

PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY TO FAMILIES & CHILDREN

One of the realities of life and ministry within a church is the presence and involvement of families and children. There are varying opinions among Christians as to how the church and families serve each other and function together. Some minimize the God-appointed role of the church, while others minimize the God-appointed role of the family. As with every aspect of church life and ministry, the Bible must be the guide for a church's philosophy and practice of ministry to families and children. God has provided sufficient information in his Word to develop such a philosophy regarding how children are to be viewed, how they are to be instructed, how families and churches relate to one another, and how children are to be included in a church's gatherings.

How Children Are To Be Viewed

The way a church involves and ministers to families and children will be significantly affected by the way that a church views children. The Scriptures provide instruction on the proper way for God's people to view children.

Children are a blessing, and are blessed by God

Though many today view children as a burden, the Scriptures present them as a blessing from God (Psalm 127:3-5¹). The New Testament shows that Jesus viewed them this way. Matthew 18:1-6 presents Jesus bringing forward a child in response to his disciples' question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus stated, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" and then, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus' actions indicate that he was willing to take time for children, and his words show that there are things for adults to learn from the lowly attitude of children. He added a solemn warning about the mistreatment of children and the lowly disciples they represented. Jesus' receptivity to children is seen again in Matthew 19:13-15 when his disciples attempted to keep children from being brought to him for his blessing. Jesus corrected his disciples, saying, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." If Jesus had time for children and thought of them positively, so must his followers.

The New Testament also indicates that children are closely connected with their parents when it comes to the spiritual opportunities and blessings available to them, as a passage like Acts 2:39 demonstrates in the words of Peter: "The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." Christians today must continue to extend the offer of these blessings in Christ to children through committed teaching of the gospel.

Children are responsible to God and to their parents

Along with welcoming children as a blessing from God, churches must encourage children to respond to the teaching of the Bible with faith and submission. The Bible itself shows that children are capable of doing so and are responsible to do so towards both God and their parents. The fifth of the Ten Commandments requires this of children with the words "Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you."² The New Testament repeats this requirement for children with the words, "Children, obey

¹ **3** "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, / the fruit of the womb a reward. / **4** Like arrows in the hand of a warrior / are the children of one's youth. / **5** Blessed is the man / who fills his quiver with them! / He shall not be put to shame / when he speaks with his enemies in the gate." (Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.)

² Deuteronomy 5:16.

your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and your mother.'³ Many of the Proverbs are directed to children as is indicated by the frequent introductory reference "My son"⁴ or "O sons."⁵ This demonstrates the ability of children to receive and follow biblical wisdom and parental instruction as well as the responsibility of parents to give both to them. Children, then, can and must live in submission to and dependence on God along with their parents. Proverbs 20:11 states, "Even a child makes himself known by his acts, / by whether his conduct is pure and upright." Therefore, "A wise son hears his father's instruction"⁶ and a wise father urges his child, "My son, give me your heart, / and let your eyes observe my ways."⁷ Not surprisingly, one of the promises in the Old Testament regarding God's restoration of the people of Israel is the prophecy that God would send Elijah (identified in the New Testament as John the Baptist) to "turn the hearts of fathers to their children and hearts of children to their fathers."⁸ In fact, these words appear in the final verse of the Old Testament in English versions of the Bible. This lack of spiritual harmony between parents and their children was an essential part of Israel's failure to follow God, and the restoration of that harmony would mark the return of the people to God.

We see the perfect example of a child's submission to both God and his parents in Jesus himself in Luke 2:41-52. When Jesus visited Jerusalem for Passover with his parents, he remained at the temple after they had left, discussing the Scriptures with the teachers. He gave his parents this reason when they returned and found him there: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (2:49). Two verses later, Luke also records, "He went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them" (2:51). It is fitting that this brief account of the childhood of Jesus ends with the statement, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (2:52). His example establishes the ideal for all Christian children. The New Testament further indicates that children can follow Jesus' example of faith in God and submission to him. One example of this comes in Acts 16 in the narrative of Paul and Silas's encounter in Philippi with the jailer responsible for keeping them imprisoned. By his own acts and the words and actions of Paul & Silas, God led the jailer to ask, "What must I do to be saved?" (16:30). Paul and Silas answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (16:31). Paul and Silas explained the gospel to him and to the members of his family, and it is recorded that after hearing their words, "he was baptized at once, he and all his family" (16:33), demonstrating that the members of this family had believed in the Lord Jesus. The children of the jailer were able to respond to the gospel along with their father.

