

A Vision for Ministry to Children and Their Parents

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PREFACE

For over a century, God has given Bethlehem Baptist Church a vision for nurturing faith in children. By His grace the vision will continue to evolve and grow until Jesus comes.

Two recent documents were revised and merged to make this booklet. The first is a statement on children and children's ministry which was adopted in 1992 by the Council of Elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church. The second is a philosophy of parenting and children's ministry, which was initially prepared for the church in 1996 by David and Sally Michael as they were being considered for their current positions as Pastor and Minister for Parenting and Children's Discipleship.

By bringing these documents together, we hope to give you an understanding of the theological and philosophical convictions which shape Bethlehem's ministry to parents and children. We pray that as you invest the time in reading these pages, you will catch the vision and join with us in spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of the generations to come.

PART 1
A THEOLOGY OF CHILDREN'S MINISTRIES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
Council of Elders
Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
1992, Revised 1999

The Elders of Bethlehem offer this Theology of Children's Ministry with the hope and prayer that the members of Bethlehem will wholeheartedly join us in this expression of vision for children, so that the next generation will "*Hope in God*" (Psalm 78:7).

All Scripture quotations in this section are from the RSV unless otherwise noted.

THE VALUE OF CHILDREN

1. *We believe that God is honored when persons created in his image are treated with honor and love for the sake of Christ.* Therefore we stand firmly against the cultural trend of cheapening and dishonoring human life. We want to affirm forcefully that children are a "heritage from the Lord" (Psalm 127:3). Children are a gift from God. They are freely given as a sign of His blessing. Parents do not somehow earn the right to have a child. Instead, God pours out His grace on them by allowing them to become parents.

2. *Human life, from its earliest pre-born form in the womb until death, is the unique work of God and has value in reflecting the personhood of God.* Human life is utterly unique among all of created life because humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27; James 3:9) with the capacity to consciously know and enjoy and glorify God. The value of human life is precisely its awesome potential to reflect the glory of God through faith (Romans 4:20) and God-centered good deeds (Matthew 5:16).

3. *We value children before they are born.* The Bible teaches that already in the womb God is knitting together a human person. Psalm 139:13 says, "Thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb." And Job 31:15 says, "Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" We believe that God is honored when persons, who are created in His image, are treated with honor and love for the sake of Christ. Abortion on demand reflects the devaluing of human life. We proclaim the truth of Scripture: God's image is not to be snuffed out, whether that image dwells in a mother's womb, incubator, or ward for the terminally ill.

4. *We value children as much as we value every other age group.* Jesus taught us about the value of children when He rebuked His disciples because they tried to prevent children from touching Him (Mark 10:13-16). We know that children are a blessing and a heritage from God. It is our hope and our prayer that God will so work that at Bethlehem we will always welcome children, teach and minister to children, and love children because God loves children and He wants to save them and meet all their deepest needs.

THE NATURE OF CHILDREN

1. Children Have a Sinful Nature

a) The value of children as persons created in the image of God is not forfeited in this life even though all persons come into the world with a corrupt, sinful nature inherited from Adam (Romans 5:12-19). The image of God is defaced but not destroyed. Humans are not mere animals even in their worst sin. There remains until death the potential of regeneration and recreation in the moral likeness of Christ to the glory of God (Ephesians 2:5-10; 4:24; John 3:3-8).

b) Nevertheless, we are all by nature born as "children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3) and are headed for destruction unless new birth, repentance and faith unite us to Christ, whose death covers the guilt of all who belong to Him (Ephesians 5:25-26; Hebrews 10:14).

c) Thus, we believe in the wonderful potential of children to become men or women whose lives are immensely significant because they bring glory to God and great good to their fellow human beings. We also believe in the power of God to change children so that they become vessels for His use even while they are still children. But we do not believe that their true potential will be realized if children are left to their own moral resources. Children are spiritually dead until born of God (Ephesians 2:3; John 3:6).

d) In their spiritual deadness they are without saving faith and therefore without the moral ability to submit to God or please God (Romans 8:7-8). "Whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). Therefore conversion to faith in Christ is indispensable for a life of true and lasting significance.

2. Children are Immature

a) In addition to sharing the fallen, sinful nature that all humans have, children are also less developed in their physical, intellectual and emotional capacities than adults are. They are in the process of growing up.

b) Some of the marks of immaturity in children are brought out in the following passages of Scripture:

... so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. (Ephesians 4:14)

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature.
(1 Corinthians 14:20)

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.
(1 Corinthians 13:11)

*Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child.
(Hebrews 5:12-13)*

c) From these texts we see that children are in the formative stages of learning to think and reason and make moral judgments about what is good and bad, true and false, beautiful and ugly, wise and foolish, etc. They are easily swayed by cunning and deceit. They lack experience in righteousness, and need to grow up into a way of speaking and thinking and reasoning that is mature and not childish.

d) The point of these texts is not to belittle children but to warn adults not to be like children in ways that are meant to be left behind in childhood. Children are not to be criticized for their immaturity, but rather lovingly and patiently nurtured toward mature adulthood.

3. Children are Dependent

a) Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4). This does not mean that children are sinless or that they are mature. It means that they are helpless and needy and utterly dependent on their parents for what they need. Moreover, they have a kind of natural humility in that they do not make pretenses of self-sufficiency. They accept their limitations and lose no sleep over not being able to drive a [the] car or earn a living or run a computer. They are happy to depend on their mother and father for what they need. They are models of happy trust in the protection and provision of their parents.

b) Jesus is not naive about the self-centeredness of children. When he says, "To such belongs the Kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14), the likeness He is commending is not the gullibility, or the self-centeredness, or the immature thought patterns, or the naiveté about the world, but rather the free and natural dependence and trust that should also characterize our reliance on our heavenly Father. We are to be like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air (Matthew 6:26, 28) and the babes in their mothers' arms. They do not fret, but let God serve them to meet their needs.

4. Children Become Accountable

a) In one sense it is impossible to define what any given child is like, because children are always developing. One day they have one propensity, the next they may have another. Thus, all our descriptions of children must be understood as being on a continuum from total helplessness to strong mature adulthood.

b) It is necessary to say in this regard that children gradually become more and more accountable for believing what is true and doing what is right. There is a time in the earliest years when children are not held accountable for failure to know and believe and do certain things. This is because accountability to know and believe and act assumes a certain level of natural ability.

c) We are distinguishing natural ability from moral ability. None of us as fallen sinners, dead in our trespasses, was morally able to believe and obey God. We loved sin too much to come to the light (John 3:19-20). We could not because we would not. Our will was so enslaved to sin (Romans 6:20) that it was morally unable to submit to God (Romans 8:7). So even though we were morally unable to do right, we were held accountable to do it, because accountability assumes natural (or physical) ability, not moral ability.

d) Natural ability means having the basic physical prerequisites for knowing what is true and right. It includes having a mind that is physically developed enough to perceive the world and process moral thoughts. It also includes having the necessary facts from which truth and right can be inferred. When these two things are present (a relatively mature mind and the necessary facts) then physical ability is present and a person is held accountable for knowing and doing what is right.

e) This means that there are increasing stages of moral accountability in a child's life. A one-year-old can be taught not to touch the electric socket and can be held accountable for simple levels of obedience. But a one-year-old is not accountable to understand and believe the gospel. He does not have the mental capacities or the powers of perception to grasp the meaning of sin and redemption.

f) Thus, we believe there is an "age of accountability" when a child is morally responsible to put his faith in Jesus and declare war on sin. Jesus said that the "little ones" believed in Him such that they served as an example to the disciples (Matthew 18:3-6). No one but God knows the exact moment when a child reaches such an age. Nor is it crucial to know when a child comes to the age of accountability, if efforts are being made all along the way to present Christ in the fullest, most loving and truthful way so that children may believe as much as they can at every level of development. God will determine when a simple acquiescence to parental teaching becomes personal, authentic faith.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS TOWARD THEIR CHILDREN

All of the biblical truths about the value and nature of children constitute the foundation upon which we must build our attitudes and actions toward children and children's ministries. We love our children. We treasure our children as wonderful gifts from our heavenly Father. We see beautiful lessons, for individuals and for the family of God as a whole, embodied in the children of Bethlehem. With all of these truths in mind, we turn now to a dominant biblical theme regarding interaction, under God, between adults and children.

