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OUR COVENANT TO NURTURE OUR CHILDREN

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Where have all the children gone? There was a time when children attended church activities with their parents. Pentecostal worship seemed especially to abound with children. In most cases they were intentionally involved in all aspects of the worship service. Children were welcomed into the choir and often sang specials. Those who could play musical instruments were encouraged to join the band where their talents would be nurtured. They served as ushers and sometimes read Scripture and led in prayer. At the close of the service children filled the altar area where loving adults sought to pray them through to experiences with God.

However, in some Pentecostal churches children were with great effort ignored. They were present but uninvolved with the vibrant worship taking place all around them. In between frequent trips to the bathroom, older children did their homework, counted the ceiling tiles or passed notes. Younger children freely wandered about the room as one adult after another took time out from worship to entertain them. It was as though the art of worship included the skill of tuning out disruptive motion and sounds. Loud, engaging music and public address systems seemed to be the key to winning the war for attention. Ironically, the louder the music, the more active and noisy the children became. In consolation, by the time the sermon was going good, the children had burned off most of their energy reserves and settled down for a nap or daydreaming.

Visit almost any urban church in North America today and you will find an "adults-only" crowd in the sanctuary on Sunday morning. Children are kept out of sight and out of mind. Babies are cuddled in "clean, comfortable, safe, and convenient" nurseries. Toddlers play on indoor gym sets, and older children are held captive by creative curriculum. The common understanding among most Pentecostals seems to be that children need to worship on their own level. The trend is to separate them from adults until about age 12, although some large churches extend the separation all the way through high school and beyond.

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The segregation of children (and youth) from adults is not limited to the worship service. This separation often applies to all church activities. We should understand that this is a recent development in church history, one that has flourished in the United States but is now common in most regions of the world. It may be thought of as an established or at least preferred characteristic of the modern church. But to say this phenomenon is established and modern is not the same as saying it is good and pleasing to God. Neither is it wise to assume the old ways are always the best ways. The time has come for the church to rethink the place of children in the family of God and to do so in the light of the Word of God.

Most books on ministry with children focus on what the church does for them when they are separated from adults. Emphasis is placed on methods of instruction (teaching them in Sunday school) and worship (leading children's church). While being concerned with these issues, this book attempts to also ask what are believed to be some more basic questions: What are children really like and what do they need from the church? Where do children belong in the life of the church? How can they best be disciplined and brought into a healthy, life-sustaining relationship with the church? Answers to these and related questions should determine the direction we take in all of our ministries with children.

The Nature and Needs of Children

The place of children in the modern church is largely determined by what is understood to be their nature and needs. Most church leaders sincerely desire to meet the needs of children through methods and programs that cooperate with their "God-given" characteristics. Denominational curriculum and programs are developed with this as a primary directive. This is a worthy sounding goal but one that we may not have thought through clearly. How do we know what the nature and needs of children are? What are their God-given characteristics? Where should we turn to find answers to these questions? What are our sources of authority for understanding children?

There are many voices crying out to the church about the nature and needs of children. One voice is what might be called the common cultural concept of childhood. Another

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voice is the one that arises from the social sciences. And a third is the Scriptures. These voices sometimes complement each other as if speaking one clear message. But they often send out conflicting signals.

It might be argued that we should forget about culture and science and listen only to what the Scriptures say about children. But we are products of our own culture and must live within some culture. Unless we confront the manner in which our culture shapes us, we will blindly follow its direction without even being aware of its influence upon us. We will even interpret the Bible through the eyes of our cultural biases. The challenge we must accept is to interpret our cultural expectations for our children in light of Scripture.

The social sciences are another matter. God requires us to seek after truth and wisdom. All knowledge is from God. Any truth that can be gleaned from the sciences that will help us better serve the cause of Christ is a gift from God. However, we must take great care to examine the claims of science against the Word of God. Scientists are capable of error, especially in their interpretations of the facts. And most of what we call science is merely human attempts to interpret the complexities of God's creation.

The Concept of Childhood

Every society creates its own understanding of what it means to be a child. Young children are obviously different from older adults. But in what ways are they different and for how long do the differences last? For some people, the differences are thought of primarily in terms of degree. Children are seen by them as incomplete humans. Often this incompleteness is expressed in terms of dependency upon others. Children must rely on adults for food, shelter and protection. They are dependent upon others for their survival and identity. This condition may be thought to end as early as their being weaned from their mother's breast or as late as the day they move permanently out of their parents' household.

