ministry came about.

Knowing What We Shouldn't Do

Warnings from the History of Family Ministry

MY GRANDPARENTS once had a wall of pictures in the long hallway at the top of the stairs in their home. I can remember my mom and aunts standing around the pictures after a new cousin was born, talking about how much the new addition favored one older relative or another. These days it seems like everyone is tracing their ancestry and genetic history. Discovering where we've come from helps us to understand something about ourselves.

That's one of the reasons I love Martin Luther. He's like a bombastic German uncle who has helped me to understand both the centrality of the gospel and our *both-and* responsibility for family discipleship. Luther's plan for reaching the next generation began with a focus on the family. He was passionate about parents teaching their children.¹

During the Middle Ages, professional clergy and church institutions such as schools and monasteries had taken pride of place in the role of passing down the faith. But with the dawn of the Reformation, church leaders called for a return to family discipleship, instructing parents, and especially fathers, to take an active role in discipling their children.² Luther led the way. When giving his lectures on the book of Genesis, the Reformer famously compared the Christian home to a school and a church:

Abraham had in his tent a house of God and a church, just as today any godly and pious head of a household instructs his children . . . in godliness. Therefore, such a house is actually a school and a church, and the head of the household is a bishop and priest in his house.³

Luther helped to move the church from a culture of clericalism to a culture where the work of *every* believer mattered. The Wittenberg pastor believed that the ordinary labors of life—everything from laboring at a trade to changing a baby's diapers—are charged with meaning. In one sermon, Luther rebuked men who might avoid marriage because of the dirty work involved in raising children.⁴ He was convinced that God is always at work in our labors at home, no matter how ordinary they are. Luther was also “confident in the power of the gospel rightly preached to move hearts and generate energy for its cause.”⁵ He believed that gospel preaching would move fathers to become disciple-makers within their homes.

This conviction never wavered. However, Luther's experience visiting the churches of rural Saxony in the late 1520s seems to

have convinced him of the need for stronger institutional safeguards as well. After the visits, Luther wrote:

Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts.⁶

After seeing such depressing conditions, Luther prepared a catechism that could be taught *both* in homes *and* in church-sponsored schools.⁷ He became convinced that parents couldn't train up their children alone. They needed support from the church community.

Reaching the Youth Culture for Christ

In many ways, the story of our contemporary family ministry movement mirrors Luther's journey.

In 1844, the Young Men's Christian Association (the YMCA) was founded in London to improve the lives of young working men; soon, churches followed this model by creating their own Young People's Associations or Christian Endeavor Societies.⁸ Those were early precursors to contemporary youth ministry.

But if you ask me, I'd trace today's student and children's ministry models back to the 1940s and 1950s. During the latter half of the twentieth century, the social function of the adolescent years

began to change. The teenage years were no longer viewed as an intermediary life stage with adulthood as the goal but as a distinctive youth culture that resisted movement toward adulthood.⁹

In response, Christian leaders created organizations and ministries that sought to reach teenage culture for Christ. Para-church ministries such as Young Life (1941) and Youth for Christ (1944) were quickly followed by age-directed youth ministry programs in local churches.¹⁰ Youth ministry leaders of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s saw the youth culture as their mission field. They set up drum sets, used lights and video, and played crazy Nickelodeon-style *Double Dare* games as a way of becoming “all things to all people that by all means [they] might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

But the youth ministry movement of the late 1900s also had its liabilities. What emerged was a segmented-programmatic approach that comprehensively divided up a congregation according to age and special interest. In this compartmentalized model, youth groups—and sometimes children's ministries—developed their own expressions of Christian community that operated in isolation from the rest of the congregation. These groups typically rejected older forms of worship such as hymn singing, and the youth ministry leaders would pursue their own methods and teaching plans that were disconnected from the direction—and sometimes even the theology—of the larger church.