Churches, then, must support the work of parents in the instruction of their children to trust in Jesus Christ and to obey God's Word. The church will do this through Scriptural instruction itself for the dual purposes of equipping parents and exhorting children to submit to their parents and God.⁹

How Children Are To Be Instructed

Not only does the Bible teach that children are to be instructed, but it lays down the principles for how they are to be instructed both by their parents and the larger Body of Christ.

³ Ephesians 6:1-2.

⁴ 1:8, 10; 2:1; 3:1, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1; 6:1, 20; 7:1

⁵ 4:1; 5:7; 7:24; 8:32

⁶ Proverbs 13:1.

⁷ Proverbs 23:26.

⁸ Malachi 4:6.

⁹ Behind this statement lies another complete Biblical philosophy on the identity, purpose, and role of the church. Instruction of God's people for the sake of spiritual formation in the image of Christ is a frequently repeated and clearly emphasized responsibility of the church and its elders (Acts 2:42; Colossians 1:28; 1 Timothy 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 3:16 - 4:2; Titus 2:1-6).

Parents are responsible to teach and train their children in the Scriptures

In the first book of the Bible, God himself said of his chosen servant Abraham, “I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”¹⁰ Abraham’s personal faith in God and his promises included a responsibility to teach his children to exercise the same faith in God. This same concern of God for succeeding generations of his people is evident in the next book of the Bible, Exodus, too. In expressing the way he would deliver the people of Israel from Egypt, God explained to Moses that he had hardened Pharaoh’s heart in order to perform great works in judgment on him “that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.”¹¹

God gave further commandments through Moses regarding parents’ responsibility to teach their children in Moses’ final address to the people before they crossed into the Promised Land. These commands are recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, and the classic expression of these commands appears in chapter six: “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.”¹² Parents are to teach God’s Word to their children both systematically as well as occasionally, wherever they may be and as matches their circumstances. They are also to use their children’s questions as opportunities for instruction in God’s works & his Word.¹³ God even commanded the people of Israel to set up memorials to elicit such questions from their children.¹⁴

God’s plan for the continued faithfulness of the people of Israel was for one generation to pass on to the next their knowledge of him and his works. Psalm 78 stands as a clear example of this kind of teaching. The Psalmist explains:

[The LORD] established a testimony in Jacob / and appointed a law in Israel, / which he commanded our fathers / to teach to their children, / that the next generation might know them / the children yet unborn / and arise and tell them to their children, / so that they should set their hope in God / and not forget the works of God / but keep his commandments.¹⁵

The same need for parental instruction of children remains for God’s people today in the church. God commands Christians through Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers [or parents], do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” This verse expresses the two-sided responsibility of parents towards their children: instruction and discipline, teaching them God’s truth and training and disciplining them to walk in it. The book of Proverbs also repeatedly brings together these parental responsibilities, frequently calling parents to reprove and discipline their children alongside its example of a father instructing his children in God’s wisdom.¹⁶

The New Testament also highlights the impact of parental instruction and influence in the life of children in several places. Paul traced the faith of Timothy back to his grandmother and mother.¹⁷ First Corinthians 7:14

¹⁰ Genesis 18:19

¹¹ Exodus 10:2

¹² 6:6-7.

¹³ Deuteronomy 6:20-25.

¹⁴ Joshua 4:6-7 “When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD.

¹⁵ 78:5-7.

¹⁶ See Proverbs 3:12; 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17.

¹⁷ 2 Timothy 1:5.

even indicates that in some way children are sanctified by the presence of a believing parent. Both passages demonstrate the responsibility that lies with parents to lead their children after God. This responsibility is also apparent in the requirement that elders and deacons in the church be men who manage their households well.