In some cultures, children are thought of as empty vessels that need to be filled with knowledge and skills; in others they are flowers that need to be nurtured until they bloom into adults. Other cultures treat them as if they are wild animals that need to be tamed, or trees that must be

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bent into the right direction. In each of these settings, children are seen as different from adults in their very essence. It is assumed they will be transformed into adults (that is, productive citizens) only if society does the right things to them.

Cultural understandings of children create societal expectations for them. In turn, those expectations determine the role children play in society. All societies define what a normal child is and then go about attempting to mold children into those expectations. In time, the children will give new shape to the culture that has produced them. We must face our own cultural understandings of children before we can help them find their rightful place in the family of God.

Regretfully, the modern church (at least in the western world) pays little attention to biblical criticism of the culture in which it exists. Consequently, we have blindly allowed the common social attitudes toward children to define who they are and what their needs are. The programs and methods we use with them in church can hardly be distinguished from those of the public schools. We relate to them out of cultural values which are often in direct conflict with the Word of God.

We frequently read our understanding of childhood into the Scriptures by approaching all biblical references to children from the vantage point of our preconceptions. For example, the Gospel stories of little children being brought to Jesus are often used to defend the need for "children's ministries." However, there is no record of Jesus ever separating children for ministry to them. In fact, there are no biblical references to the schooling of children. This is not to say that age grouping is contrary to Scripture or the will of God. It is only to say that our modern approach to children in the church is largely determined by our extrabiblical beliefs about them and that those extrabiblical beliefs may lead us to faulty interpretations of the Scriptures.

In what ways are our current understandings of childhood consistent with the Word of God? In what ways are they in conflict with the Scriptures? A thorough response to these questions is beyond the limits of this book, but we must move forward into ministry with children with a healthy awareness of the limits of our cultural values. We must be willing to ask some difficult questions concerning

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our cultural concepts of childhood. For example, on what bases can we defend the following themes commonly associated with childhood?

- Childhood is an age of innocence. Children are not responsible for their actions.
- Crimes committed during childhood should receive a more lenient punishment than the same crimes committed during adulthood.
- Children learn faster and easier than adults.
- It is unhealthy for children to sit for more than a few minutes at a time.
- Children are frustrated by words they do not understand.
- In order for worship to be meaningful, children must understand all that happens in worship.

There is little scientific evidence or clear biblical teaching to support any of these positions. That is not to say they are wrong. Some of them do clearly flow out of our Judeo-Christian heritage. But could it be that some of them are in error or, even worse, in direct conflict with the Word of God? Our ministry with children must be built upon a foundation more solid than culturally approved "common sense." We must build upon the truth.

The Social Sciences

A second source of authority influencing the manner we minister to children is information gleaned from the social sciences. The social sciences are those academic disciplines—including anthropology, sociology, and psychology—that apply scientific methodology to the study of humanity. These sciences have given us many insights about the nature of children.

Through the scientific observation of children, it has been documented that children apparently follow a preset order in their physical, social, emotional, and mental development. Physical development moves outward from the body trunk and head to the extremities. The heads and bodies of young children are proportionally much larger than those of adults. The larger bones and muscles of the arms and legs develop before the finer muscles of the hands and feet. All

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humans follow this same pattern of physical unfoldment.

Intellectually, all humans develop abilities in perception and reasoning according to similar patterns of unfoldment. It has been demonstrated that infants lose interest in all objects as soon as they are out of sight and seem surprised at their reappearance. Who has not enjoyed a game of peekaboo with a young child? But toddlers develop a sense of "object permanence." The "magic" of reappearing objects is gone and they lose interest in the game. At that stage, they prefer activities in which they can manipulate objects. Through such activities they will learn to distinguish between shapes and sizes. An awareness of distance, speed and time will later develop.

Similar patterns have been observed in social and emotional development. Even moral reasoning seems to follow a set plan of maturation. The social sciences have endeavored to understand these patterns in development and other dimensions of being human. Numerous theories have been developed to explain the patterns and their interrelatedness. But there are limits to science:

1. The observed patterns only describe human development. They are not prescriptions for creating "normal" children. There is no basis for expecting certain characteristics to develop on a tight time schedule. Each child is an individual and will unfold at his or her own pace. We must not set goals for children that will attempt to force them into a mold they are not ready to fill.
2. The certainty of observable phenomenon must never be confused with the theories offered to explain them. Human beings are fearfully and wonderfully made—we are complex creatures. Devotion to any given theory of human development may cause us to ignore important needs in the lives of our children or, even worse, to distort their growth into the pattern we consider normal. We must take care not to allow the social sciences to be mere tools for the defense of our culturally defined concepts about childhood.

