



THE VALUE AND SPIRITUAL LIFE OF CHILDREN

Final Report

98th International Assembly

Assembly Committee for
Biblical Doctrine and Polity
Church of God of Prophecy



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Preface

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the development of a sound, concise, theological statement regarding both the value of children and the spiritual life of children within the global Church of God of Prophecy (COGOP). The task set before both the Assembly Committee on Biblical Doctrine and Polity (BDP) and International Children's Ministries (ICM) Committee is multifaceted, especially considering the many cultures, countries, and people groups that operate within the COGOP.

Introduction

The realities and challenges that face the church today regarding the present culture's values and mindset towards children do not differ from the realities and challenges God's people faced regarding children found throughout the Bible. Children have been and still are the smallest, weakest, and most vulnerable humans in society. Children are easily exploited and are the primary recipients of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. They often are silenced, treated in a condescending manner, patronized, and deemed as second-class citizens in society. While progress has been made in light of children's rights, there still exists an acceptable cultural norm of ignoring the "least of these." At times, the church has allowed the culture to dictate our view of children, even narrowing our conceptions of children's place in the kingdom of God. As members of the body of Christ, we affirm that humans are a unique and distinct creation of God in that each person is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Yet, while we may affirm the image of God in children, we may still fail to value their personhood and spiritual life. This lack of integration becomes evident in the ministry models used in the church today.

The goal of this project is to challenge every person and church to assess its present view regarding the value of children and their spiritual life so that it reflects God's commitment to every child. As a child matures emotionally, physically, and mentally, the child must also be given the resources to mature spiritually. This research will examine the biblical witness, historical witness, and practical witness so that we may develop a sound theology for the Church of God of Prophecy regarding the value of children and their spiritual life. The biblical witness aims to provide examples of children in the Bible and God's point of view. It will also examine what it meant that God became a child as well as Jesus' response to children in the New Testament. The historical witness will explore how children have been regarded throughout the history of the church, especially in the early stages of the COGOP. The practical witness will provide concrete evidence that children are to be spiritually nourished and that children can receive salvation, be baptized, be full of the Holy Spirit, and minister within the church body and community. These three aspects are the building blocks in the foundation of a theology that truly values children and their spiritual life.

The Biblical Witness

Children in the Image of God

In the opening moments of human existence, we are thrust into the reality of a deep difference existing between people and the rest of the creation. This elevated distinction was a decision in the eternal council of the Triune God.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26 NIV).

Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. These words at once give the context of humankind's relationship with God and the rest of creation. There was a unique possibility of relationship and leadership with creation. At the same moment, there was potential for intimacy and thoughtful relationship with God Himself. Humanity, though thoroughly earthly, was also capable of heavenly dimensions.

David wrestles with these questions of God's special attention to humanity in Psalm 8:4, 5:

What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with
glory and honor.¹

Although perplexed by God's concern for humankind, he proclaims that God crowns humanity with glory. This was not just a past reality, but also the ongoing reality for David. God continues to crown man with glory. This seems to point towards the eternal significance, which God places on each member of the human race. Above all earthly creation, we are His special delight and receive His unwavering attention and care. The scope of this unreserved care is revealed as David continues to wrestle with his value in Psalm 139:15, 16:

My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I
was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came
to be.²

God's attention began before birth and included every day of David's life. God knew him as the godly king of Israel, the man willing to surrender to temptation, and as the shepherd boy. God's attention was continuous and resolute. Yet David was not unique or isolated. God's care extends similarly to all people. This care is not based on gender, race, or age. We will never look eyes with another human that God does not eternally care about. Children, as all humans, are in His image and are His beloved creation, no matter their age. This is the core of our human value—we are loved uniquely by our Creator.

The Stewardship of Children

This unique position of humankind is represented as one of a steward. We are placed here to act on God's behalf with His creation, to build, serve, and lead for Him. Within this exalted position there is enormous responsibility and accountability. However, everything remains His possession.

"The earth is the LORD'S and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1 NIV).³ Even children fall into this relationship of stewardship. They are not "ours" in the truest sense. There is no ownership, only stewardship. God has entrusted children into the care of adults for His purpose. Jesus reveals this reality when, at twelve years of age, He understands that Mary and Joseph are stewards for the Father. Luke states that Jesus continued to submit to their leadership as stewards:

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them . . . (Luke 2:49–51 NIV).

This understanding of stewardship, instead of ownership, challenges cultural understandings of parenting and the church's commitment to children. The accountability of all our stewardship,

including our stewardship of children, is clearly portrayed in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:19: “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.”