The church also carries a responsibility to train and support parents in carrying out the high responsibility they have to teach and train their children in the Scriptures. The church may come alongside parents as well as take part in teaching the children as it does all participants in the church in its special role as the “pillar and buttress of truth.”¹⁸ Biblical examples to support this point include Samuel’s education by Eli at the temple¹⁹ and even Jesus receiving instruction from the teachers at the temple in a passage that is bracketed by the statements, “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom” and, “Jesus increased in wisdom.”²⁰ Passages like this indicate that God’s people may work together in the instruction of the children among them. These passages do not suggest that the church should take the responsibility for teaching children away from the parents, though, as the Scriptures repeatedly lay this responsibility first on parents. The church should reinforce and complement parents’ devoted instruction of their children.

Distinctions in life situation and maturity are recognized within the church

While emphasizing the unity of the church, the New Testament does not fail to recognize distinctions within the church, a recognition that impacts how the people of the church, including children, are to be instructed. Paul’s Pastoral Letters provide two examples of this awareness. Paul commanded Timothy, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters.”²¹ People are to be treated differently based on their life situation, and they are to be taught according to their life circumstances as well, as Titus 2:1-6 demonstrates, listing particular things Titus was to teach older men, older women, younger women, and younger men respectively. First John 2:12-14 exhibits the same recognition of distinctions in the church.²²

This awareness applies to children among God’s people as well, as they do not possess the maturity and understanding of adults. Nehemiah 8, for example, records a gathering of God’s people to hear the Book of the Law of Moses read. Verses 2 and 3 refer to the assembly as consisting of “men and women and all who could understand what they heard.” The third group must be a reference to children, and the qualification “who could understand” implies that some of the children could understand and others could not. The Scriptures frequently acknowledge the immaturity of children in passages that call adults to maturity in the faith. In 1 Corinthians 14:20 Paul instructed the readers, “Do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.” Similarly, Ephesians 4:13-14 describes the process of edification in the church as growing up to “mature manhood” and sets forth as its reason, “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” This comparison is set up by what is commonly observed regarding children as evidenced in such a text as this: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.”²³

Obviously, maturity in understanding is the goal for children, so instruction of them must take place to that end, but that instruction should not ignore their present level of understanding. This attention to Christians’

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 3:15.

¹⁹ See 1 Samuel 1 & 2.

²⁰ Luke 2:40, 52.

²¹ 1 Timothy 5:1-2.

²² 1 John 2:12-14 refers to the people of church using the terms “little children,” “fathers,” and “young men” with different observations being made about each group.

²³ 1 Corinthians 13:10.

present understanding and maturity is seen in passages like 1 Corinthians 3:1-2 and Hebrews 5:12-13, which distinguish between “milk”—instruction for the immature—and “solid food”—instruction for the mature. Pastors must wisely choose the kind of Scriptural instruction given to children as an important group of people within the church so that they will progress from milk and immaturity to solid food and maturity over the course of time.

How the Family & Church Relate to One Another

God has instituted both the family and the church for the good of society in general and the good of his people in particular. He mediates his authority and grace through both. These two institutions are not in opposition to one another, but should function in harmony and cooperation according to the shared and distinctive purposes God has given to each.

God’s family occupies a place of priority alongside the human family

That the church is referred to as a family²⁴ with its members as brothers and sisters²⁵ having God as their Father communicates the importance of both the church and the family. There is intimacy and relational commitment and responsibility among the members of a family, and the same applies to the members of the church. The passages cited above regarding parental responsibility for children and children’s responsibility to their parents are sufficient to prove the importance of the family, a truth established in the opening chapters of the Bible with their description of the creation of man and woman as husband and wife to whom was given the command to bear children.²⁶

The fact that God values earthly families so highly makes Jesus’ call to supreme devotion to him over earthly family ties very significant. He promised blessing to those who would leave brothers, sisters, father, mother, or children for him.²⁷ He also stated, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”²⁸ Devotion to him supersedes devotion to family. Jesus even made this point surprisingly on an occasion when his mother and brothers wanted to speak to him while he was teaching others. His reply to their request was to ask, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” He then motioned to his followers and stated, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”²⁹ Jesus did not intend to diminish the importance of earthly families by such statements, but he did intend to emphasize the supreme value of a relationship with him and, by logical extension, the importance of the relationship of his disciples with one another as part of his spiritual family.