1. Responsibility to Teach and Model God's Truth

a) The Bible consistently and explicitly lays upon parents the primary responsibility for teaching and modeling God's truths to children. It is crucial that there be a clear understanding of the primary role parents have in the training of children, so that the biblical responsibility given to parents is not ignored and laid on the church.

b) The most striking thing is that parents are constantly charged with the primary responsibility for the training of their children. The great command of the Bible is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5; see also Matthew 22:37). These words "shall be on your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:6). Then Moses tells us, "And 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 up" (Deuteronomy 6:7; see also Deuteronomy 11:18-21).

c) There are at least two implications from these verses. First, Moses teaches adults the Word of God, and the adults are then expected to pass it on to their children. Second, adults will only be effective teachers if these words are "on their heart." If these words are on their heart, adults will be able to teach their children in every situation of life, whether they are sitting, walking, or lying down. This point is utterly crucial. What parents end up teaching children is what they (parents) treasure and love. If they love God with all their hearts, they will seek to instill that love in their children in every situation which arises. Therefore, the most important thing the church can do for children is to trumpet a vision of God and nurture adults in the wisdom of the Scriptures.

d) Many Scriptures show that parents have the primary responsibility to "train up a child in the way that he should go" (Proverbs 22:6). For example, Ephesians 6:1-4 says:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

This shows, first of all, that both parents are to be obeyed. Therefore, both parents have authority to teach and guide their children. It is important that parents function as a team and present a united front to their children when the standards of the home are in question. Second, the text shows that fathers bear a special responsibility in teaching their children. Fathers are singled out. Mothers are to support and help, and may even have some superior gifts in this matter of teaching their children the things of God and training them in righteousness. But the father should still feel the main responsibility to see that this kind of discipline and instruction happens.

e) This is confirmed in the book of Proverbs where the responsibility of a father to teach his sons is emphasized again and again with the words "my son" and "my sons" (Proverbs 1:8,10,15; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1,10; 5:1,7; 6:1,20; 7:1,24; 8:32). We want to emphasize the depth and the breadth of this parental role. It is a high calling: to impart words of life, to be God's messengers of truth and love to children created by Him and in His image. The responsibility of parenting is powerfully expressed in Moses' words: "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you they are your life" (Deuteronomy 32:45-47 NIV). It is clear from these verses that parents are to "carefully" teach children "all" of the Word of God, and impart the amazing truth that God's Word is our life.

2. Responsibility to Discipline

a) The time of youth is favorable to forming lifelong attitudes toward God. Ecclesiastes 12:1 says, "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, I have no pleasure in them." If it is true that children are born with evil inclinations, but are malleable and more easily formed when young, then they not only need teaching, they need corrective, loving discipline. Proverbs 22:15 says, "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him." Note that children are not naturally good or wise. There is "folly" in their heart. "Foolishness," according to Proverbs, is not just an intellectual deficiency but also a moral one (see also Proverbs 29:15).

b) Parents, therefore, have the responsibility to discipline their children in the Lord. Scripture commands us, "Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your soul" (Proverbs 29:17). Compare here the important verses on how God disciplines us, and the discipline of a father in Hebrews 12:5-11.

c) Such discipline is rooted in love. In fact, those who do not discipline their children ultimately do not love them!

He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.
(Proverbs 13:24)

Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.
(Proverbs 19:18 NIV)

We discipline our children because we love them so much that we want them to escape death. So we now see that the dual parental responsibilities of teaching and disciplining assist our children to escape death and to find life!

d) This does not mean, however, that we can guarantee a child's commitment to Jesus by proper teaching and discipline. Children have wills of their own and can walk in either obedience or rebellion (Matthew 10:21). Parents must teach, but children must grow in their own faith. Proper teaching, discipline and modeling will encourage them to consider seriously the claims of Christ on their lives, but only God can draw them to Himself.

e) Teaching and discipline do not exhaust our parental responsibilities. We focus on these two because they are especially highlighted in Ephesians 6:4, "Bring up [your children] in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Other passages of Scripture discuss other responsibilities. For example, "encouragement" is a crucial role according to Colossians 3:21: "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." In all our teaching and discipline we are to constantly give hope and courage to our children that by God's help they can live joyful, productive lives for His glory.

f) For other specific responsibilities that every Christian parent will want to fulfill we refer to the "Parental Promises" at the end of this booklet (Appendix I).

IMPLICATIONS OF THESE TEACHINGS

These biblical teachings carry certain implications for the parents at Bethlehem and for the congregation. We turn to a brief examination of those implications before we focus on our goals for Bethlehem's children's ministry.

Implications for Parents

- a) The Bible consistently and explicitly lays the primary responsibility for teaching children on their parents. Children's programs in a church can help, strengthen, confirm and reinforce what parents are teaching. But they should never be the primary or substantial vehicle for the teaching of children. As parents, this should drive us to our knees. We exert the most significant influence on our children. We as parents should be more worried about our children leaving the faith because of our own sin and weakness than about them leaving because of the church.
- b) Given what we have said above about discipline, it follows that children should be taught (disciplined) to pay attention and not to unduly disrupt worship services, Sunday School classes, or any other church function. This means that parents also will be teaching their children to respect other authorities in their lives.
- c) At Bethlehem, we want children to worship with their parents as soon as they are able to sit through the service. We believe children absorb much from attending worship services with parents who go hard after God week in and week out. Children who are encouraged to participate by singing and listening will sense the importance of worship. Such children will be less disruptive during classes and services, thereby benefiting everyone involved. (For more specific guidance on children in worship see John and Noël Piper's article, "The Family Together in God's Presence," Appendix III.)

Implications for the Church

- a) Since it is primarily the parents' responsibility to teach their children the ways of God, children's ministries are provided to assist parents in that role, not to take it from them. When children are entrusted into the care of the church, we will seek to provide faith-nurturing programs that will fit their needs and will support home-based training.
- b) At the same time, however, we must remember that we are the extended family of Jesus. As such, we must support and encourage each other, especially those who come from unbelieving families. We must endeavor to become for children and their families the extended "family of God" where support, encouragement, teaching and training are a regular part of life.
- c) Sunday morning classes are Bethlehem's primary vehicle for imparting Biblical truth to children. Other activities shall be encouraged to provide positive learning and ministry experiences which will complement the Sunday morning experience and the teaching received at home.

d) We have examined some fundamental truths about the value and nature of children and the primary responsibility upon parents to train and discipline children. From these, we conclude that Bethlehem will be a powerful influence for the good of children if the church equips parents to savor a vision of God, to have God's truths in their hearts and on their lips, and to understand that they must pass these life-giving truths on to their children. If the church successfully empowers and assists parents in those responsibilities, then the children in the church will be, by God's grace, mightily blessed.