Could there be anything more important than our role of stewarding those who bear His image and were given into our trust as God’s agents for building His kingdom?

God as Protector and Defender

God is an attentive Creator who responds to the plight of children. In the Old Testament there are numerous references to infanticide, child-sacrifice, and even child cannibalism at times of war.⁴ The Scripture is clear that these practices are abhorrent to God and were often brought about due to the wickedness of humanity. However, there are two instances that demonstrate God’s desire to spare children in a combined effort of divine and human agency.

The first example is that of Abraham’s firstborn, Ishmael, who is the product of Abraham’s misunderstanding of God’s covenant and promise. The boy Ishmael is cast away from his earthly father’s dwelling only to find himself on the verge of death in the desert. But God does not ignore him:

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is” (Genesis 21:17 NRSV).

Verse 16 states that it is Hagar who is crying, but God is moved to compassion because of Ishmael’s voice. The very meaning of Ishmael’s name is “God hears,” thus it holds a powerful prophetic meaning for the life of this boy. This story is significant in that it demonstrates God’s love towards all children, not just those whom we decide are important or worthy. In this story, “God is involved in the life of an unchosen child.”⁵

The second of these deals with God’s chosen people, the Israelites. In Exodus 1, we encounter the infanticide of Hebrew boys at the command of Pharaoh, who is fearful of the potential of future generations. The midwives are commanded by Pharaoh to destroy all the Hebrew boys at their birth. However, the midwives did not follow this command, at great risk, out of their reverence of God. Exodus 1:20 states that God showed His favor to the midwives for this courageous action of joining Him in the protection of children.

In the case of the unchosen child and in the case of the chosen children, we see God shows no partiality when it comes to responding to the most vulnerable members of society. In Psalm 82:3, 4 we read, “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy, deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” An adult’s response to children should mimic God’s response to children. God desires and needs human agency when it comes to caring for children in desperate situations regardless of race, class, or sex. Had it not been for Hagar who cared for her son, or the midwives who spared the Hebrew boys, the fates of these children and their families would have been quite different. Thus, as a church, we must not only see ourselves as agents with whom God works, but like Pharaoh, we must see the potential that even infants bring to our community. Unlike Pharaoh, however, we must offer life instead of (spiritual) death.

Children Set-Apart

Just as God uses adults to bring about the work of the Kingdom in this world, God also chooses children to carry out the divine plan. On several occasions, children are set apart for a specific purpose that is tied to the fate of Israel. In Exodus, the emphasis is placed on the birth and rescue of Moses, whose life is inextricably tied with that of Israelite history. Miriam, Moses’ sister, is used by God to secure Moses’ well-being after he is pulled out of the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter. She accomplishes this through her courage to speak up to the daughter of the oppressor. The part Miriam plays in the life of her brother also has lasting impact on the fate of the Hebrews.

The tale of the barren woman and God's divine intervention to provide children is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament. Both Samson and Samuel are products of this tradition, and both are set apart for a purpose. Samson, from infancy, is set apart by God to begin the deliverance of Israel from the bondage of the Philistines. God choosing Samson was to be illustrated by his commitment to a lifelong Nazarite vow (Judges 13:4, 5). Therefore, from an early age we can see God's work in Samson's life.

Samuel is also set apart from an early age in a bleak time in Israel's history. 1 Samuel 3:1 specifically makes mention that "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." However, God speaks directly to the boy Samuel to confirm the prophecy of judgment which had been given to Eli the High Priest. This event reveals that even as a young boy, Samuel was used by God in the office of prophet—which he would fill the remainder of his life.

These examples only further reinforce that God chooses to set apart children for divine purpose. In each of these instances, we cannot ignore the role that these children played in the life of Israel. We should not be surprised that God speaks to children and we, as a church, must nurture in them an ability to recognize that voice allowing them to participate in the life of our community of faith.