A final point should not be ignored—that marriage and child rearing will not be part of the eternal experience of God’s people. Jesus made this evident in response to the Sadducees’ attempt to trap him with a question regarding marriage in the resurrection. He said, “In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven.”³⁰ God’s people will be united but apparently not in distinct family units. These family units play a vital role in God’s current rule of his creation, but they will give way to the undivided unity of God’s people in eternity, something that is witnessed to in the church even today where

²⁴ See for example Galatians 6:10, Ephesians 2:19, 1 Timothy 3:15, and 1 Peter 4:17, which refer to the church as “the household [family] of faith” or “the household of God.” See also 1 Timothy 5:1-2 where Paul instructed Timothy to treat older men as fathers, older women as mothers, younger men as brothers, and younger women as sisters.

²⁵ “Brothers” is used repeatedly in the New Testament to refer to the relationship of Christians with one another.

²⁶ Genesis 1:27-28; 2:7-25.

²⁷ Matthew 19:29.

²⁸ Luke 14:26.

²⁹ Matthew 12:46-50.

³⁰ Matthew 22:30.

“there is neither Jew nor Greek ... slave nor free ... male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”³¹

Singleness is a blessing and gift from God

Another factor that supports the importance of the church alongside that of the family is the value of singleness. In Matthew 19:11-12 Jesus refers to singleness “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” as a gift to be embraced.” Paul shared this sentiment in his advice to the Corinthian Christians as recorded in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34 where he explained, “I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided.” Paul was encouraging his readers to remain single for the sake of the kingdom if God had given them ability to do so. Once more, this does not diminish the blessing of families which is stated in many places in the Scriptures. It does, however, show that the family is not ultimate. A relationship with God through Jesus Christ is ultimate and is expressed in service to him and following him, both of which are lived out in the context of the church. Just as churches must not ignore the crucial role of families, so families cannot ignore the equally vital role and place of the church.

How Children Are To Be Included in the Church Assembly

While the Scriptures provide little prescriptive instruction (explicit commands) regarding the inclusion or exclusion of children in gatherings of God’s people, there are several examples, especially from the Old Testament, that do furnish some helpful descriptive insight into this matter. These examples provide helpful guidance for the church today regarding the inclusion of children in church gatherings.

The Church has the responsibility to accept and include children

Jesus corrected a tendency among the Jews of his day, including his own disciples, to exclude children entirely from interacting with spiritual leaders such as he. Reference has already been made above to the instance recorded in Matthew 19 in which Jesus’ disciples attempted to keep children from receiving his blessing. His response was, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them.” He went on to explain, “for to such [those who exhibit the lowliness of children] belongs the kingdom of heaven.”³² If Jesus was willing to include children in his ministry, churches must be willing to do the same,³³ and it is to the benefit of the entire church for the reminder children provide of the lowliness and simplicity to which Jesus calls his followers. Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:3-4 make the point even more clearly: “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Children are sometimes included in the religious activities and observances of God’s people

The historical sections of the Bible provide some examples of gatherings of God’s people in which children are referenced. Exodus 10 narrates Pharaoh’s attempt to send Moses and the adults of the people of Israel into the wilderness to worship God without their children, but Moses responded, “We will go with our young and our old. We will go with our sons and daughters ... for we must hold a feast to the LORD.”³⁴ Moses’ response obviously went beyond concern for a worship service, but it demonstrates the principle that God was interested in all the people of Israel. Just a couple of chapters later, Moses instructed the people of Israel regarding their observance of Passover. He said, “When your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the LORD’s Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.’” This instruction makes it clear that

³¹ Galatians 3:28.

³² 19:14.

³³ As Jesus stated elsewhere, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Mark 9:37).

³⁴ 10:9.

children would participate in the Passover feast.³⁵ Deuteronomy 16:11-14 similarly includes the people's sons and daughters among those who are commanded to rejoice before the Lord at the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths. Further, every seventh year all the people of Israel, including the "little ones," were commanded to come to the central sanctuary for the Feast of Booths to hear the Law of Moses read.³⁶ The New Testament also shows Jesus Christ at the age of twelve going with his parents for their annual trip to Jerusalem for Passover. Not only was he with them for the feast, but he also stayed at the temple after his parents left, to listen to the teachers and ask them questions.³⁷