On the other hand, the social sciences can help us understand the behavior and development of children. The information they provide can help us better relate to children and cooperate with their strengths and limitations. The sciences can help us adjust our expectations to match children's

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abilities and to use teaching methods that are developmentally appropriate. But we must not allow science to overly influence the place of children in the church, especially our goals for our children. Our vision must go beyond their physical, social, mental, and emotional development. We must concern ourselves with the total experience of being a child of God. There are aspects of human existence that science can never probe or explain. We would do well to think of children as whole human beings created to be vital, contributing members of God's household. We must grant them the place prescribed for them in the Word of God.

Children in the Bible

The third and highest authority which should be giving direction to our ministry with children is the Bible. As recorded in the Scriptures, children played a critical role in God's plan for His people. Within Israel, they were objects of His grace, wards of His care, and ministers of His purposes. But the attention given them was less on the basis of their age than on the basis of their place in the nation. They were members of God's covenant household. Children received special nurturing not because they were weak or intrinsically different from adults but rather because of the things they shared in common with the community. They were critical links in the national destiny of their people. Thus the Bible is not primarily concerned with the nature of children as children. Instead, it is concerned with the role of children within the community of the children of God.

In ancient Israel, children were first and foremost viewed as gifts from God. Yes, they were descendants of Adam and Eve and products of the human will. As such, they were marred by sin and existed in broken fellowship with their Creator. But their origin was in God, the source of all life. He formed them in their mother's womb. He gave and sustained their breath by His very breath.

Children were viewed as gifts of love from God. They were His promise for the future. When parents were young, children brought them joy; as parents aged, children provided them with sustenance. For the nation, children were a promise of future glory—Israel would continue as long as it had children. Their national destiny to bless all nations would be fulfilled through their offspring. The Messiah would be their child.

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Children were also viewed as gifts from their parents to the nation and to God. They were not born just into a nuclear family. They were born into a covenant community, a community that belonged to God and loved its children. It was a privilege and duty to return unto God that which He had given. The birth of a child was cause for the nation to celebrate and to renew its covenant with God.

It was the responsibility of the people of Israel to pass the covenant on to their children in a manner that would prepare them to pass it on to following generations. As originally made with Abraham, the covenant required circumcision as a means of sealing the pact and extending it into the next generation. The law of Moses later provided additional expectations for the community. Virtually every dimension of life was governed by these laws. Through them national and personal identities were formed in each succeeding generation. The nurture of children was the focal point of life in the community as governed by the Law.

The Law included instructions on how it was to be taught to the children. Parents were to teach their children to love God by obeying His commandments. Instruction was to take place in all the settings of life:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, *NIV*; see also Deuteronomy 4:9-14; 6:20-21; 11:18-21).

Parents also had the responsibility of teaching their children about their national history and about the meaning of their great religious festivals (Exodus 10:1, 2; 12:24-28; 13:8-10, 14-16; Deuteronomy 6:20-25; 32:7; Joshua 4:4-7, 19-24; Psalm 44:1; 71:18; 78).

The Law also provided that children were to be instructed through participation in the public ceremonies of Israel. They were to attend the national feasts (Leviticus 23:42; Deuteronomy 16:1-17). Once every seven years, the entire nation—including children and aliens—were to gather

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to hear the law of Moses read (Deuteronomy 31:9-13; Joshua 8:30-35). Also, many of the laws and ceremonies specifically addressed children (Exodus 13:2; 20:12; 21:15, 17; 22:22, 23, 29). The community was charged with seeing that children fulfilled their responsibilities to their parents and that parents fulfilled their responsibilities to their children.

From these and other passages, several observations and conclusions can be made about children in ancient Israel:

1. The principal idea about being a child was that of lineage and relationship rather than age. To be a child in Israel was to be a descendant of Abraham, a member of a family, and a partner in the covenant.
2. Children were to be cherished and protected as gifts from God. From Him they received eternal value.
3. All children were to be taught to "fear the Lord" through the knowledge of His law.
4. Parents were the primary teachers of children.
5. Israel was a learning community, and children were instructed with the adults. In general, children gathered with the adults when they assembled as the congregation of the Lord.
6. Both the private and public instruction of children centered on the religious ceremonies required by the Law. Public worship was one means of instruction.