Another disadvantage of the programmatic youth ministry model was a growing sense among some parents that they themselves would never be able to reach their children. They needed younger, cooler youth leaders who were, one might say, “in touch with kids today.” During the Reformation, Luther had fought

TWO DANGERS OF SEGMENTED-PROGRAMMATIC MINISTRY

Segmented-Programmatic Ministry comprehensively divides up the congregation according to age and special interest, delegating the discipleship of the next generation to specialized ministers who oversee church programs. The two dangers are:

Segmented Ministry Silos—Kids and youth ministry become compartmentalized expressions of Christian community and are disconnected from the faith of older generations.

The Drop-Off Mentality—Parents assume that the responsibility for training their children spiritually is best left with professionals.



against the clergy-laity divide within the Roman Catholic church. But less than five hundred years later, many parents assumed the responsibility for evangelizing and training their children was best left with professionals. Here's how Timothy Paul Jones describes this drop-off mentality: “School teachers are perceived as the persons responsible to grow the children's minds, coaches are employed to train children's bodies, and specialized ministers at church ought to develop their souls.”¹¹

Bringing Student Discipleship Back Home

Thankfully, just as it did during the Reformation, the church has once again responded to an overemphasis on *segmented* and

institutional ministry. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a group of family ministry leaders arose and registered their concerns about both of these trends. These leaders formed what has come to be known as the family ministry movement, and they've proposed a number of creative alternatives to programmatic youth ministry.

Proponents of *family-based* ministry, for instance, have added intergenerational and parent-training activities to their churches' existing age-organized activities. The goal of these supplemental events and learning experiences is to draw the generations together.¹²

Family-integrated churches are more radical. They've eliminated age-graded classes and events altogether. There's no youth group, children's ministry, or senior adult programs in these churches. The generations learn and worship together, and parents bear the primary responsibility for the evangelism and discipleship of their children.¹³

Many churches found an approach between the supplemental family-based model and the extreme of family-integrated churches. Adopting what has come to be known as the *family-equipping model*, these church leaders have sought to coordinate a church's age-stratified ministry structures and the parents' ministry to their children at home around "a master plan to build faith and character in their sons and daughters."¹⁴

While the solutions proposed by these scholars and practitioners varied, they shared two common goals: (1) de-compartmentalizing the church's people by reconnecting church and home, and (2) empowering parents as the primary faith-trainers for the next generation.

Chart 2.1

The Mathematics of the Family Ministry Movement¹⁵

÷	Segmented-Programmatic Ministry comprehensively <i>divides</i> up the congregation according to age and special interest, delegating the discipleship of the next generation to specialized ministers who oversee church programs.
+	Family-Based Ministry <i>adds</i> intergenerational and parent-training activities to existing age-organized activities. The congregation maintains youth ministry, children's ministry, senior adult ministry, etc., but events and learning experiences are planned to draw the generations together.
—	Family-Integrated Ministry is by far the most radical. This approach <i>subtracts</i> all age-graded classes and events. There is no youth group, no children's ministry, and no age-graded training programs. The generations learn and worship together, and parents bear the primary responsibility for the evangelism and discipleship of their children.
×	Family-Equipping Ministry <i>multiplies</i> the impact of age-stratified structures by transforming activities and events so that they train parents, involve the generations, and equip the congregation with resources to disciple the next generation.

Is There Something Wrong with Focusing on the Family?

I'd consider myself an advocate for the family ministry movement. After all, God has a heart for each successive generation, and I know kids and students benefit from the combined influences of loving parents and a missional church community. But as I've worked with kids and families over the past fifteen years, I've had some experiences that, like Luther after his trip to Saxony, have tempered my enthusiasm. I'm concerned in particular that

our ideals about how to do family discipleship have sometimes distracted us from our more primary responsibility to teach kids the gospel.

Here are a couple of the ways we get distracted.

First, we're tempted to believe that getting family discipleship right will automatically produce Christian kids. In the early days of the family ministry movement, you'd hear a lot of daunting statistics about church kids leaving the faith after they went off to college. Many leaders offered new family-discipleship strategies to the church as a way of helping to raise retention rates.¹⁶ It makes sense, doesn't it? We want our kids to stay connected to Christ as they grow older. We'd like to have surefire strategies for keeping young men from running off into the hills with a gang of bandits.