FINAL COMMENTS

Jesus said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

Because it is a great privilege and delight to welcome Jesus and to minister to him, we highly value ministry to children. Under the Lord's leading we commit Bethlehem to prayer, to planning and to funding for orderly, effective, "Jesus-welcoming" ministries to and among children. As Elders, we commit ourselves anew to support parents, to equip them for the responsibilities given them to welcome, value and love the children of Bethlehem, and to encourage, support and value those who minister among "these little ones." We believe that by God's grace the prayer and service of adults in children's ministries will have great effects in the lives of children and in the church as a whole. Children will acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they will grow to savor God in worship, they will be strengthened in their vision of God through careful teaching of the Scriptures, and they will learn how to spread His praise to all nations! Jesus will have been welcomed in our midst, and the angels who are watching our children will look at the Father, and smile.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-22 NIV)

PART 2
A PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY TO PARENTS AND CHILDREN

David and Sally Michael

1996, Revised 1998

A HEART FOR MINISTERING TO PARENTS AND CHILDREN

*He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach 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; and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.
(Psalm 78:5-8)*

This text is one which drives our passion for ministry to parents and children and expresses our desire for children at Bethlehem to surpass us in faith, in knowledge, in righteousness, fruitfulness, in evangelistic zeal and in commitment to world evangelization. Like the Psalmist, we hope that the next generation will learn from the mistakes and the rebellion of our generation and firmly set their hope in God. What a blessing that would be for us! As John says, "No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth" (3 John 1:4).

It is our conviction that there is much we can do to nurture the faith of the children who have been entrusted to us. As we see the world's agenda for our children, we sense a tremendous urgency for Christian parents and for the church to bring forth an even stronger agenda for God in the lives of our children. Our vision for children must be greater than the world's vision. May it never be said of us that we stood by and watched while the world molded our children.

Instead, may God use us to actively shape them into men and women of faith who know God and His glorious attributes and His infinite glory. May they be faithful followers of Christ who love the Bible, affirm its infallible worth and grow in their abilities to understand, express and defend its teachings. May they learn to worship the Lord with their head and their heart and to fill their lives with prayer as they grow in faith and win the lost!

We are concerned about the low standards and expectations for ministry to children in the church today. A popular conviction expressed by many contemporary children's ministry leaders is that *"kids should have fun in church . . . they should have positive experiences in church so that when they grow older they will continue to enjoy coming to church."* This is a good vision. We think kids should have fun in church too; but this is not the banner that we want to hang over the children's ministry at Bethlehem.

We want our church to aim with aggressive, God-dependent, Christ-exalting determination to raise our children with a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for their joy and the joy of all people. We want to see them raised in the faith knowing how to live by faith in future grace. We believe that we can pursue this aim in a way that will still be fun for the kids. Imagine us saying that our vision for the people who come to Bethlehem is that they have fun.

Imagine us saying that we want people to feel comfortable here so that they will participate and continue coming when they are older. It would be absurd for us to say this, and yet in evangelical churches across America this is an implied, if not an expressed, vision for children's ministries. The high standards for preaching and teaching and worship at Bethlehem and the vision of God lifted up Sunday after Sunday is what has made Bethlehem so wonderfully refreshing and life-giving to hundreds of people. This is what will sustain the church and her people. The fun times, friendships and good churchmanship are significant, yet must remain secondary values.

Our aim is to raise the standard as high in children's ministry as we do in most other arenas of ministry. We will be as intentional and passionate and serious about building a vision of God in the younger generations as we are in the older ones. We will pursue that vision for our children not only with our words, but also with the curriculum we use, the way we recruit and train our teachers and the way we design our programs for children and youth.

Ministry to parents and children at Bethlehem will be radically God-centered, Biblical and consistent with what we teach adults. Teachers will take their calling seriously and be inspired by a vision of what our children can be. They will labor with joy and with a sense of calling on their life more than from feelings of obligation and duty.

We will earnestly pray that all the necessary energy, creativity, gifts and resources of heaven will be lavished upon our congregation for the purpose of building the next generation of faith. We will endeavor to bring the church and home together as partners in nurturing the faith of our children.

Our desire is for children and their parents to find a banquet spread for them when they come to Bethlehem and have plenty of "carry-out" for the rest of the week. Like Jesus, our hope is that when our lives are over and we think about our involvement in the lives of children, each of us will be able to say,

" . . . I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them . . . I am praying for them . . . While I was with them, I kept them in thy name, which thou hast given me; I have guarded them . . . I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. . . . I have made known to them thy name."(John 17:8-26 NASB)

THREE PILLARS

There are three pillars that support Bethlehem's philosophy of ministry to parents and children, rising from the book of Deuteronomy where Moses gives his final instructions to Israel. Chapters four and six especially provide illustrations of some of the Biblical footings beneath these pillars.

1. God is Central in All Parenting and Teaching

Moses makes it very clear that all our teaching should be characterized by the centrality of God.

a) God is the goal of our teaching.

*... so that you and your son and your grandson might **fear the Lord** your God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments. (Deuteronomy 6:2 NAS)*

*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall **love the Lord** your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 NAS)*

b) God is the source of our teaching.

*You shall diligently keep the commandments **of the Lord** your God and his testimonies, and his statutes which he has commanded you and you shall do what is right and good in the sight **of the Lord.**" (Deuteronomy 6:17, 18a NAS)*

c) God is the main character in all our teaching.

*The Lord brought us up out of Egypt with a mighty hand . . . **The Lord** showed great and distressing signs and wonders . . . **He [the Lord]** brought us out from there . . . (Deuteronomy 6:22-23 NAS)*

Although most Christian parents and teachers would affirm the centrality of God in all things, not all have taught and parented in a way that enables young disciples to recognize and embrace this truth. Many of the resources available to parents and teachers stop short of this most essential reality. The centrality of God must be a constant refrain in all our various forms of teaching. Young disciples must be helped to recognize in concrete ways how God relates to absolutely everything in life. We must help them see that God's ultimate purpose in everything is His glory.

2. Children Must Learn to Love and Fear the Lord

*... so that you and your son and your grandson might **fear the Lord** your God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments. (Deuteronomy 6:2)*

*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall **love the Lord** your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4,5)*

The outcome of a child's faith is not guaranteed by having parents who faithfully nurture faith in their children, nor is it guaranteed by being active in a church that diligently strives to teach and equip parents and children. No child or adult can come to Jesus unless the Father draws them. No parents have any hope of their children being saved without the regenerating work of God taking their hearts of stone and turning them into hearts of flesh.

Nevertheless we are commanded to teach our children to fear and love the Lord. The church and the home provide an environment where God often does His saving work in the heart. Our obedience to God and our faithfulness as parents does not ultimately save our children from wrath, but it is very often the means by which God saves our children. Similarly, our disobedience and unfaithfulness as parents does not necessarily condemn our children, but is often the means by which our children are led to destruction. God has ordained that parents bear the responsibility of acquainting their children with the Word of God and the life of faith. Our success in this endeavor matters more to Him than it does to us, and He has made all the resources of heaven available to us. Therefore, we as parents and as a congregation must be faithful to teach our children "to fear the Lord and to keep all His statutes and commandments and to love the Lord with all [our] heart."

Statutes and commandments can easily be taught so that a child can remember them and repeat them back. We can also train our children to conduct themselves in certain ways and to maintain behavior which portrays godliness. However, these things are not enough. Teaching them to "fear" and to "love" God in the fullest sense of those words is our greatest challenge. We want our children to not only know the truth but to embrace it with all their hearts lest it be said of them:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God, or give thanks to Him. (Romans 1:21) or

They profess to know God but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed. (Titus 1:16)

Our children can know all about God. They can know endless Bible stories, and even have vast portions of Scripture memorized and yet not honor God or have fellowship with Him. They can live their lives knowing who God is and yet never meet Him until they meet him at the judgment seat and hear Him say, "Depart from Me. I never knew you."

When we teach children we must aim for their hearts as well as their heads. Although most of us at Bethlehem believe this, we feel that more effort needs to be made to raise the expectations of parents and teachers of what God might do in the heart of a child in response to hearing the truth.

