

A WEED IN THE CHURCH



*How a culture of age segregation is
destroying the younger generation, fragmenting
the family, and harming church*

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CHAPTER 1

A CHILD OF THE MOVEMENT

I entered the stream of history in the 1950s, at the dawn of the systematic, age-segregated ministry movement. I went with the flow, not knowing where the water came from or where it was going, embracing the practices that everyone thought were best. I was a child of the movement.

I Did it All

Like most pastors in my generation, I was a proponent of the age-segregated model of outreach during my early years of ministry. I did it all: youth minister, singles minister, senior pastor, and everything in between. I have worked in the nursery, played guitar for the toddlers, and taught a high school Sunday school class. As an elder, I have been involved in hiring and firing youth ministers. I have made statements such as, “After you hire a senior pastor, youth and music ministers are next.” I bought the literature of Youth Specialties and even started a Campus Life chapter under the leadership of Youth for Christ. I have said, along with the best of them, “It’s a sin to bore a kid with the gospel.”¹

1 Char Meredith, *It’s a Sin to Bore a Kid: The Story of Young Life* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978), 53.

I have argued that you must meet youth on their own ground, and was the greatest advocate for pragmatism in the churches where I served. I proactively and creatively helped to lead churches to think this way. In my twenties and early thirties, I could have been a poster child for modern youth ministry. I read the books, studied the programs, and did my best to ensure that the techniques they espoused were practiced in our church.

This perspective was driven by my own experience as a young man. The workers of Campus Crusade for Christ profoundly impacted me while I was in high school. They brought the gospel, and God saw to it that they would find me. Their ministry, along with the ministry of my father and a local church pastor, played an important role in my conversion. So much so that years later, when I heard the news that the founder of Campus Crusade, Bill Bright, had died, I sat in my office and wept out of thankfulness for those missionaries who had come to my high school campus. They threw out the seed of the gospel, it fell on sinful but fruitful ground, and I was converted. They loved the youth they sought to reach; they loved me.

So I am grateful for how God uses all things for His own glory. I do not despise the kindness of the Lord and how he uses our practices to save the lost and heal the broken. But all is not well on the discipleship front in our churches, and we should not be content to pattern our lives after secular movements and the forces of youth culture.

The Errors of Our Times

In the introduction to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the authors speak of a problem that besets all of us; the errors of our spiritual fathers that become ours.

They were not so much their own errors, as of the times wherein they lived! Thus do most men take up their religion upon no better account than Turks and Papists take up theirs, because it is the religion of the times and places wherein they live.¹

I am aware that no matter what historical moment we enter, we can know with certainty that there are problems with the practices of the times and they will affect us.

Fragmenting the Family

Today's church life is highly fragmented into age and life-stage discipleship opportunities. There is a ministry niche for everyone, including infants, toddlers, first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth graders; junior high, senior high, college, singles, young marrieds, marrieds, senior adults, and the divorced. Thirteen-year-olds hang out with thirteen-year-olds; twenties with twenties, marrieds with marrieds, and seniors with seniors.

At a time in history when nearly every social opportunity the secular world offers separates the generations and the family, the church has followed suit. We seem to have fallen in love with popular educational philosophy and target marketing. The church has joined ranks with an age-segregated world.

When I realized this, I became convinced that something was wrong with the whole system. A wild plant had overtaken the garden. I began to believe that the problem could be traced primarily to one fundamental issue: the abandonment of Scripture as it pertains to our discipleship philosophy and practice. It seemed

¹ "To the Christian Reader, Especially Heads of Families," Westminster Confession of Faith, (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003. First published 1646.), 6.

to me that we had built our approach to ministry on a new revolutionary educational and cultural movement.

I don't know how I missed it. I don't know how, after decades of local church involvement and Bible reading, it never occurred to me that the pattern in Scripture is so different when compared to the age-segregated pattern of the modern church. But, as I began to recognize our church's constant practice of separating into different sub-groups I came to three conclusions.

First, age segregation was not founded in Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation you only see age integrated worship and discipleship. And there are a host of commands establishing it.

Second, it is actually tearing the fabric of the family, which is essential to the church. I saw that we are losing the youth in our church. They are increasingly worldly, immature, and dishonoring to their parents and other authorities.

Third, this practice actually came about as a result of easily identifiable forces at work in the culture at large. Various modern movements, which I too had embraced, are the driving factors of the age-segregated world we have created; specifically, the coupling of two major forces apply—the rise of youth culture (something that did not exist in past generations) and the modern public school movement. The church copied the public school model of age segregation and embraced the rising of youth culture.

Harming the Younger Generation

These realizations framed the beginning of my change of perspective. I saw the pain in families. I saw worldliness in our

youth and the corrupting influence they had on each other, and it got my attention. I saw severe problems in contemporary church and family life, and it caused me to question what we were doing.

Not only was there significant pain, the generations hardly had anything to do with one another. While the Bible presents a picture of a big family where the older teach the younger, our churches had peers teaching one another. It was like everyone had to figure everything out fresh and on their own within their own peer group, without older and wiser members helping them along the way.

Then I saw what Scripture taught and it all made sense. The generations were meant to be together in the church. This whole culture of age segregation was fragmenting the family, harming the younger generation and dividing the church.

As my concerns increased, the theological issues began to be clarified in my mind. I decided to do something about it. During an elders' meeting, I drew a graph on the whiteboard to illustrate how our church was fragmenting the families of our congregation. On the top of the graph I listed all the ministries we were providing, and on the left, their function, whether equipping or evangelism. Then I added a third category: fragments family.