But the danger with promoting strategies is that we sometimes overpromise. If we give the impression that getting your family-discipleship strategy right is the way to produce perfect, Christian children, then we're presenting a false gospel. It's a subtle form of legalism, one that pastor Dave Harvey calls the "false hope of deterministic parenting."¹⁷

Don't get me wrong. I believe Christian parents should be expectant about their kids' future. Our children are raised in homes and churches where they hear the gospel taught (1 Cor. 7:14). They've been given the opportunity to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8). But there's no formula for ensuring our kids will persevere as Christians. Both parents and family ministry workers must be clear that our responsibility is to faithfully teach the good news to the next generation and then leave the results to the Lord. Salvation is his work. Practicing family devotions or disciplining consistently can't prevent kids from rebelling. Remember, our

perfect Father has prodigal children (Luke 15:11–32). What right do we have to assume that wandering can't be a part of our own children's stories?¹⁸ Being more honest about this will release the parents we're shepherding from unnecessary guilt and encourage them to build home environments where older kids who wander spiritually will be welcomed back into the fold.

Second, we're tempted to let promoting our family ministry ideals eclipse the priority of reaching the lost. The family ministry movement as a whole emphasizes the importance of parents as the primary faith-trainers for their children. This is in fact biblical (Deut. 6:1–12; Ps. 78:1–8). But what about kids whose parents are absent, unbelieving, or just immature? Kevin Jones writes:

I have served in contexts where the *worst* person to discern the condition of a child's heart is the parent! Parents can be toxic, enabling, and spiritually damaging to the growth and development of young believers. In the best cases, fathers and mothers are present spiritually—but the best case doesn't always describe the contexts where God has placed us. In some situations, the parent may be one of the reasons a young Christian struggles to grow spiritually.¹⁹

I've seen friends and church leaders advocate for sweeping changes both in their church communities and the church at large in the name of a family ministry ideal. Earlier, I told you how family-integrated churches reacted radically to programmatic and segmented ministry. One thing I love about this approach is the emphasis it puts on exposing young people to cross-generational church life; this is essential for kids' growth.²⁰ However,

TWO DANGERS OF FOCUSING ON THE FAMILY

The False Gospel of Deterministic Parenting—We're tempted to believe that getting family discipleship right will automatically produce Christian kids.

Creating Gospel-Preventing Social Barriers—We're tempted to let promoting our family ministry ideals eclipse the priority of reaching the lost.



promoting our family-discipleship hobbyhorse should never eclipse the priority of the Great Commission (Gal. 2:11–14).

Kids trained from an early age might pull off sitting through a long-winded sermon without rolling matchbox cars down the wooden pews, but will unchurched visitors and new believers be as successful?²¹ In our pursuit of family-ministry ideals, we must be careful not to create social barriers to the gospel.

As we pursue ways that our churches can experience inter-generational family life, we also need ministry approaches that remember kids from unbelieving homes and that capitalize on the pedagogical advantage of age-directed lessons (see chapter 7). Think about it. Why should we have young children sit all the way through a sermon they don't understand? Even within the Bible, there seem to be some parts—Song of Songs, for example—that should be taught publicly (2 Tim. 3:16–17) but seem to be reserved for adults and older teens, not for younger children (Song 8:4). Other parts of the Bible, such as Proverbs, are geared toward youth (Prov. 1:8; cf. Ps. 119:9–16)! We have

Chart 2.2

Potential Dangers of the Family Ministry Movement Models

Segmented-Programmatic Ministry

Because each generation's expression of faith is compartmentalized, inter-generational influence can be lost. Moreover, there can be a tendency for Christian parents to see ministry leaders as the professionals who are primarily responsible for discipling their kids.

Family-Based Ministry

While family events are planned, the strategy for equipping Christian parents to lead in family discipleship can sometimes be less clear. It's also unclear whether the drop-off mentality and mindset of viewing ministry leaders as professional faith-trainers has been adequately addressed.