Curricula and practical teaching methods can guide parents' and teachers' in aiming for the heart of their children but these will be largely ineffective without work on three very significant fronts.

a) The prerequisite for nurturing faith in children is that parents and teachers must love God and love His word. It is almost impossible to teach something you have not experienced. Children

will not be excited about God unless those that are teaching them are excited about God. God will not be real to them if He is not real to us. If God is not real to the parent or teacher, if His word is not treasured and respected, then imparting a true love for God and His Word is almost impossible. Therefore, parents and teachers must be diligent in keeping their own hearts alive for the sake of their children.

b) A healthy love and fear of God is more easily cultivated in children that have a healthy love for and fear of their parents. It is very difficult for children to learn to honor God if they defy their parents and resist their authority. It is very difficult to nurture a reverence for God and humility before Him when children are permitted to treat parents and adults in general with disrespect. As a church we must be very earnest in our efforts to help our people be courageous parents. The permissiveness that is encouraged and taught in our culture, and which is rampant in the American church and is evident in our own congregation, not only makes life miserable for those who have to be with our children but can lead our children to destruction.

Discipline your son while there is hope; do not set your heart on his destruction.(Proverbs 19:18)

c) We can model, teach and discipline in a way which encourages the heart to respond but only the Holy Spirit can effectually change the heart of the child. Therefore, priority must be given to intercession in any ministry to children and their parents.

3. Parents are Responsible for Disciplining their Children

. . . so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the Lord your God . . . you shall teach [God's words] diligently to your sons . . . when your son asks you . . . then you shall say to your son . . . (Deuteronomy 6: 2, 7, 21)

Biblically it is very difficult to minimize the importance of the family in redemption. Like everything else, God created families for His glory and to make His glory known to the ends of the earth. God did not reveal Himself to every generation in the same way He revealed Himself to Moses. He intended for the truth about His character and His deeds and His will to be communicated by parents to their children. This text clearly places the responsibility upon parents to make sure their children know and fear the Lord. The Biblical expectation is that parents will acquaint their children with the Word of God and the life of faith, and equip them for service in the kingdom. Therefore, more than anyone else in the world, parents must be committed to the instruction and the spiritual well-being of their children.

This has several implications for how the church ought to be engaged in ministry to children.

a) Bethlehem should not usurp God-ordained, parental responsibility; but rather, the church should equip, support, and encourage parents in their vital role.

Two chapters earlier in Deuteronomy 4:10, Moses reminds the people of what the Lord said: *Assemble the people to me that I may let them hear my words so that they may learn to fear me all the days they live on the earth and that they may teach their children.*(NASB)

If children must learn to "fear the Lord," their parents must first fear the Lord. If parents must teach their children, they first must be taught themselves. Therefore a major responsibility of the church is to "assemble the people" and teach them to "fear the Lord."

b) Bethlehem is a community of believers who have made a covenant to "educate our children in the Christian faith." Therefore, the church must be engaged in helping each member of this large family live up to this calling and responsibility.

Most parents expecting a child will attend several weeks of classes before the birth so that they will be well equipped when the "blessed moment" arrives. Following the birth there are volumes of resources that could be consumed to help parents know how to care for their child and what to anticipate at each stage of development. Our society has much to offer parents in raising physically healthy children, but it is the role of the church to provide resources and support that will help parents raise spiritually healthy children.

As part of a church, parents are tapped into a collective body of wisdom and a network of support and encouragement that can aid them in their parenting responsibility. This is especially important given the reality of single-parent homes, "unequally yoked" marriages and spiritually dysfunctional families. The church is in a unique position to help stand in the gap for children and parents who find themselves in less-than-ideal situations.

c) The spread of the Gospel and the future of Bethlehem is at stake. In his final instructions to Israel, Moses warns the people again and again to listen carefully and teach children diligently because their future in the land was at stake. If they forget the things which he was teaching them and act corruptly Moses warns:

. . . you shall perish quickly from the land . . . you shall not live long on it but shall be utterly destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples and you shall be left few in number among the nations. (Deuteronomy 4: 26, 27 NAS)

Often, we can be very short-sighted when we approach Christian Education. Are we keeping the children occupied while the adults have their meeting or are we investing in the next generation of leaders at Bethlehem? Are we merely teaching children to obey their parents and to share with their brother or sister, or are we strategically and consistently teaching them in a way that communicates the calling on their life to teach their children who will teach their children to fear the Lord and to walk in His ways? Are we merely providing our young disciples a fun experience at church to help them form meaningful relationships with their peers, or are we diligently establishing traditions in the church and within our families that will endure across generations and establish the people of tomorrow's Bethlehem firm in their faith? A strategy for ministry to children and their parents must be very explicit and pro-active in pursuing a vision for future generations lest we be left "few in number among the nations."

A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING CHILDREN

With these three pillars established, Deuteronomy 6 goes on to imply at least three ways to impart a fear of God and a love for Him and for His word.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and 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. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.(Deuteronomy 6:4-9 RSV)

1. Formal Teaching

. . . you shall teach them diligently . . .

In Romans 10:17 Paul affirms this principle by telling us that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The knowledge of God is so wonderful that it produces faith. In fact, it is impossible to embrace in faith what is not first taught to us. We cannot believe what we do not know, because knowledge precedes faith.

Children need purposeful, intentional, formal instruction in the Word of God. If we use a "hit or miss" approach to teaching the Word of God, there will be gaps in their knowledge. This will limit their faith in God; or there will be a misunderstanding of God because of an incomplete picture of who He is. This mandates us to strive for an accurate, God-centered, complete, formal curriculum which acquaints young disciples with the whole counsel of God. In essence, children need a theology. They need doctrine. They need to know the Word of God intimately. They cannot be kept from error or superficial faith if they do not know the Word.

Rather than repeating familiar stories over and over, and ignoring vast portions of Scripture, we are formulating curricula which encompass the full counsel of God. Given that most children remain in the "nest" until high school graduation, parents have the privilege and the responsibility to impart the Word of God on a daily or almost daily basis for at least seventeen years. Given the shortness of this window of opportunity, we need to maximize our efforts by careful, strategic planning. If we can implement formal, step-by-step training in the Bible through God-centered curriculum, we can more assuredly expose our children to the full counsel of God.

We need to employ a curriculum which is true to the intent of Scripture. Much of the curriculum written for children is moralistic in nature and teaches the Bible with the aim of producing good behavior in children. Teaching that is true to Scripture presents the Bible as one continuous, interconnected story of the revelation of the character of God and His plan of redemption of man. Acquainting children with God is the goal of Bible teaching. Good morals follow when children fall in love with God and His character and want to please Him and to be like Him. (One of the highest forms of praise is imitation.)

As we stated above, teaching which does not aim for response from the child is not effective teaching. Knowledge remains information stored in the brain unless there is opportunity for response to the Word of God. Although a parent or teacher cannot make a child respond to the Word, good instruction will lead a child to understand the relationship between Scripture and the child's life. A child must be able to understand the implications of a Biblical truth and what response is required of him or her. The parent or teacher relies on the Holy Spirit to give the child concrete opportunities to apply the learned truth and then empower the child to respond faithfully. When the child responds to the Word of God, there is the conviction and confirmation in his or her heart that God is real, He can be trusted, and His Word is truth.

We do our children a disservice if, alongside our formal instruction, we do not also urge our children to memorize Scripture. Children can memorize easily, and often what is learned in childhood is retained for a lifetime. The Word memorized is an ever-present counselor for our children, providing them with truth in any situation. It is also a weapon, "sharper than a two-edged sword," to combat the attacks of the enemy and the foolishness of the "wisdom" of this age. Applied in real life, the memorized Word comes alive in a child's spirit, making response to it more likely and impressing the child with the truth of Scripture.

