

Spiritual Growth for Tweens in Transition

By Dr. Rob Rienow

We have a new group of people in the church today. They have always been with us, but now we have a name for them – “tweens.” These young people are somewhere between fourth and seventh grade, and often find themselves awkwardly caught between the world of childhood and the coming pressures of teen culture. These are years of intense spiritual battle, and significant spiritual opportunity. Are these boys and girls children, teens, or in a category all to themselves? How the church views, responds, and seeks to nurture faith in these “tweens” is of the utmost importance.

What can church leaders do to point these children, who are on the brink of becoming young adults, toward a lifelong faith in Jesus Christ? Thankfully, God has given us the answers in the Scriptures. In the Bible we have everything important about everything important and everything that matters about everything that matters. Does the evangelism and discipleship of the next generation matter? It is of supreme importance in the eyes of God, and He has not left us without a strategy and method for how He wants His people, and His church to impress the hearts of children with a love for Christ.

If we were to lock ourselves in a room with the Bible and ask, “Lord, as I search your Word, will you please show me your plan for reaching “tweens” with the Gospel and helping them grow in Christ?” What do you think you would find? This is the essential question church leaders must ask in every area of ministry strategy. What has God said about this ministry issue in His Word? Let’s consider how God speaks to the issue of ministry to tweens.

First, and not surprisingly, the word “tween” is not in the Bible. More importantly, this life stage is not specifically mentioned either. Being a “tweenager” is a new idea, which has been born out of our secular culture. This new stage is little more than an extension of another recent cultural invention – adolescence. Because of this newly invented “lifestage” we now expect people between the ages of 12-22 to be irresponsible, disrespectful, disconnected, and controlled by hormones. Young people tend to live up to the expectations we have of them, and many of our teens today are doing exactly that. In some senses, the creation of the new “tween” category is an extension of the false construct of adolescence. Through the 4200 combined years of Jewish and Christian history, God’s people have seen only two “life stages” in the Scriptures – childhood and adulthood. The bar/bat mitzah in the Jewish tradition is held at age 13 to transition the young person from childhood into adulthood. The same principle held true in the Christian world for the first 1900 years of the church. Children were viewed as children until their transition to adulthood (not necessarily at age 13). Church leaders need to decide whether they will allow God’s Word or the culture to determine our labels and categories. Will we mirror what the culture gives us, or will we let the Bible shape our thinking? If we follow the pattern of the Scriptures, we will view “tweens” as children, and understand that their “next step” is to enter the world of young adulthood.

If God views people in this age group as children, our next question is, “Lord, what have you said in your Word about how you want children to come to Christ and grow in Him?” Tragically, I spent my first ten years in youth ministry without asking this question. I used whatever creative methods that I thought would work. From the perspective of outsiders, I was wildly successful. We would see 500 high school and junior high students participating in our programs each month. I now deal with the harsh reality that the majority of those students who were seemingly on-track spiritually as high school students, are now, as adults in their 20s, no longer following the Lord.

So what method does God want us to use to lead children toward lifelong faith? This is the million dollar question for everything we do in Children’s Ministry, and there are two essential answers in God’s word which should drive our strategy.

Mission #1: Equip parents to disciple their children at home, and encourage children to give their hearts to their parents.

In Deuteronomy 6:5-7 we find the Great Commandment and the first action step for a faith community that seeks to love God. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. These commandments that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children.¹ Talk about them when you sit at home.”

Mothers and fathers are given the primary responsibility to lead their children to Christ, teach them the Scriptures, and equip them to make a difference in the world for the glory of God. Parents are to engage with their children spiritually in the home. The first practical action step following the Great Commandment is to “talk about [the Word of God] when you sit at home.” For centuries, this has been referred to as family worship. This is the time when parents, ideally led by the father, gather the family together for prayer, Bible reading, sharing their hearts with each other, and even singing.

The most powerful spiritual event in the life of a child is authentic family worship in the home. Many Scriptures affirm the call on parents to intentionally disciple their children at home.² When fathers are present, they bear primary responsibility to lead the family and children in faith. Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

Because this is God’s primary plan, it is Satan’s primary attack point. First he attacks the parents to keep their heart at their job, with their friends, or in their hobbies. He tempts parents with the lie, “It is your job to make sure your kids are in church and that they have good friends.” The enemy also attacks the hearts and minds of children. “Don’t give your heart to your parents. It’s OK if you want to talk with your friends about things, or

¹ Children are always referred to in the Scriptures as “belonging to” their parents. When God says, “your children” here in verse 7, He is speaking to parents. In the Bible, children are never considered as “belonging to” the faith community at large.

² A few of these Scriptures include: Genesis 18:18, Deuteronomy 32:45-46, Proverbs 1:8, Psalm 78, Malachi 4:4-6, Acts 2:38-39, and 1 Timothy 3:4.

even your small group leader, but not mom...not dad.” Another huge barrier we have in regards to family worship is that roughly 85% of the adults in our churches today did not grow up in a home where family worship was practiced.³ It will take a long-term encouraging strategy to renew family worship in our churches. This has been a deep personal journey for me as well. For the first five years of my parenting, I had no plan to pass my faith to my own children. I was giving everything I had to disciple everyone else’s children! Thankfully, it was not too late for me to repent, and turn my heart to the number one reason why God created me – to do all in my power to impress the hearts of my five children with a love for God and help them get safely home to heaven. I now view my role in leading family worship in our home as my most important ministry responsibility.