Though the participation of children is particularly noted in passages dealing with Israel's feasts, these are not the only places where there are such notes. Children could be included at unspecified occasions for bringing offerings and gifts to God at the central sanctuary.³⁸ Samuel even served under the priests at the Tabernacle after he was weaned.³⁹ Children could be included in general worship since they were commanded to give praise to God along with young men, maidens, and old men.⁴⁰ The Scriptures also point out the presence of children at times of Jesus' teaching and working of miracles, such as at the miraculous feeding of the 5,000⁴¹ and the miraculous feeding of the 4,000.⁴²

Another place in the Scriptures where the presence of children is noted is at significant moments in the people's relationship with God. When the people of Israel entered the Promised Land and overthrew the cities of Jericho and Ai, they obeyed God's instruction to renew the covenant before Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Joshua 8:35 notes that the entire assembly of Israel included women and "little ones." Second Chronicles 20:1-23 records an occasion on which Judah was under threat of attack from several hostile peoples. Jehoshaphat, king of Judah turned to the Lord in prayer and proclaimed a fast. In this context, it is stated that "all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children."⁴³ Two more examples, from Ezra and Nehemiah, further demonstrate this point. When Ezra led the returned exiles in a time of prayer and confession, it's noted that the assembly gathered with him included children.⁴⁴ Nehemiah 10 relates the affirmation of the covenant as expressed in the Law of Moses by the returned exiles. This group too had sons and daughters, though it is noted that this covenant was intended for those who had "knowledge and understanding."⁴⁵

When looking at the New Testament passages that deal with the gatherings of the church, very little is stated regarding the inclusion of children either by direct command or in descriptive example. Hebrews 10:24-25 is a classic passage commanding Christians not to neglect meeting together, but nothing further regarding such meetings is expressed. Acts 2:42-47 describes the early church in Jerusalem as being together

³⁵ Exodus 12:26-27. Exodus 13:8-9 indicates that the children would also participate in the connected feast—the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

³⁶ Deuteronomy 31:10-13.

³⁷ Luke 2:41-52.

³⁸ Deuteronomy 12:12, 18.

³⁹ 1 Samuel 1:22-24. It is noted here, though, that Hannah did not bring Samuel to Jerusalem for the yearly sacrifice until he was weaned.

⁴⁰ Psalm 148:12.

⁴¹ Matthew 14:21. They were not among the 5,000, but there was obviously a sizeable number of them along with women for the presence of both to be pointed out.

⁴² Matthew 15:38.

⁴³ 2 Chronicles 20:13.

⁴⁴ Joel 2:12-16 is a similar example in which the people, including children and even "nursing infants" were called fast over the people's sin.

⁴⁵ 10:28.

and attending the temple together and meeting together in their homes,⁴⁶ but the meetings are not described in any more specific detail. First Corinthians 14:26-35 describes a typical meeting of the church in Corinth, but it does not provide any additional insight on the place of children in the meeting either. Acts 20:7-9 does single out a young man named Eutychus who was present at a gathering of the church. Eutychus fell asleep and out of a third story window to his death but was restored to life by Paul. A more informal group of believers that included women and children is described in the next chapter of Acts. This group of believers from the city of Tyre accompanied Paul & his companions on their departure from Tyre until they were outside of the city. These examples together indicate that children were present sometimes with their parents for their religious activities. This was especially the case at special annual observances and unique occasions of response to God's work in them and for them.

Children are sometimes not included in the religious activities and observances of God's people

While some Scriptural examples show the presence of children at the religious observances of God's people, other passages indicate that children were not present. Exodus 12:21 evidences a pattern in the Old Testament in which the elders of God's people would receive instruction that they were to pass on to the rest of the people of Israel. Exodus 19:7-8 shows that in these cases, the elders of Israel were acting as representatives for the whole nation. Moses delivered to them God's Word, and with their response it could be stated that "all the people answered together." The elders received God's Word on behalf of the people and agreed to it on behalf of the people. The pattern continued with Joshua. In chapter 23 of Joshua, it is said that Joshua summoned "all Israel" to speak to them before his death and charge them to remain faithful to God. Those to whom Joshua actually spoke were Israel's "elders and heads, its judges and officers."⁴⁷