If memorization is not intentional, it is less likely to happen. A formal memory program, starting at age two, will give our children a large body of memorized Scripture by the time they leave the nest and perhaps a lifetime habit of Scripture memorization.

As we plan all-church activities, we should be intentional about seizing the opportunity to include formal instruction of our children and to make our activities beneficial for all members of the body, including the children.

Childhood years are the training years in which we must intentionally train our children to meditate on the Word daily building a habit of daily devotions and participation in worship services, including diligent, critical listening to the preached Word. We need to teach them to discern truth from error and to use the Bible as the measuring standard for everything else in life.

2. Informal Teaching

... 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.

Jesus was continually using everyday occurrences as opportunities to impart truth. Meeting the woman caught in adultery gave him the opportunity to teach about forgiveness and the sinfulness of all men.

Encountering a woman drawing water from a well became a lesson about living water and eternal life.

The lilies of the field became a lesson about faith in the constant provision of God.

Camels became object lessons on the danger of riches and the challenge to put God above all else.

Jesus seized ordinary events and turned them into teachable moments to bear fruit for the kingdom.

This is our task also. Parents and teachers who love God and His Word will naturally speak of the Word in connection with ordinary circumstances. The key ingredients are a love of the Word and a "teachable moment."

The reason Jesus could teach so frequently was that He spent time with people; He included His disciples in His ministry, He walked from town to town in the company of other people. The teachable moment cannot be seized if you are not present with your disciples when the moment occurs. If we are to teach our "disciples" (our children), we must spend time with them. The *quality* of our time with children is important, but the *quantity* of time is essential as well. We dare not sacrifice quantity presuming that "quality" will make up for our negligence. Families must have seasons of un-frenzied time to work and play together.

Families must also be together and not constantly separated into age groupings. Children must be woven into the fabric of church life. They must be included in our activities not always, but often. They must be allowed to minister alongside their parents and other adults. They must be encouraged to discover their gifts and then be treated as members of a team (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-26). Children can minister in ways that adults cannot. Including them in church life not only will cause the church to benefit from the uniqueness of children but will also give opportunity for teachable moments.

3. Modeling

And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

When we love God with our whole heart and soul and might, and His words are in our hearts, our whole lives are permeated with Him and His Word becomes part of us.

Who we are will speak louder to our children than our words. God taught Israel through His appointed messengers throughout the Old Testament, but He backed up His words with His Character with faithfulness to His chosen people, with forgiveness, with punishment to call them to repentance, for example. He modeled the truth of His Word.

The greatest model God gave us of His character was the incarnation of His Son." And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). Jesus modeled the Father's compassion by healing the sick. He modeled humility by washing the disciples' feet (see John.13:14,15). He modeled perseverance and intensity in prayer in Gethsemane.

We all benefit from the example of someone more mature in the faith than ourselves. Children and youth should be given the opportunity to learn from more mature believers. This opportunity must first be available in the home. Our ministry to parents and children must aim to encourage and admonish parents to spend time with their children and enhance family life, where the greatest opportunity for role modeling takes place. Also, curriculum should be designed to expose our children to the great Biblical, historical and contemporary role models of the faith. Intergenerational activities should be designed to provide opportunities for young people to learn from the experiences and maturity of those who have walked longer with God and have learned to trust God through the ups and downs of life. We must strive to involve mature leaders with our children and youth; leaders who have a mature understanding of God and a mature faith in Him. If children and youth are always in an environment with other children and youth and are mainly led by those just slightly older than themselves, they will miss out on the richness that adult interaction can provide for them. "A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher"(Luke 6:40).

It is important that children be exposed to spiritually mature adults. It is also important that, as children mature, they be involved in nurturing the faith of those who are younger. Before leaving the nest, they should embrace the vision of passing on faith to their own generations and to the generations to come. Ministry to children and parents must aim to prepare our children to assume that role.

Jesus' command to us is clear in His words to Simon Peter:

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

He said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

He said to him, "Tend my sheep."

He said to him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him,

"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17)

If we love Jesus, we will feed His lambs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BETHLEHEM'S MINISTRY TO PARENTS AND CHILDREN

1. Ministry to Parents and Children will be upheld and shaped by prayer.

Parents, teachers, elders and small group leaders will be encouraged to pray earnestly for the children under their care. We will encourage groups of intercessors at Bethlehem to uphold the marriages and families of Bethlehem. Those with a burden to pray for children will be sought out and encouraged to band together to pray for the future generations.

2. Ministry to Parents and Children will recognize that nurturing the faith of our children is not a higher calling than following Jesus.

Consequently, we will encourage parents to seek first the Kingdom of God, while trusting Him for the outcome of their children's faith. We will be sensitive to the danger of becoming so fixated on the welfare of our own children that we ignore the Great Commission. Nevertheless, we maintain that faithful parenting and the Great Commission are rarely competing and are often complementary passions. Therefore, we encourage parents to find balance between these responsibilities and callings upon our lives.

3. Ministry to Parents and Children will be an equipping ministry.

Since Scripture's greatest mandate for nurturing the faith of children is given to parents, it seems most strategic to encourage parents to take their responsibility seriously and to train them to be effective in their instruction of their children. The first and foremost avenue to nurturing faith in children will be within the context of the family. Therefore, significant attention will be given to strengthen families. Over-committed, over-involved, over-stressed families will be encouraged and sometimes admonished to pull back, even from some other ministry posts, in order to adequately carry out their family responsibilities. Parental input and involvement in ministry to children at Bethlehem will be encouraged.

4. Ministry to Parents and Children will make an effort to inspire fathers to set God-centered goals for their children and to lead their families.

While we stress the importance of mother and father working as a team in nurturing the faith of their children, we will emphasize the father's unique responsibility before God to nurture the faith of his children and provide spiritual leadership in the home.

5. We will trust God to raise up and empower gifted teachers for ministry to children.

We do not assume that every person who is willing to teach is necessarily ready to teach; therefore, we will offer opportunities for aspiring teachers to develop their gifts. We will give serious attention to training them to be effective in their handling of the Word and in their understanding of how to teach children. They will be encouraged to teach for response touching the heart as well as the head.

6. We will also trust God to raise up storytellers, worship leaders, small group leaders and other people with essential gifts for all other facets of children's ministry.

We will strive to equip all children's workers with a solid understanding of the age group needs, understanding of the curriculum, goals and classroom discipline. All workers will be carefully screened before they are entrusted with our children and they will be encouraged to "keep their hearts with all vigilance," to nurture diligently their own faith so that they will be godly examples to our children, "*prepared to make a defense to anyone . . . for the hope that is in them* (1 Peter 3:15), and to be ready "*in season and out of season, [to] convince, rebuke, and exhort. . . unfailing in patience and in teaching*"(2 Timothy 4:2).

7. With a view toward inspiring new leadership in Ministry to Parents and Children, we will trust the Lord to raise up some people who have a call on their lives to teach and train children vocationally or more extensively as lay persons.

Our desire is to inspire them to see this as a high calling and therefore challenge them to a commitment of serious Bible study and earnest, diligent, prayerful striving for better ways to communicate God's truth to children in a faith-producing manner.

8. High standards will be pursued for parental involvement in the spiritual education of children.

Prior to the dedication of their children, parents are expected to participate in the first *Foundation Builders* seminar led by pastoral staff and other experienced parents. This session is designed to prepare parents for dedicating their children; introduce them to the philosophy and theology of Ministry to Parents and Children at Bethlehem, offer practical suggestions of how to teach their children during the first few years of life and how to train them in righteousness and discipline. As children mature *Foundation Builders 2-6* are offered to parents with a focus on nurturing faith at the pre-school, early elementary, late elementary, Junior High and Senior High levels.