Children in ancient Israel were incorporated into the life of the covenant community to create within them a sense of belonging and destiny. The law of God placed children at the center of the life of the nation. Unfortunately, Israel was not faithful to God and His law.

As an act of God's judgment, the Jewish people were exiled from the promised land. During the period between the Old and New Testaments, the role of children in Jewish society was slightly changed. Removed from Jerusalem and the Temple, the Jews built meeting houses called synagogues wherever they settled. Each synagogue served as a center for worship and study of the sacred Scriptures which now served as their central link to the presence of God.

In that setting of displacement, the Jewish people maintained a constant vigil to draw their children into the life and mission of Israel. Children (specifically boys) were for the first time assembled as a distinct group for the purpose of

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schooling them in the traditions of their people. Two key factors, no doubt, contributed to this congregating of boys: (1) The Temple and the Temple rituals were no longer accessible, thus the things of God had to be learned indirectly through the written and oral accounts of God's dealings with His people. This required specialized training in reading and interpreting the Scriptures. (2) The Jewish identity was under constant threat of absorption into the dominant cultures of the world. This required an intense counter-inculturation to prevent the loss of national identity. Their children had to be intentionally taught what it meant to be the children of Israel. In this environment Jewish boys were intensely prepared to take their place in the adult gatherings.

By the time of Christ, the synagogue was the center of Jewish life even in Palestine. The boy Jesus no doubt participated in the synagogue school where He studied the Hebrew language, memorized large portions of Scripture, and was drilled in the teachings of the great rabbis. He lived at a time when young children were excused from participation in the activities of the Temple. Only after proving Himself skilled in the interpretation of the Law and the Prophets (at about the age of twelve) could He like all other boys take His place with the men of the synagogue and in the court of men at the Temple.

Children figured prominently in the life and teachings of Jesus. Two prominent stories of His own childhood were set in the Temple. At eight days of age He was presented before the Lord in fulfillment of the requirements of the Law. This marked His entrance through circumcision into Israel's covenant with God. The prophecies given over Him on that occasion attested to both His identity with Israel as a nation of glory and His role in the coming salvation of the Gentiles (Luke 2:21-40).

At the age of twelve, Jesus made His first journey to Jerusalem for the Passover (Luke 2:41-50). Here we find Him in the Temple asking questions of the teachers of the Law, who were amazed by His knowledge. The significance of that event is often lost on the modern reader. Jesus was not asking questions because He was seeking answers from the teachers. Instead, He was using the accepted teaching method of his day in asking them questions that provoked them to

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rethink their understandings of God's Word. He had a thorough grasp of the issues facing His time and could challenge even the greatest thinkers to reconsider their opinions.

Christ's treatment of children reveals a conscious attempt to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. The adults of His time had largely forgotten their heritage and responsibilities toward their children. No doubt they had confidence that the teachers in the synagogues were preparing the children for life in Israel. As adults they were occupied with "weightier matters" such as Roman occupation and the coming Messiah.

Jesus recognized the fallacy of such reasoning. He knew that children were integral to the life of Israel. They were needed to point the way to the coming Kingdom. He admonished adults to emulate children if they wished to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:3, 4). Jesus used children as examples and object lessons (Matthew 18:2). He allowed a child a central role in one of His greatest miracles, the feeding of the multitude (John 6:9). But most importantly, He blessed children (Matthew 19:13-15). Children were the objects of His healing power (Matthew 9:18, 25; 17:14-18) and the subjects of His most stern teaching (Matthew 18:6). And He was touched by them and their adoration of Him (Matthew 21:15, 16).

Jesus understood that children are a gift of God for the community of God. As such they are a word from God. They convey something of His nature and will. The value and meaning of a gift are inseparable from the value attributed to the giver, thus the manner in which we receive children reflects our true disposition toward God. The real significance of children in the life of Christ was not so much what He did for them as what He did with them. With them, He called out to Israel to return to a place where they could hear the voice of God.

The Nature of the Church

The place of children in the church will always be affected by the church's prevailing understanding of its own nature. Children are segregated from adults in the life of the church in part because the church's own self-perception encourages segregation. (Unfortunately, segregation is also

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consciously or unconsciously encouraged between races, cultures, and socioeconomic classes.) Only when we rediscover the biblical images of God's redeemed people will we be able with confidence to welcome children into their rightful place in the family of God.