Family-Integrated Ministry

There is a narrow focus on church families—on the church as a family of families—and this family ministry ideal can eclipse the church's missionary purpose—to reach the lost. The family-integrated model narrowly applied fails to engage the broader daycare culture and to reach youth and children whose parents are not believers.

Family-Equipping Ministry

The intentional focus on equipping parents can at times be alienating to families who are not from a Christian background. Furthermore, when this and other family ministry models have been presented as ways to counter the church's low retention emphasis, one can get the false impression that getting family discipleship right will automatically produce Christian kids; that's the false gospel of deterministic parenting.

to keep our priorities in order. The church's goal in discipling the next generation is not to train kids so they can sit quietly through church services. Our goal is for them to hear about the Savior and, by God's grace, be changed by him.

Chart 2.3

How the Gospel Shapes Our Goals for Children's Ministry

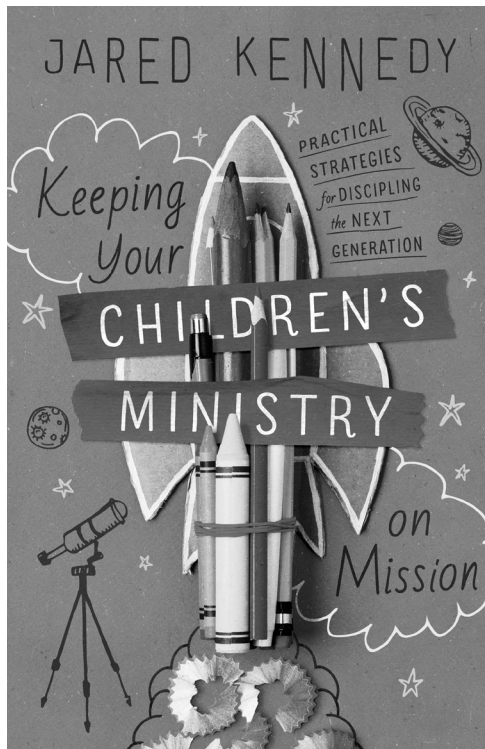
Hospitality	Teaching	Discipleship	Mission
Gospel-Seasoned Presence	Gospel-Centered Message	Gospel-Formed Identity	Gospel-Fueled Witness
We welcome children in Jesus's name.	The content of the message matters; it must be about Jesus.	The cross of Christ shapes the entire Christian life.	Risk-taking, courageous faith comes from God.

As you continue through this book, we'll move from evaluating the history of family ministry toward working out a gospel-centered ministry strategy. I believe there are at least four ways the gospel shapes our goals for children's ministry. It shapes our hospitality, teaching, discipleship, and mission (see chart 2.3). Over the next eight chapters, I'll unpack each of these key areas and encourage you to:

- *Create* welcoming environments for building relationships with kids and families.
- *Connect* kids and families to Christ through gospel-centered Bible lessons.
- *Grow* alongside families by helping them take next steps in their spiritual journey.
- *Go* with kids and families, sending them out on gospel-fueled mission.

I have confidence in these strategies and methods. I think they're biblical and important, but I also hope I'm sober enough not to

overpromise results. These strategies aren't silver bullets, and I don't mean for them to be understood that way. My goal in teaching these methods is to help you keep the mission—sharing the gospel with little ones—the main thing. God has called *both* parents *and* the church to partner for the sake of reaching the next generation. Ultimately, we're working together as a means to a greater end—seeing the next generation come to know and love Jesus.



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HAVE THE TASKS OF CHILDREN'S MINISTRY DISTRACTED YOU FROM THE GLORY OF THE GOSPEL?

In children's ministry it's easy to become preoccupied with the stress of missing activity sheets and stalled check-in computers. But the gospel gives us a better perspective and vision. It seasons our hospitality with humility, centers our teaching on Jesus, forms our discipleship in conformity with his story, and fuels the mission so that the next generation's faith rests in God's power. Learn how all the tasks of children's ministry—creating protection policies, crafting lesson plans, rehearsing catechisms—work together to help us disciple children in the good news of Jesus.

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