

WHAT DO OUR CHILDREN DESERVE FROM THE LOCAL CHURCH?

[The major premise of and some ideas in the following article (the three phases of learning in particular) are not original with this author. They are derived from an article published in the bulletin of the Northside Church of Christ, Calhoun, GA, August 9, 2009, entitled, "A Guide To Worship," the author of which is unknown.]

Children are precious. They are deserving of much. Perhaps every parent has uttered, "I want to make my child's early years better than my own," or "I want my child to have all the things I could not." The attitude behind such statements is honorable and commendable. It is an expression of "natural affection" (cf. 2 Tim. 3:3), which is pleasing to God. It manifests a desire to "nurture" and provide for these little ones entrusted to our care (cf. Eph. 6:4; 1 Tim. 5:8). Children (and adults for that matter) need "play time" and activities which offer enjoyment and pleasure. There is nothing inherently wrong with enjoyable activities and fun, as long as it does not trespass any law of the Lord. Any activity which is contrary to any Bible principle or command is sin (1 John 3:4). It is important to note, however, that it is the responsibility of the home (parents) to "nurture" (Eph. 6:4) and to provide avenues of entertainment necessary for healthy growth. Sadly, there is a growing trend towards usurping God's design for raising children. Local churches have taken it upon themselves, without God's authority, to offer entertainment as a means (or ruse) to attract children and their parents. The implication is that God's Word is not enough to attract souls (cf. Rom. 1:16-17; 10:17). Another implication, which is sadly underappreciated, is that children are the best judges of what they need spiritually. How can a child, who is unable to provide for himself physically, know what is best for him spiritually? No loving parent would allow his children to determine their own diet or the time they go to bed. If allowed to do so, most children would live in Willy Wonka-land, eating only chocolates and other sweets and would be up playing at all hours of the night. Yet, when it comes to the most important aspect of the child's being, his eternal soul, many parents will shirk their God-given responsibilities to care for the child and delegate the decision of where to worship (**and when**) to the child.

So, what is the responsibility of the local church regarding child rearing? First, the local church should teach and train young adults who are planning to marry or are already married, what God expects of them as parents. God admonishes older Christians to train the younger (Tit. 2:1-8). Second, the local church should assist the parents (since it is their obligation) in preparing the child for eternity (Deu. 6:6-8; Eph. 6:4). The local church can accomplish this by offering Bible classes which are age specific and by example during the worship assembly. Consider the following "phases of learning:"

PHASE I (little children): At an early age, children cannot be expected to understand what it means to worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). But they can begin. They can be trained how to "act" during the time we set aside for worship. They can be taught to respect the "place" (not because it, itself, is Holy, but because worship to God takes place there). Children can be taught to sit still, show respect, and be quiet. Though this is contrary to their nature, it is a good place to start and teaches them that there is something "different" about this time and place.

PHASE II (older children): Gradually children can become participants, rather than just observers. Though their minds are not yet mature, and their attention is still hard to maintain, children can begin to practice what they've been taught about authorized worship to God. Though they may not be of an age or mental capacity to say that they are "true worshippers"

(John 4:24), they are well on their way. They respect the acts of worship, the place of worship, and act accordingly.

PHASE III (teenagers & adults): Now, with a better understanding of God's Word, our participation in worship is more profound. As children and adults grow in the truth, they eventually come to a mature knowledge of truth (1 Tim. 2:4) and obey the Gospel plan of salvation (i.e., hear, believe, repent, confess and be baptized). Now, they are "true worshippers" of God. They no longer attend worship services because "mommy and daddy said so;" they attend because they desire to please and be faithful to God. They do not imitate "acts" of worship; they worship by participating in God authorized acts.

What children need from the local church is a place to learn how to worship God acceptably. It is the responsibility of parents to raise their children and to teach them the ways of the Lord. The local church can "assist" parents in this effort, but should never attempt to usurp God's design for the home. The church that seeks to only do such things as are authorized in the New Testament and "assist" parents as they teach their children the same, is the one that is seeking to simply be obedient to God. A church that seeks to overtake the role of the home by offering entertainment, fun, and games, is one whose intentions are not Biblically motivated.

Growing up is a process, and so is teaching children how to be pleasing to God. If a child is taught to respect the place and time of worship at a young age, it will be a blessing to him for the rest of his life. If a child is trained to think that he can determine when, how, and where to worship when he is young, what do you suppose the result will be when he is grown? Remember the general principle set forth by the inspired preacher, "train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Pro. 22:6).

- *Brad Green*