9. Careful and primary attention will be given to selecting and creating curriculum which is God-centered, age-appropriate and faith-building.

Serious attention will continue to be given to creating a plan of formal Bible training to acquaint children with the full counsel of God both at home and in Sunday School in order to take full advantage of the eighteen strategic years at our disposal.

10. By God's grace, church-wide emphasis on Bible memory for adults and children will be sustained.

11. Parents and teachers will be encouraged and helped to introduce children to Jesus, recognizing that without regeneration, children are unable to please God or walk in righteousness.

12. Care will be given to instructing children in righteousness.

Our prayer is that they will "set . . . an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). We will impart to the children respect for authority, courtesy, modesty, wholesome speech, self control, kindness, etc. We will enforce the "Behavioral Principles and Guidelines of Children at Bethlehem" (See Appendix II) and set a tone for respect and self control at church functions which we hope will be reinforced at home. Parents and teachers will be given tools for effective training in righteousness and correction of inappropriate behavior.

13. We will endeavor to give children wholesome activities and models of godliness who will faithfully call them away from conforming to this world.

We will remind them that we are "aliens" and "exiles" here and give them tools to stand against the rising tide of secularism, worldliness and apathy. We will encourage them to live as followers of Jesus. We will endeavor to place the "best" before children and strive for excellence in our efforts to encourage them toward righteousness.

14. Serious effort will be given to weaving children into the life of the church.

We want to esteem them as integral members of the body. We recognize that because of their immaturity of faith, we need to be careful how we encourage the involvement of children in church life. We will aim to recognize gifts in them which can be released in appropriate ways for the good of the body and for the enhancement of their faith. Parents and teachers will be encouraged to help children discover their gifts and to seek places where those gifts can be appropriately employed inside and outside the body. In addition, children will be encouraged to see their role in the scope of local and world mission, discovering how they can be engaged in "spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples."

15. Ministry to Parents and Children will endeavor to engage children in faith-stretching experiences.

We know that the "testing of [their] faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:3) and that for God to become real to children, they must see Him respond in faithfulness. Encouraging children and parents to take risks for God will not only strengthen their faith, but also combat the lie that we are to seek comfort above spiritual growth.

16. Ministry to Parents and Children will encourage the people in the body to minister to each other through relationships of love.

Intergenerational gatherings will be encouraged for the benefit of all ages. Families will be encouraged to include singles, the elderly and other isolated people into their activities.

17. Ministry to Parents and Children will not ignore the needs of the children and parents outside the walls of our church and especially those outside the faith.

Small groups, cell groups, individual families and ministry developers will be encouraged to invest in ministry to un-churched children and their parents. Efforts will be made to equip them for effective ministry and to provide them with resources.

We recognize that even if there were no staff or program resources available to the children of Bethlehem, our children would already have more going for them spiritually than a vast number of children in our neighborhood and in our world. We have been given much and understand that much is required. Therefore, ministry to children and parents will aim to extend itself beyond the walls of our church to include the unreached parents and children of our neighborhood and the world that surrounds them.

18. Our aim will be to sincerely welcome children with special needs (and their families) into our community.

We will endeavor to teach them with our words and with our actions that they, like all children, are created by God, in the image of God, for the glory of God. We will work creatively to equip them spiritually and provide appropriate opportunities for them to express their gifts in service to the community alongside their peers and their parents for their joy and the building-up of the church.

19. Ministry to Parents and Children will give careful attention to being earnest and faithful in all our endeavors and God-centered in our instruction.

As a ministry team we will aim to honor the Lord in our department and try to be an example to the congregation of complementary and Biblically-appropriate ministry roles. We will aim to be good examples of faith-nurturing parents who are firm but loving in discipline and careful instructors in righteousness. We will endeavor to pray regularly for Bethlehem families and invest our gifts in "spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.

APPENDIX I
PARENTAL PROMISES IN THE DEDICATION OF THEIR CHILDREN

1. Do you today recognize these children as the gifts of God and give heartfelt thanks for God's blessing?

*Children are a gift of the Lord;
the fruit of the womb is his reward.*
(Psalm 127:3)

*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
blessed be the name of the Lord.*
(Job 1:21)

2. Do you now dedicate your children to the Lord who gave them to you all, surrendering all worldly claims upon their lives in the hope that they will belong wholly to Jesus Christ?

These are words taken from the dedicatory form (see below) that the pastor will say over the child as he lays his hand on him or her. What you should mean when you say "we do" is that you heartily agree with these words. "Surrendering worldly claims" means that you will allow this child to follow God wherever God leads and put no obstacle in the way of obedience to Christ (1 Samuel 1:27-28). It means that you will delight in the child's coming to love God more than you (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), and in doing that, love you as he ought (Matthew 10:37). Indeed, it means that you will bring up the child with the hope and the prayer that this will happen as early as possible (Psalm 78:5-7).

3. Do you pledge as parents that, with God's fatherly help, you will bring up your children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord," making every reasonable effort, with patience and love, to build the Word of God, the character of Christ and the joy of the Lord into their lives?

The reference here is to Ephesians 6:4, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Also see Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Psalm 78:5-7.

4. Do you promise to provide, through God's blessing, for the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs of your children, looking to your own heavenly Father for the wisdom, love and strength to serve them and not use them?

This promise takes into account the inadequacy we all properly feel in facing the responsibility to meet our children's varied needs. The phrase "through God's blessing" is meant to signify our reliance as parents on God for what we need from God in order to be what our children need from us. Therefore, this promise is a pledge to trust God to fulfill the promise of 2 Corinthians 9:8, "God is able to provide . . . in abundance for every good work." (This includes all the demands of parenting.)

5. Do you promise, God helping you, to make it your regular prayer that, by God's grace, your children will come to trust in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of their sins and for the fulfillment of all his promises to them, even eternal life; and in this faith follow Jesus as Lord and obey his teachings?

This question is built on the two questions that we ask all baptismal candidates when they stand in the waters of baptism. 1) Are you now trusting in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sins and for the fulfillment of all his promises to you, even eternal life? 2) And do you intend by faith to follow Jesus as Lord and obey his teachings? Our assumption is that all parents will want their children, above all things, to come to this all-important point of putting personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

WORDS OF DEDICATION

"(Child's name), together with your parents, who love you dearly, and this people who care about the outcome of your faith, I dedicate you to God, surrendering together with them all worldly claims upon your life, in the hope that you will belong wholly to Jesus Christ forever."

Appendix II
Behavioral Principles and Guidelines for Children at Bethlehem Baptist Church
Introduction

At Bethlehem we love children and are thrilled to have them among us. They are not only the future of this church, but also the means by which the fame of the Lord's name will be carried into the next generation. We who labor for the Lord take our responsibility seriously and want to do all we can to build faith into children and to encourage their parents. This sense of responsibility has inspired and informed the principles and guidelines that follow. An expanded discussion of the theology and philosophy behind them can be found in Parts I and II of this booklet.

Three Convictions

There are at least three convictions which have motivated the development of these "Behavioral Principles and Guidelines for Children at Bethlehem Baptist Church." First, we are a big "family" (over 2000 in worship on Sunday mornings) and it is important for certain boundaries to be in place for the sake of the larger church family. Stewardship of church property, the safety of children, and the safety of others are at stake. For example, a child running through the Commons on a Sunday morning may not concern most people. But for a 75 year old woman who is shaky on her feet and terrified of a broken hip, a running child poses a serious threat.