A similar point may be noted when King David gave his final words to the people of Israel as recorded in 1 Chronicles 28-29. Verse 1 of chapter 28 makes it clear that David summoned the officials and officers and commanders for his final charge to Israel and to his son Solomon whom they anointed as king. This group of leading men took part in this important moment as representatives of the entire nation. This point is also shown clearly in 1 Kings 8, which narrates the bringing of the ark into the temple under the direction of Solomon. Verse 1 states that Solomon "assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel." In verse 5, this group is referred to as "all the congregation of Israel" and as "all the assembly of Israel" in verse 55.⁴⁸ Second Chronicles 34:29-33 provides one more example, this one from the life of King Josiah. He gathered the people of Israel together to hear the reading of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple. Verse 29 notes specifically that Josiah "gathered together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem." Verse 30 also points out the presence of "all the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites, all the people both great and small." The last phrase seems to be a summarizing statement regarding all the people previously listed. Again, it appears that men represented the entire people of Israel.

In summary, the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments provide few explicit instructions regarding the inclusion of children in the religious activities and observances of God's people. The few instructions that may be found almost exclusively apply to the religious festivals of the Jews or to special, non-recurring events such as a time of national repentance. In passages that describe the gatherings of God's

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, and Philemon 2 also describe the meeting of churches in the homes of believers. It can be reasonably assumed that children were present in such an environment

⁴⁷ 23:2. Joshua 24 is a similar example.

⁴⁸ This is similar to 1 Chronicles 15:25-28 where it is stated that "all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD," when it was indicated previously that it was "David and the elders of Israel and the commanders of thousands" who went to bring up the ark to Jerusalem.

people, where there is enough information to reasonably conclude the presence of children, the evidence is mixed. At times, children were present. At other times, they were not, particularly as evidenced on occasions when the men would be present as representatives of all the rest of the people. This last point shows that congregational worship of God could be representative, though other passages demonstrate the value at times of complete participation for congregational worship. More instructive examples can be found in the Old Testament than in the New Testament, where there are very few instructions and clear examples. It is rather likely, though not certain, that these Old Testament patterns were followed to some degree at least by New Testament Christians in the church.

Conclusions and Principles

The Bible does directly address how children are to be viewed and how they are to be instructed. It does not, however, directly address the relationship of the family and the church, though it does teach on both God-appointed institutions with clarity. Their relationship with one another can be explored on the basis of those teachings. The Scriptures do not explicitly teach on how children are to be included in the church assembly either, but there are principles that provide guidance for prayerful, Spirit-led decisions by churches on the matter. Based on the collection and explanation above of the relevant Biblical data, what follows are some succinctly stated conclusions and principles to guide the ministry of the church to families and children.

1. Parents must instruct their children in God's Word and discipline them to walk in it.
 - a. The church must disciple parents in general for their walk with Jesus Christ.
 - b. The church must teach and equip parents for their role as parents.
 - c. The church should aid parents in knowing what to teach their children.
 - d. The church should involve parents in its ministry to children.
2. The church must include children in the ministry and life of the body.
 - a. Children should be included at important times for the whole congregation to be present.
 - b. Children should be included at occasions specially suited for their participation and instruction.
 - c. The presence of every person, including children, is not necessary for a gathering of the church to be considered a truly corporate assembly.
 - d. Children must be welcomed gladly into the life of the church and protected carefully.
 - e. Children should be given opportunities to interact with the rest of the people of the church, learning from them, serving them, and expressing what they are learning about God and his Word.
3. The church may instruct the children who are part of the church family.
 - a. The Scriptures must be the primary substance of the instruction.
 - b. The gospel of Jesus Christ must be taught clearly and repeatedly.
 - c. The redemptive focus and flow of the Scriptures must be made clear.
 - d. Thorough knowledge of key narratives and passages should be emphasized along with memorization of important Bible verses.
 - e. The doctrines of the Bible should be taught systematically.
 - f. Discipleship and spiritual formation must be the aim of the instruction.
 - g. The teaching material should be made available to the parents and should be usable by them.
 - h. Children should be instructed according to their level of understanding and maturity.
 - i. Teachers must be exemplary Christians with a clear knowledge of the Bible and ability to teach it.
 - j. The elders of the church must exercise oversight of the teaching and should be involved in it.

Redeemer Bible Church will seek to follow these conclusions and principles that have been derived from the Scriptures' teaching regarding children and their involvement with God's people. These principles will guide the corporate gatherings of this church body and the Biblical instruction and training that is given both to children and to their parents.