So what can we do as church leaders to move this first part of the mission forward? First, understand that the most important role your staff and volunteers have in your children’s ministry is to equip and inspire parents to take the spiritual lead with their kids. Do you have a great idea how to teach the Scriptures to a child? Get that idea into the hands of the parents. Second, strategize how you can make “family worship” the most important program in your children’s ministry. If your team will talk about “family worship” (which happens privately in the homes in the families of your church) as a program that you want to see grow, improve, and succeed – how could you make that happen? Consider sending home “take the lead” sheets with parents. Rather than say, “Here is what we learned today, and you can keep the conversation going...” have the take home designed to say “Take the lead! Next week, we will be talking about prayer, please take the lead with your son or daughter and during this week ahead read these Scriptures, talk about these questions together as a family...”⁴

If church leaders want to follow the biblical model for evangelizing and discipling children to follow Christ, we must begin by doing all in our power to equip and inspire parents and grandparents to turn their hearts to their children, encourage children to give their hearts to their parents, and build a church culture where family worship in the home is our most vital “discipleship program.”

Mission #2: Welcome and integrate children into the full life of the church, beginning with the weekly worship service.

In the Scriptures we find a second method that God has prescribed for the discipleship of children. In both the Old and New Testaments we find children fully integrated into the life of the faith community, in particular in the corporate worship service.

³ A great first action step is to do a snapshot survey of the adults in your congregation to learn more about their personal experience with family worship from their home environment growing up. The question can simply stated as, “When you were growing up, did your family regularly come together for prayer and Bible reading?”

⁴ Great resources to equip the parents in your church to disciple their children can be found at www.famtime.com. The Visionary Parenting DVD series available at www.visionaryparenting.com is designed to give parents a vision for taking the lead in passing faith to their children, and beginning to practice family worship in a way that will engage the hearts of everyone in the family.

Those of us in the children's and youth ministry world frequently talk about the question, "Do kids belong in church?" I recently read a six page article on the subject, with both sides of the issue represented – those who thought that kids should not be in the service with their parents, and those who thought they should. The article was interesting, and many good points were made. There was one thing missing. Not a single Scripture was mentioned. Everyone's case was made based on their opinion, experience, and what they thought would "work best." I understand why the article was done this way. Ten years ago, I didn't think that the Bible had anything to say on the subject. I thought that this was one of those ministry issues that we had to figure out for ourselves. That all changed when my Senior Pastor asked me to do a research project on this question. I was blown away. I found explicit Scriptures throughout the Old and New Testaments which demonstrated that children were intentionally included in the regular worship gathering of God's people!⁵ I knew then that this issue was not up for grabs. Either we would follow the model of our culture which seeks to segregate children away from adults at every opportunity, or we would seek to build a Christian, Bible-driven culture where children would be integrated into our worship services.

The question is fundamentally theological. It is rooted in our conviction about the nature of the corporate worship service. What do we believe, at its nature, the weekly worship service truly is? Do we believe it is an adult education hour? If so, then get the kids out because they are distracting and the message is not tailored for them. Or, do we believe it is a gathering of the faith community in the presence of God and under the authority of the Word? If that is what we believe the worship service *is*, then do we consider our children a part of the faith community? If so, then that is where they belong. Or consider this question. If Jesus Himself were going to be the "guest preacher" this weekend at your church, where would you put the children? I have a hunch that you would have them in church that day. The point here is not to puff up your pastor, but what is the difference? The Word of God would be preached. Our pastors have been called by God to preach the truth of the Scriptures to *the church*, not just to the adults. One of the biggest mistakes I made in youth ministry is that I sought to win the hearts of the teens to the youth group. I wanted them to find their community and their spiritual home there...and I succeeded. I didn't realize that when they graduated, they lost their "home," and many then lost their faith. I should have made it my mission to first help them connect spiritually with their parents, and then to connect with the full faith community.

If you want to follow the biblical pattern on this issue and intentionally seek to welcome and integrate children into the worship service, you will be a counter-cultural church. There will be resistance from those who have become accustomed to the church structuring itself after the patterns of the world. Have you allowed the culture to drive this decision in your church, or have you sought God's direction in the Scriptures?

Some churches seek to address this need with periodic "children/youth Sundays." I think that these special Sundays where children or youth are invited send the wrong message: "This is a service for the adults, but from time to time you are welcome to come." Is that

⁵ Read the article "Do Kids Belong in Church?" at www.visionaryparenting.com/vpchurch.htm

the pattern we find in the Bible? Rather than set aside special Sundays to welcome children into the church, include them in regular and natural ways every week. Invite them to help with the ushering. Invite children to participate in the choir or worship team. Encourage your pastor to occasionally make specific application of the Scripture for that day to children who may be present. You will likely need to share with your church the biblical basis for why children are invited and included during your worship services. It may take a long time to build a Bible-driven, “pro-child” atmosphere in your church, but their souls are worth it.

So what do “tweens” need most for their spiritual growth? God has not left us to figure it out on our own. Most importantly, they need a spiritual connection with their parents – beginning with family worship in the home. Secondly, they need to be connected into the church – beginning with weekly worship with the church family. You have a great opportunity to provide these vital spiritual growth experiences for the children in your church. In addition, when the children in the church begin to receive their primary discipleship at home and through the church service, your children’s ministry will be increasingly freed up to pursue ministry with children who do not know Christ, and who do not have Christian parents.

Imagine the amazing things God could do through your ministry if your staff and volunteers dedicated themselves to praying, “God, please show us how we can do all in our power to equip parents to disciple their children at home through family worship, and how we can welcome, involve, and integrate children into the full life of our church!”

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