Modern Images of the Church

Since worship is the primary Christian gathering, the activities of worship symbolically define the nature of the church. The images taken from our meeting place become synonymous with our images of the church. From those images, our children draw much of their understanding of what it means to be Christian.

The modern place of worship is often little more than a lecture hall. The furnishings and seats all focus on a rostrum from which the sermon (lecture) will be delivered. Often behind the rostrum is a choir loft from which musical messages are delivered. The significant aspect of this arrangement is that it is suitable only for presentation. Sustained congregational interaction is virtually impossible. In other words, our church buildings send out powerful, if subtle, messages that worship is primarily an act of listening. The congregation is to be passive for most of the time, but children are not very good at being passive listeners. They are too active for most "adult worship," so we have provided places outside of the sanctuary where they can interact and worship. What is the image of worship and the church they are receiving there? Is it complete? In what ways is traditional Pentecostal worship suited for people of all ages?

Christianity once thought of its gatherings as a great banquet for the family of God (a covered dish "dinner on the grounds" affair). Churches today often resemble more a smorgasbord where members get exactly what they want but do not even know the people sitting next to them. The modern church is seldom thought of as a community gathering for persons of all ages. Instead, it is considered an activity center with programs for all ages.

Biblical Images of the Church

What are the visual images of the church we should be creating for our children? It is interesting that the Scriptures avoid defining the church in institutional terms. Instead, the

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church is described in the language of relationships. Quite a number of images are used to provide the description. The church is the body of Christ, comprised of individuals joined together as ligaments and joints of His body. The church is a living temple being constructed for God's habitation and comprised of living stones. The church is the family of God with brothers and sisters who are joint heirs with Christ. The church is the bride of Christ comprised of saints who will rule with Him.

The character of early Christian gatherings conformed to these visual images. The church met together in large or small groups daily. They assembled in homes, public places, Jewish synagogues and at the Temple. They ate together, prayed together, studied together, worshiped together, witnessed together, and conducted the business of the church together. The early church was a vibrant community that understood itself to be living in the presence of God.

Christians described themselves as witnesses of the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit. The memories they held of their gatherings were those of an intimate family. They had no opportunity or desire to view the church as a stagnant building or an entertaining set of programs. The church was the context for divine-human encounter. This is not to say the church lacked order, structure or discipline. It is to say that relationships took precedence over form; the church gathered to glorify God and build up the body of Christ. And children were there.

The Covenant Community

The New Testament images of the church are rooted in the Old Testament understanding of Israel as the people of God. At the core of Israel's self-understanding was the covenant they shared with God. *Covenant* was a common concept in the ancient Middle East, but one that needs some clarification in modern times. It is the same word that is translated "testament," as in the Old and New Testaments. But *testament* is an Old English word that has lost meaning except as a reference to the Bible or as a legal document that records the last wishes of the dead. *Covenant* is a better word for our times.

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Covenant is often treated as if it is a synonym for *contract*. The two words are similar but distinct in meaning. A contract is an agreement between two parties to fulfill commitments made to each other. The focus of a contract is on meeting the needs or desires of the two parties. A contract always specifies what the parties have agreed to do for each other. The expectation is that each party will be enriched by the fulfillment of the contract.

In the Bible, the focus of covenant is on the binding of individuals in a relationship. It is perhaps better thought of as a pact. In a covenant, individuals enter into an agreement that defines the manner in which they are to relate to one another. The emphasis on relationship in covenant is powerfully described in the account of Jonathan and David: "After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. . . . And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself" (1 Samuel 18:1-3, *NIV*; see also 20:8). The essence of the covenant God made with Israel was that He would be their God and they would be His people. The motivation for the covenant was God's love for humanity, His desire to redeem and bless all nations.

Covenants were not to be taken lightly. They represented the highest level of binding and were often formalized with the eating of a sacrificed animal. A common practice in the ancient world was to divide the carcass of the sacrificial animal into halves and for the parties of the covenant to walk between the halves. Thus, the sacrifice became a solemn symbol of the seriousness of a covenant. Those covenanted together shared a common life.