Second, children who are well-disciplined and under control honor the Lord, honor their parents, and are a positive reflection of the ministry of our church. The opposite is also true: unruly children dishonor the Lord and are an embarrassment to their parents and to the church (Proverbs 29:15; I Timothy 3:4-5).

Our third and probably most important conviction is that discipline is an important part of nurturing the faith of our children. To follow Jesus means to obey Him and submit to His authority. Cultivating an obedient spirit in our children and teaching them to yield to God-given authorities in their lives helps prepare their hearts to obey Christ and their wills to be bent to His.

Guiding Principles

1. Although it is possible to control the outward actions of a child and produce obedient behavior, the goal of our ministry to young people is to direct their hearts toward God and to cultivate a spirit which is responsive to Him. True obedience and discipline flow from a heart that is responsive to the Lord, not mere conformity to an external set of rules. Therefore, if we are concerned about the behavior of our children, the most important thing parents and youth workers can do is to seek God's help in nurturing the heart of faith out of which acts of righteousness will flow.

2. We will maintain high standards for behavior at Bethlehem but we are also committed to being fair and realistic about our expectations for children. We recognize that if a child had only six hours of sleep the night before, we should not be surprised if he has difficulty sitting still in church. If a preschooler is expected to sit quietly for a two-hour service, we are probably

expecting too much. Or if there are 45 minutes of unstructured time between a social event and a worship service, we should not be surprised if children get into mischief. Therefore, we as a church staff will do our best to consider children and their limits and will try to accommodate their needs as much as possible.

3. Parents are ultimately responsible for the behavior of their children. We expect parents to keep their children under control during public gatherings and to make sure that their children are under adult supervision while they are on church property. When under the supervision of a youth or a children's worker at Bethlehem, that worker is expected to maintain order and appropriate behavior among the children in their care. If a child is not responsive to any of the permissible forms of classroom discipline (see "A Word About Correction" in the next section), the child will be taken to his parents.

4. Raising children is also a community responsibility. As a church family we gladly stand with parents and are eager to do all we can to support and encourage them in their parenting. We consider teaching the full counsel of God and inspiring children in faith, in love, and in righteousness serious responsibilities. Some children will struggle with behavior problems more than others. The Children's Ministry staff is eager to pray, to strategize and to work with parents to help find solutions to behavioral challenges

Expectations for Children at Bethlehem

Although behavioral boundaries vary depending upon the age of the child, the activity they are involved in, and where that activity takes place, most rules will fall under one of the four basic teaching goals we have for children at Bethlehem.

1. Respect for the House of the Lord

Children will be expected to treat church buildings, furnishings and equipment in a way that honors the Lord and in the way they are intended to be used. For example, children will walk on floors --not on pews, tables, balcony ledges or window sills. Paper --not walls or furniture --is the appropriate place for artistic expression. Trash belongs in trash containers, not on the floor. Space and equipment will be left in the same, or better, condition than it was found. Children or their parents may be asked to accept responsibility for accidental or intentional damage to church property or equipment.

2. Respect for Adults

We want the children of Bethlehem to honor the adults in the church with respectful speech and behavior. Sassing and defying the instruction or the correction of an adult are examples of what we consider disrespectful. We encourage children to use an appropriate title, such as Mr., Mrs. or Miss, when addressing an adult. (Adults may choose the name they would like children to use, such as "Mr. Smith" or "Mr. Bob".)

3. Respect for Others

We endeavor to provide a physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe environment for every child at Bethlehem. Children will be encouraged to think before they speak and to find encouraging things to say to others. Therefore, mean, crude or hurtful speech or action toward others is not acceptable.

4. Respect for Themselves

We will encourage children not to act in ways that put their body or their faith at risk.

A Word about Correction

We believe that discipline should be primarily positive and so we encourage parents and those who work with children to be quick to encourage and to affirm positive behavior. We also encourage immediate and consistent response to negative behavior before it escalates into a serious problem. If parents are present we will expect them to correct their children when they misbehave. We will also encourage other adults to not ignore a behavior problem when they see it.

If parents are not present, the adult in charge may respond first by speaking to the child and issuing a warning. If the child persists in the behavior, he may be denied a privilege or isolated from the group. The last resource available is to take the child to his parents. Since it is our conviction that parents are the appropriate persons to employ corporal punishment when needed (and that this is best carried out privately), any physical form of correction is considered unacceptable in the classroom or in any other group setting. Those working with children and youth are permitted to gently restrain a child to keep him from hurting himself or someone else.

Thank you for taking the time to read these behavioral principles and guidelines. Please discuss them with your children. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact us.

Appendix III
The Family: Together in God's Presence
by John and Noël Piper

God-centered worship is supremely important in the life of our church. We approach the Sunday morning worship hour with great seriousness and earnestness and expectancy. We try to banish all that is flippant or trivial or chatty.

Not all services are this way. Sunday morning is the Mount of Transfiguration—the awesome place of glory and speechlessness. Sunday or Wednesday evening is the Mount of Olives—the familiar spot for conversation with the Lord and each other.

In this article, we hope to do two things: 1) demonstrate that parents (or some responsible adult) should bring little children to the Sunday morning worship service rather than send them to a “children’s church”; 2) give some practical advice about how to do it.

We don’t claim that our way of worshiping is the only valid way. Not all our ideas may fit with the way another church does it.

For example, we don’t have a children’s sermon as part of our Sunday morning service. It would be fun for the children, but in the long run would weaken the spiritual intensity of our worship. To everything there is a season. And we believe that, for at least one hour a week, we should sustain a maximum intensity of moving reverence.

The Biggest Stumbling Block

There are several reasons why we urge parents to bring their children to worship. But these arguments will not carry much weight with parents who do not love to worship God.

The greatest stumbling block for children in worship is that their parents do not cherish the hour. Children can feel the difference between duty and delight. Therefore, the first and most important job of a parent is to fall in love with the worship of God. You can’t impart what you don’t possess.

Togetherness

Worshiping together counters the contemporary fragmentation of families. Hectic American life leaves little time for significant togetherness. It is hard to overestimate the good influence of families doing valuable things together week in and week out, year in and year out.

Worship is the most valuable thing a human can do. The cumulative effect of 650 worship services spent with Mom and Dad between the ages of 4 and 17 is incalculable.

Catch the Spirit

Parents have the responsibility to teach their children by their own example the meaning and

value of worship. Therefore, parents should want their children with them in worship so the children can catch the spirit and form of their parents' worship.

Children should see how Mom and Dad bow their heads in earnest prayer during the prelude and other non-directed times. They should see how Mom and Dad sing praise to God with joy in their faces, and how they listen hungrily to His Word. They should catch the spirit of their parents meeting the living God.

Something seems wrong when parents want to take their children in the formative years and put them with other children and other adults to form their attitude and behavior in worship. Parents should be jealous to model for their children the tremendous value they put on reverence in the presence of Almighty God.

Not an Excessive Expectation

To sit still and be quiet for an hour or two on Sunday is not an excessive expectation for a healthy 6-year-old who has been taught to obey his parents. It requires a measure of discipline, but that is precisely what we want to encourage parents to impart to their children in the first five years.

Thus the desire to have children in the worship service is part of a broader concern that children be reared so that they are "submissive and respectful in every way" (1 Timothy 3:4).

Children can be taught in the first five years of life to obey their father and mother when they say, "Sit still and be quiet." Parents' helplessness to control their children should not be solved by alternative services but by a renewal of discipline in the home.

Not Everything Goes Over Their Heads

Children absorb a tremendous amount that is of value. And this is true even if they say they are bored.

Music and words become familiar. The message of the music starts to sink in. The form of the service comes to feel natural. The choir makes a special impression with a kind of music the children may hear at no other time. Even if most of the sermon goes over their heads, experience shows that children hear and remember remarkable things.

