

Family First in Youth Discipleship and Evangelism

Posted By [Jon Nielson](#) On August 11, 2011 @ 5:30 AM In [Commentary,Featured,Opinion](#)

As a high school pastor, I am constantly thinking, praying, and talking with others about how we can teach young people the Bible and encourage them to be disciples of Jesus Christ. I look back with thankfulness on my high school years and the men who contributed in significant ways to my spiritual growth through discipleship, coaching, and pastoring. There is a *place* for a well-run youth ministry in the context of the local church, as I will seek to articulate in part two of this article, coming soon. But there is a *primary* sphere where evangelism and discipleship of young people must occur. It is the context of the family, the Christian home. Christian parents—*not* youth pastors—have the primary role, responsibility, and calling to evangelize and disciple their children.

The Biblical Pattern

Throughout biblical history, the family unit is the primary mechanism used by God to spread the saving knowledge of him. God's servant Moses, after instructing God's people concerning the God's identity and the people's call to love him and keep his Word, turned immediately to instruct the parents of the community regarding their responsibility to their children:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise (Deut. 6:6-7).

Moses describes a relationship of evangelism and discipleship, grounded in the Word of God, that takes place in the context of the God-centered home between parents and children. It was the parents (not early Israelite "youth pastors") on whom Moses laid the primary responsibility for passing on and applying God's Word to the next generation. Here was a call to teach God's Word diligently (*evangelize*), and then to train children in God's Word, even when walking "by the way" in work and leisure (*discipleship*). It was a call—first and foremost—to parents.

This theme is picked up in the New Testament as well, especially as we read in the book of Acts about the church of Jesus Christ beginning to grow and flourish during the age of the apostles. A striking example is the Philippian jailer who, in Acts 16:32, asked Paul and Silas: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Almost immediately, the scene shifts to Paul and Silas, as "they spoke the word of the Lord to him *and to all who were in his house.*" As we read, then, that the jailer and all his family have been baptized, we see that this man has—even in the moments surrounding his conversion—identified his home as the most immediate sphere of personal evangelism. What a beautiful account! One can only imagine the transformation that took place in the now-Christian home, as an entire family began the journey of following Christ together.

Proper Mindset for Parents

If the primary place for evangelism and discipleship of children is in the home under the leadership of parents, then how should that affect the mindset of Christian parents as they interact with their local church?

First, parents must be willing to prayerfully, humbly, and yet boldly, take responsibility for the spiritual growth of their children, as much as it depends on them. I don't mean to heap blame on faithful Christian parents whose children have turned away from Christ despite their best efforts to speak the truth of the gospel into their lives and live as godly examples to them. Rather, I want to challenge parents who perhaps fail to feel the full weight of their responsibility for praying, teaching, sweating, and even weeping for the sake of their children's eternal destiny.

Parents must commit themselves to the *evangelism* of their kids—seeing themselves as the primary "missionaries" in their lives. This involves a commitment to speaking verbally, clearly, and often the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and all of its implications. It means actively and intentionally making the Bible the central voice in the home, reading it to the family and explaining it as clearly as possible. Parents must commit themselves, also, to the *discipleship* of their kids. This activity moves into the area of relationship and application. It is involving our children in our lives, pursuing a genuine relationship, and teaching them with words and example how to actively apply the truths of the gospel in everyday life. Christian parents, do you view your home as the first wave of evangelistic and discipleship ministry in the lives of your children?

Second, parents should never presume that the church will do the work that is primarily theirs. Relying on a youth pastor or church mentor to serve as the primary gospel-shaping force in the lives of our children will actually almost guarantee the *failure* in that task for even the most gifted and godly youth leader. How can a youth pastor realistically

encourage a high school boy to read and study the Bible if that boy has never seen his Christian father doing the same? In the context of the local church, the effective youth pastor seeking gospel growth in the lives of students *reinforces, strengthens, and bolsters* a gospel work that has sprung out of—and been nourished already within—the context of a Christ-centered home. While parents should see their evangelism and discipleship of their children as primary, they should not be hesitant to involve other mature Christians in these activities in the lives of their children in order to further the work they have started (more on this in part two).

Proper Mindset for Churches

How, then, can churches support the primary work of parents who truly desire to evangelize and disciple their children?

First, churches must actively and openly place this responsibility on the parents of their congregation. They must remind them of it, and call them to it! Silence on this issue for pastors and other church leaders is not neutral. Failure to call parents to serve as the primary spiritual leaders in the lives of their children, all the while going about ministry and providing great youth programs for church kids, actually can implicitly say to parents concerning the spiritual development of their children, “We’ve got this; just leave it to us.”

Every church must sort out exactly what this means in its own context. Does it mean cutting a certain youth activity? Maybe. Does it mean calling parents to account from the pulpit? Probably. Church leaders, are we supporting and encouraging our parents to take primary responsibility for the souls of their children, or subtly sending the message—even through dynamic programming—that we are better equipped to do the work for them?

Second, churches must not only *call* parents to their spiritual responsibility for their children, but also *equip* them for it and *encourage* them in it. We must become more creative at training our congregation to be ministry leaders—preachers, teachers, and spiritual mentors—in the context of their own homes. Many churches with vibrant ministries have many venues in which Christian adults can be ministered to by church leaders. But if all of our ministries are geared toward feeding, and none toward training and equipping, then we are not preparing parents to do the gospel work that only they can—and must—do.

When the primacy of the family in evangelism and discipleship of children is both embraced by parents and affirmed by the church, a biblically grounded and church-based youth ministry can then be incredibly valuable. That will be the topic of my next article.

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