A covenant included vows which clarified the expectations of its members for each other. These terms were binding in that they made clear the manner in which the members of the covenant were to relate to one another. They were very much like a contract in that they focused on what was to be done by each partner in the covenant. The difference between a contract and the terms of a covenant is simply this: In a contract a relationship exists in order to achieve the terms of the contract; in a covenant the terms exist in order to maintain the relationship.

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Marriage serves as a good illustration of the distinctions between covenant and contract. Historically, marriage was understood as a covenant for life. Couples exchanged vows during the wedding ceremony, but these public statements served more as guidelines for a healthy marriage than as regulations to be enforced. Divorce was never granted for failing to fully live up to the standards. The marriage ended only when proof of the gravest offenses could be established.

Modern society has moved into viewing marriage as a contract. Couples live together for pleasure and mutual fulfillment. A contract is needed to protect their rights when the pleasure has ended. A similar situation developed in ancient Rome, which took pride in being a nation governed by civil laws. Jesus's teachings about marriage and divorce may be understood in this light. Israel had begun to read the law of Moses through the lens of Roman culture. Men were viewing their marriages as contracts which they could end for whatever reason.

In a similar fashion, the modern world tends to view its relationship with children in terms of a contract instead of a covenant. The growing distance between children and adults allows the young to be treated like a competing society, a nation of their own. They have resources the adult world needs: energy, innocence, and a future of productivity. And there is an implied contract. Adults are to provide for the security, pleasure, and general well-being of children while they are young in exchange for the same services from them when the adults retire. In such an environment, it is easy for one group to treat the other as objects to be manipulated for their own satisfaction. Today, many parents view their children primarily as objects to satisfy their own emotional needs. It is no wonder that modern societies are marred by the abuse of children and the elderly by those who should be caring for them.

Covenant requires that Christians view children and relationships with them differently. We are part of the same society. We are bound together for our common good but also for the good of others and for the glory of God. We share the same history and destiny. We are joined together in such a way that there is never a time we are not meeting one another's needs. Even our weakest members offer wholeness to the body. Thus our commitments are in sickness and

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in health until death do us part. They do not end when the terms become inconvenient. In covenant there is no room for the discarding of the young or the abandonment of the elderly. We are bound together for our very existence.

There is an extended social dimension to covenant. Covenants are never private. In ancient times, they were generally witnessed by others who became partners in the covenant.

The witness was often an authority figure who would guarantee compliance and mediate future disagreements. Covenants with God were made only at His invitation, and since there is no higher authority, He guaranteed His own covenant. Thus God alone walked between the pieces of the sacrifice when He entered into covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15). Furthermore, God serves as witness to all covenants. He is a partner and judge in all relationships.

In Christianity, there is no such thing as a private relationship with God. Each person must have a personal encounter with God through Jesus Christ. But our relationship with Jesus is on the basis of the new covenant of His sacrifice. We must be baptized into His body, making us one in Him. The church must see itself as a community of persons who have been baptized into covenant with Christ. We must live together as people bound in covenant.

Our covenant requires that we honor the family as a central expression of the family of God and as the primary context for Christian instruction. It is the responsibility of the church to oversee the covenant in all of its expressions. We must teach families how to live and how to care for and teach their young. We must hold them accountable for doing so in light of God's Word as He shines it upon their paths. The church can never truly honor the family while avoiding its duties toward the family and all its members.

The covenant also requires that the church accept responsibility for discipling its children into spiritual maturity and into their own healthy union with the church. Families must be viewed as full expressions of the church but not as substitutions for the church. Congregations are accountable for helping each child find his or her rightful place in the body of Christ.

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Children in the Covenant Community

If children are to gain their rightful place in the family of God, the efforts of the entire congregation will be needed. The pastor and elders of the congregation must accept responsibility for leading this endeavor. In addition to the proper understanding of the place of children in the family of God, the task will require the cultivation of a godly disposition toward children, the establishment of corporate ceremonies for the enfoldment of children, and programs for their discipleship.

Children belong at the center of the life of the church, not the annex. They are members of the covenant community and are to exist in relationships of mutual love and responsibility with the entire family of God. When the church gathers to be the body of Christ and to fulfill the mission of Christ, children should be involved. This is especially true when the church gathers around the Word of God in study and worship. But it is also true when the church gathers to conduct business, share fellowship, and make disciples. Children should be present at funerals and weddings and birth celebrations. They belong because these events provide for them the best instruction in the meaning of following Christ. But they also belong because these events are expressions of the covenant we have with Christ and one another. The events themselves require the presence of children in order for the church to realize the full meaning of the gatherings. Without children, Christian activities are void of hope for the future.