Dividing the Church

Literally, every single program or ministry in our church separated the church into subgroups and divided the church family into an age-segregated system of discipleship. Everything we were doing fragmented the church and the family. But this was no different from any church I had ever been a part of. And then I realized, "I'm part of the problem. This is the only thing I have ever done." I was

at the whiteboard that day to argue that we needed to shift some, or at least one, of our programs to help keep our families together.

However, this was just the beginning of the changes I would make in my views of youth and family ministry. In the years following, my thinking regarding discipleship methodology underwent a radical transformation. This was fueled by a return to a cardinal tenet of the Protestant faith, *Sola Scriptura*, which argues that God's Word alone is sufficient for faith and practice.² This principle holds the Bible as the exclusive foundation for all that we do. It is rooted in the belief that man's notions for how to live must be set aside for God's clear directives. These directives are found in His inspired, written revelation, and God's people are to limit themselves to obedience to His revealed will.³

I progressively realized that the modern-age, segregated ministry model had largely developed from traditions, educational philosophies, cultural shifts, cultural preferences, and the opinions of creative leaders rather than biblical principles. I will speak in detail on this in the next chapter.

If All I Had Was Scripture

If I began with Scripture alone, I would have no reason for age-segregated Christianity. In other words, if all I had was the Bible, it

2 Deuteronomy 4:1-4; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3

3 "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word, and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed." "Of the Holy Scriptures," The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) republished in *The Baptist Confession of Faith & The Baptist Catechism* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian; Carlisle, PA: Reformed Baptist Publications of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America, 2010), 3.

would be difficult—if not impossible—to establish the credibility of current practices.

I was humbled to learn that God’s vision for training young people is beautiful and wise and comprehensive. *And* it stands in sharp contrast to the culture-driven model I once advocated.

I realized that I was blind to the clear patterns of discipleship revealed in Scripture. I realized that I was a child of a movement that was born out of general blindness to Scripture. For twenty-five years of ministry, it did not occur to me that the only pattern in Scripture for discipleship was an age-integrated pattern that was contrary to the age-segregated pattern I was practicing. I was clueless to the fact that not a single godly leader in Scripture ever practiced it. What is worse, it never even occurred to me to question the practice. I was caught in a culture that had rejected biblical patterns.

Time to Rebuild

What I drew on the whiteboard in that elders’ meeting is the pattern of most churches in America today. As a general rule, churches separate family members for worship, equipping, evangelism, celebration, and prayer. Most churches are so comprehensively programmed for age segregation that sons and daughters are rarely together with their parents or siblings in the corporate meetings of the church. Why? They have been divided by a vast network of age-segregated activities.

Don’t get me wrong, I am not against ministry to youth. In fact, the Bible presents a detailed testimony for how to minister to youth. I love ministry to young people. Being surrounded by them

in my work has always been one of my greatest joys. The church in which I am currently a pastor is no exception. It consists of almost 70 percent youth. Our church is a youth ministry. My desire is to see them believe the gospel so they can blossom into great and mighty warriors for Jesus Christ. I desperately want to see them equipped to be salt and light in our culture. And yet, the methods I now use among these young people are vastly different from those I once embraced.

But do methods matter? Or is it only the message that matters?

The Preaching of the Gospel Is at Stake

This book exists because of the importance of the methods and message of preaching the gospel. It defends one of the critical methods the Bible has commanded: that the gospel be preached to the younger generation. The gospel is the central matter for everything in life. It is the highest priority of all, for it is “the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16). Without the priority of preaching the gospel, there is no true conversion, no true church, and no true sanctification in any area of life. The preaching of the true gospel and genuine conversion is the beginning of all transformation.

With such a precious and treasured message, it matters greatly how you communicate the gospel to youth. The Bible clearly spells out specific ways to pass on the treasure of the gospel to youth. There is a biblical methodology for the evangelization and discipleship of youth, and their equipping in the church and in the family.

Methods Matter

The Bible not only talks about the content of the message but how the message is delivered. We should care deeply about what that methodology looks like. If we don't care, or if we think we have a better idea, we are acting like unbelievers.

It is a well-known fact that the modern church is plagued with false gospels. The most visible type is easy believism, where there is no repentance or life change. Yet we must understand that the same thing that delivers a false gospel also gives us age segregation. We get a false gospel by not taking seriously everything God has said about the gospel. Leave out one detail and we lose the gospel. If we omit repentance, we have a false gospel. If we replace faith with works, we have a false gospel. And the same goes with adding. If we insist on the reliance upon certain spiritual gifts, a prayer formula, or spiritual disciplines for the new birth, the result is the belief in a false gospel because sinners are redeemed by grace alone through faith alone by Christ alone. Any change presents a gospel that is not *the* gospel. Similarly, if we leave out critical elements that the Bible has explicitly prescribed for the discipleship of youth, we end up with a false methodology.

Ignoring Details

There are many details given in Scripture for how we ought to preach the gospel to the rising generation. If we leave any of them out, we have compromised the communication of the gospel. We may have the message of the gospel right, but we are not communicating it in the way that God has prescribed.

Adding and Subtracting from Scripture

Does it really matter if we add to or subtract from the methods the Bible presents for the communication of the gospel? I maintain that man sins by adding to or subtracting from the ways that the Bible says that youth are to be gathered and evangelized and instructed (see Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32; Psalm 119:160; Proverbs 30:6; Revelation 22:18-19). The Word of God is sufficient for the communication of the gospel to the rising generation, for it contains “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). Here in this book, I document the various ways God has prescribed to communicate the gospel to the next generation. Honoring the details of the Word of God is what preserves the true gospel, and also shows us how to preserve a right delivery of what is the most important message that can ever be delivered.

You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

—Deuteronomy 4:2

If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

—Revelation 22:18-19