The content of the prayers and songs and sermon gives parents unparalleled opportunities to teach their children the great truths of our faith. If parents would only learn to query their children after the service and then explain things, the children's capacity to participate would soar.

Not everything children experience has to be put on their level in order to do them good. Some things must be. But not everything.

For example, to learn a new language you can go step by step from alphabet to vocabulary to

grammar to syntax. Or you can take a course where you dive in over your head, and all you hear is the language you don't know. Most language teachers would agree that the latter is by far the most effective.

Sunday worship service is not useless to children just because much of it goes over their heads. They can and will grow into this new language faster than we think—if positive and happy attitudes are fostered by the parents.

A Sense of Awe

There is a sense of solemnity and awe which children should experience in the presence of God. This is not likely to happen in children's church. Is there such a thing as children's thunder or children's lightning or the crashing of the sea "for children"?

A deep sense of the unknown and the mysterious can rise in the soul of a sensitive child in solemn worship—if his parents are going hard after God themselves. A deep moving of the magnificence of God can come to the young, tender heart through certain moments of great hymns or "loud silence" or authoritative preaching. These are of immeasurable value in the cultivation of a heart that fears and loves God.

We do not believe that children who have been in children's church for several years between the ages of 6 and 12 will be more inclined or better trained to enjoy worship than if they had spent those years at the side of their parents. In fact, the opposite is probably the case.

It will probably be harder to acclimate a 10- or 12-year-old to a new worship service than a 5- or 6-year-old. The cement is much less wet, and vast possibilities of shaping the impulses of the heart are gone.

Practical Suggestions from Noël

When our four sons grew to be young men, we assumed that the worship-training chapter of our life had ended. But God has wonderful surprises. Our youngest son was 12 when we adopted our daughter, who was just a couple of months old. So our experience with young children in the pew started more than twenty years ago and will continue a while longer.

Getting Started Step by Step

We discovered that the very earliest "school" for worship is in the home—when we help a baby be quiet for just a moment while we ask God's blessing on our meal; when a toddler is sitting still to listen to a Bible story book; when a child is learning to pay attention to God's Word and to pray during family devotional times.

At church, even while our children were still nursery-aged, I began to help them take steps toward eventual regular attendance in Sunday morning worship service. I used other gatherings as a training ground—baptisms, choir concerts, missionary videos or other special events that would grab the attention of a 3-year-old. I'd "promote" these to the child as something exciting

and grown-up. The occasional special attendance gradually developed into regular evening attendance, while at the same time we were beginning to attempt Sunday mornings more and more regularly.

I've chosen not to use the church's child care as an escape route when the service becomes long or the child gets restless. I don't want to communicate that you go to a service as long as it seems interesting, and then you can go play. And I wanted to avoid a pattern that might reinforce the idea that all of the service is good, up until the preaching of God's Word—then you can leave.

Of course, there are times when a child gets restless or noisy, despite a parent's best efforts. I pray for the understanding of the people around me, and try to deal with the problem unobtrusively. But if the child won't be quiet or still, I take him or her out—for the sake of quick discipline and for the sake of the other worshippers. Then I have to decide whether we'll slip back into service or stay in the area reserved for parents with young children. It depends on how responsive the child seems and whether there's an appropriate moment in the flow of the service. If we stay in the "family area" outside the sanctuary, I help my child sit quietly as if we were still in the sanctuary.

By the time they are four years old, our children assume that they'll be at all the regular weekly services with us.

Preparation All Week Long

Your anticipation and conversation before and after service and during the week will be important in helping your child learn to love worship and to behave well in service.

Help your children become acquainted with your pastor. Let them shake hands with him at the door and be greeted by him. Talk about who the worship leaders are; call them by name. Suggest that your child's Sunday School teacher invite the pastor to spend a few minutes with the children if your church's Sunday morning schedule allows for that.

If you know what the Scripture passage will be for the coming Sunday, read it together several times during the week. A little one's face really lights up when he hears familiar words from the pulpit.

Talk about what is "special" this week: a trumpet solo, a friend singing, a missionary speaker from a country you have been praying for.

Sometimes you can take the regular elements of the service and make them part of the anticipation. "We've been reading about Joseph. What do you think the pastor will say about him?" "What might the choir be singing this morning?" "Maybe we can sit next to our handicapped friend and help him with his hymnbook so he can worship better too."

There are two additional and important pre-service preparations for us: a pen and notepad for "Sunday notes" and a trip to the rest room (leaving the service is highly discouraged).

What Happens During Service?

First, I let a child who wants a worship folder have one—it helps a child feel like a participant in the service. And quietly, before service begins, I may point to the different parts of the service listed in the folder.

During service, we all sit or stand along with rest of the congregation. I share my Bible or hymnal or worship folder with my little one, because use of these is an important part of the service.

The beginning of the sermon is the signal for “note-taking” to begin. (I want a child’s activities to be related to the service. So we don’t bring library books to read. I do let a very young child look at pictures in his Bible, if he can do it quietly.) Note-taking doesn’t mean just scribbling, but “taking notes” on a special pad used just for service.

“Taking notes” grows up as the child does. At first he draws pictures of what he hears in the sermon. Individual words or names trigger individual pictures. You might pick out a word that will be used frequently in the sermon; have the child listen carefully and make a check mark in his “notes” each time he hears the word.

Later he may want to copy letters or words from the Scripture passage for the morning. When spelling comes easier, he will write words and then phrases he hears in the sermon. Before you might expect it, he will probably be outlining the sermon and noting whole concepts.

Goals and Requirements

My training for worship has three main goals:

1. That children learn early and as well as they can to worship God heartily.
2. That parents be able to worship.
3. That families cause no distraction to the people around them.

So there are certain expectations that I teach the young ones and expect of the older ones:

- Sit or stand or close eyes when the service calls for it.
- Sit up straight and still—not lounging or fidgeting or crawling around, but respectful toward God and the worshipers around you.
- Keep bulletin papers and Bible and hymnal pages as quiet as possible.
- Stay awake. Taking notes helps. (I did allow the smallest ones to sleep, but they usually didn’t need to!)

- Look toward the worship leaders in the front. No people-gazing or clock-watching.
- If you can read fast enough, sing along with the printed words. At least keep your eyes on the words and try to think them. If you can't read yet, listen very hard.

Creating an Environment in the Pew

For my part, I try to create an environment in our pew that makes worship easier. In past years, I would sit between whichever two were having the most trouble with each other that day. We choose seats where we can see the front better (while seated, not kneeling on the pew; kneeling leads to squirming and blocks the view of others).

Each child has a Bible, offering money and worship folder at hand, so he doesn't have to scramble and dig during the worship time. During the prelude, if I notice in the bulletin something unusual for which we need to be prepared (a responsive reading or congregational prayers, for example), I quietly point it out to a child who is old enough to participate.

Afterward

When the service has ended, my first words are praise to the child who has behaved well. In addition to the praise, I might also mention one or two things that we both hope will be better next time.

But what if there has been disregard of our established expectations and little attempt to behave? The first thing that happens following the service is a silent and immediate trip to the most private place we can find. Then the deserved words are spoken and consequences administered or promised.

Closeness and Warmth

On the rare occasions when my pastor-husband can sit with the rest of us, the youngest one climbs right into his lap—and is more attentive and still than usual. What a wonderful thing for a young mind to closely associate the closeness and warmth of a parent's lap with special God-times.

A child gets almost the same feeling from being next to his parent or from an arm around the shoulder or an affectionate hand on the knee.

The setting of the tight family circle focusing toward God will be a nonverbal picture growing richer and richer in the child's mind and heart as he matures in appreciation for his family and in awe at the greatness of God.

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