These words no doubt seem foreign to many, for we live in an age when children are often sheltered from the harsh realities of life. They are sheltered because it is presumed they cannot handle the pressures of adulthood, or because we can afford to offer them a more age-appropriate activity, or for some other good-sounding reason. But they are also sheltered because we simply do not want our children with us. They are noisy, messy and inefficient. They demand time and energy. They ask questions. In our fast-paced, consumer-oriented, selfish society, we want church to satisfy our adult needs.

It is not enough for us to overcome our objections to children being present with the church. We must also take great care to involve them in the activities of the church. The church must constantly work to bring children into its life

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and ministry. This will require that their gifts, talents, and opinions be sought out and utilized. Their contributions must be valued on the same basis that all others are valued. Their acts of participation should never be viewed as insignificant or as mere entertainment.

These efforts may be crystallized through the wise use of selected acts of enfoldment. Several acts of enfoldment will be discussed in later chapters. They include birth celebrations, baby dedications, water baptism, and church membership. These serve a twofold purpose. First, they remind the members of the congregation of their covenant with the church in general and its children in particular. Second, they are benchmarks for children in their incorporation into the life of the church.

Discipleship of Children

Through participation in the covenant community, children will be formed in their dispositions toward God and others. But formation is not enough. There must also be transformation. Because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, everyone who desires to be saved must be delivered from the power of sin and death. Each person must choose between living under the lordship of Jesus or following his or her own desires. The church must make disciples of its own children.

The challenge of discipling the children of the church is to achieve a balance in treating them as members of the covenant community while instructing them in their need for salvation. Much of this problem centers on our adult perceptions of salvation. Our conversion may have come with an instant, radical transformation. But most children lack the life experiences to require such drastic, outward changes. By the grace of God their knowledge of sin is limited.

Nonetheless, children are born into sin. The Bible clearly teaches that through the sins of Adam and Eve, sin entered the human race. Children are marred by its presence. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. Forgiveness from our sins requires that we repent from them. To repent is to "turn away from." Thus true repentance requires a conscious rejection of both our personal acts of sin and all that is sinful. Repentance should not be confused

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with sorrow. Sorrow often appropriately accompanies repentance, but true repentance is an act of the will and not the emotions. Christians must live in a state of repentance. It is not a once-for-all act. We are continually rejecting sin and turning toward the righteousness of God.

True repentance is the product of faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice for our sins. On the basis of this faith, we are accepted by God into a reconciled relationship with Him—we are justified. Through Jesus Christ we become fully acceptable to God, just as if we had never sinned.

Out of His grace God not only justifies, but He also acts to restore one's ability to live righteously. In other words, He regenerates the believer. He removes the curse of sin, which is death, and gives new life. Regeneration is the moral and spiritual renewal of the individual that equips him or her to live in harmony with the known will of God.

Sanctification is the act of God's grace whereby He makes the regenerated person holy, delivering that person from the residual moral affects of sin. Because the Christian lives in flesh that has been accustomed to sin, there remains in him or her a certain connectedness to his or her sinful past. Sanctification thus centers on the transformation of the human affections so that they are tuned to the heart of God. This is an act of cleansing and renewal. As individuals become more like Christ, they are made more aware of their own sinfulness and of their need for continued repentance. This doctrine teaches that the atonement of Jesus Christ provides for the complete breaking of the power of sin over the life of the individual. It is not the will of God for His children to sin, and He has made a way for their escape. The law of sin and death has no power over the believer who fully trusts in Jesus.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit is another important doctrine for the discipleship of children. This is an act of God's grace whereby the sanctified individual is equipped to do service for God. The focus of this baptism is on a relationship of complete surrender to God's presence and work in the world. It involves an enhanced communion between the individual and God. The Spirit-filled individual is under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit and serves as a willing agent of the Spirit's activities on earth. This is an act of God's grace whereby He enables the believer to more fully participate in His work of calling the world to

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Himself.

These doctrines can be translated into the language of children without distorting their truth. The key is to present them not as stale doctrines but as they are given in the Bible—as truths expressed in living stories about a personal God who is involved in the lives of people.

Using the stories of the Bible and simple, concrete language, children can be taught at an early age that God is their heavenly Father who loves them. They can understand that He is always present with them, watching out for their good. Further, that He intends to bring everybody who loves Him to live with Him one day. They can also accept that God expects them to do right things but that He loves them even when they do bad things. He will punish them if they choose to do wrong but He is always ready to forgive them. And He has the power to help them choose to do the right things. They can believe that God's love and power are expressed toward us through Jesus Christ, who died so we would not have to be punished for our sins or controlled by sin. Children can grasp that life's purpose and greatest joys are to be found in communion with God and service to Him. Finally, they can be taught to expect great experiences with God, experiences they must prepare for but which come in God's time. God will fill them with His Spirit and use them in His service.

We must not underestimate the power of God to speak to the "least" of His creation. When properly presented to them, children will respond to Christ and the gospel. Then we will be able to accept them into the covenant community of faith on the same basis that we accept adult converts. As our fellow believers, we must be prepared to hear the children's testimony of faith in the language they speak.

The simple faith of a child must be accepted as genuine. Our task is to nurture that faith so that it remains when challenged by the child's ever-expanding world.

Processes of Discipleship and Children

Discipleship is another ancient concept that has lost meaning in the modern world. We are more accustomed to think of schools, students, teachers, and subjects. Our modern emphasis is upon students mastering a variety of subjects (such as grammar, math, and science), while discipleship focuses on the learner being mastered by a subject. In

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ancient Greece and Rome, young men might attach themselves to a teacher whom they believed held the keys to truth and human fulfillment. This teacher became their master who was to lead them into the truth that would give direction to their lives.

The New Testament uses this concept of discipleship in describing the Christian's relationship to Jesus. Believers are not students trying to master the truths of God. They are disciples who are being mastered by Christ, the living Word of God. The focus of Christian discipleship is upon conforming to the image and stature of Jesus.

Discipleship is at the heart of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). As outlined by Christ, the process is to include baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This represents one dimension of discipleship. It involves bringing the individual into a personal relationship with Jesus, one that is marked by public confession of His lordship. Baptism is a covenantal concept and therefore also reflects conscious entry into the body of Christ as the covenant people of God.

Christ included a second dimension of discipleship—teaching disciples to obey all that He has commanded. In this dimension, discipleship requires personal discipline in order to conform to the Word of God. It is the responsibility of the church to guide every convert, regardless of age, into a lifestyle of conformity to the teachings of Christ.

As presented in the remainder of this book, there are four major methods the church must utilize in the personal discipleship of its children and other believers. The first method is modeling. If children are to conform to the teachings of Christ, they need models of mature Christian living to pattern themselves after. Our children especially need teachers and parents who will be "player-coaches" with them—models who know the struggles of children and can mentor them into maturity.

A second method is instructing. Instruction implies an inner building program. Disciples of all ages need resources and skills in order to structure their lives around the Word of God. The church must provide those resources through carefully planned instruction. Children need the same resources that all others need, but they must be instructed within the bounds of their abilities and personal needs. One way of looking at it is to simply recognize that children are

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under basic construction while adult converts must undergo drastic reconstruction. It is in this area that age-level grading becomes important. The church must provide a teacher-guide for each age level.

The third method is discipling. Here we are referring to the second dimension of discipleship. Children need to be guided into the basic Christian disciplines. They must be directed into the skills needed for an ongoing walk with Jesus Christ. They need to be coached into active surrender to Him and service for Him. Again, this calls for age-level grading and must be delegated by the congregation to a teacher-mentor and to parents.

The fourth method is incorporating. As was noted above, we must take great care to infold our children into the life of the church. This is a primary duty of the pastor and elders but requires the full cooperation of the entire congregation. Each of these four methods will be discussed in greater detail in the later chapters of this book.

Conclusion

Children deserve the best we can give them. Congregations that are able should provide programs and activities that will fully engage the interests of their children. Puppets, Bible videos and indoor gym sets may well express the love of the church while effectively communicating aspects of the gospel. But what children need most are a congregation that fully receives them into the family of God, pastors and teachers that serve as models and guides in discipleship, and families that nurture them into the covenant of Jesus Christ through example and instruction. Our task is to pass our faith on to them in a manner that will enable them to pass it on to others. This is the pattern of the Scriptures. It is our covenant to care for our children.

Covenant to Nurture Development

The primary reason adolescence is so distressing is because youngsters (and parents) do not fully understand what is happening to them. Many of their fears and anxieties and discouragements could be obviated by a simple instructional program.

James Dobson
Hide or Seek