God with Us

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14). The reality of the incarnation, that God became one of us, heightens our understanding of the value and dignity of humanity. The eternal God became a vulnerable human baby at a dangerous time for baby boys (Matthew 2:16–18). God chose not only to become human, but to become a baby who would pass through the stages of childhood, understanding the totality of the human experience. He would experience the growing pains of childhood with all its confusion, learning processes, emotional and spiritual maturation. Luke 2:40 tells us, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

While the Christian faith has utilized the incarnation to say that each human has dignity and worth, children are often left out of this equation due to the fact that there is very little emphasis placed upon Jesus the child.⁶ However, we must grant the same dignity and worth to children, from infancy throughout childhood, as we do adults. It was not by accident that God decided to share in all of our human experiences and it is the very fact that God, the creator of the universe, became a child that moves us to see the value of children among us. Therefore, at the very heart of the incarnation is an affirmation of the value that God places on all humans, but especially points to the dignity of children.⁷

Children and the Kingdom of God

The gospels record Jesus' statements concerning the question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1–5; Mark 9:33–37; Luke 9:46–48). In the Roman world, the notion of "greatness" or being the "greatest" had to do with status, wealth, and power among the imperial elite. The disciple's reaction to children and babies being brought to Jesus in Luke 18:15–17 points out that they were not far from the Roman view of children. They did not view babies or children as having enough value to be involved in Jesus' busy schedule. It appears that they viewed them as a nuisance who needed to be sidelined. Jesus' answer to the question "Who is the greatest" is illustrated by His pointing to a child as the example. It is the humble, the servants of all, and the least of all who are accepted into His kingdom. Jesus is making a shocking, counter-cultural statement by placing a child in their midst who was viewed as "excluded from adult, male society, powerless, without economic resources, vulnerable, unpredictable, threatening (and) submissive."⁸

This answer must have been a shock for those listening. The Kingdom is comprised of those who retain childlike faith and humility. All, both adults and children, who possess this childlike

faith, are welcome into His kingdom. Therefore children continue to be an example of the kind of heart required to come into the Kingdom.

The church today can also view children as nuisances who cannot fully understand the Gospel or God. Jesus invites us to redefine what we believe the kingdom of God looks like. Jesus' kingdom is not made of those whom the world deems worthy but is composed of those who embrace humility and servitude, no matter their age. In order to be a part of His kingdom, we must become "like children."

The Historical Witness

Early Church and Children

Contrary to the devalued status of children in the ancient world, the early church considered the assimilation of children into the life of the church to be of vital importance. Of course, the process of assimilation began with baptism and the participation in the Eucharist. To be sure, the Reformation challenged and changed the views of the sacramental practices of the church in the Protestant tradition as it relates to children.

The writings of the early church Fathers left a wealth of information that formed the doctrine of the church regarding the place of children in the Christian tradition. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, "Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity. Let the infant be sanctified from childhood. From his most tender age, let him be consecrated by the Spirit."⁹ Regarding the salvific work of Christ, Irenaeus said:

He came to save all through himself; I say, who through him are reborn, becoming an infant for infants sanctifying infants, a child for children, sanctifying those who are of that age so that he might be the perfect teacher in all things, perfect not only in respect to the setting forth of truth, perfect also in respect to relative age.¹⁰

John Chrysostom is considered to be the most prolific of the early church Fathers. He was raised as an orphan and his early Christian upbringing had a tremendous influence on his life and his concern for children. He says, "Having children is a matter of nature, but raising them in the virtues is a matter of mind and will."¹¹ He spoke against the indifference toward children in society. Children were considered as nothing more than pawns in the individualistic pursuit of wealth and power. He made this point:

The downfall of society stems from this disregard for children. Many seek the preservation of their estates, but not for the preservation of the souls in their care.¹²

The theological sentiments of Chrysostom in particular and the early church in general are captured in the following statement by Chrysostom:

Neglect of children is one of the greatest sins, and it is the highest degree of impiety. And so that I might not seem to draw unfounded conclusions, I will demonstrate this with experience itself, so that you will know that even though we may have everything we need, and it is beautifully arranged, we will nevertheless be subjected to the most extreme punishment if we do not take care for the salvation of our children.¹³

The Reformers Approach to Children's Ministry

The church reformers of the fifteenth century have in many ways left indelible imprints on the mission and ministry of the universal church. Christian families, their beliefs, lifestyle, and praxis have been influenced from then until the present age. Given that children were seen as the hope of their posterity, the reformers like Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Simons were concerned that they should be nurtured and educated with sound biblical values in the wake of the division within the Catholic Church.

The early reformers like Luther, Calvin, and Simons were adamant about the responsibility of children giving due honor and respect; obedience, and assistance to their parents. In addition to this, parents had an equivalent duty to *love, nurture, and discipline* their children; this was done for the protection of the children and in the interest of constructing a stable community, especially in the wake of the division. It is worth mentioning that this responsibility extended to children that were conceived and born out of wedlock. "Godly" parents were expected to nurture their children physically and spiritually; this included a strict but compassionate discipline. Calvin wrote, "Unless men regard their children as the gift of God, they are careless and reluctant in providing for their support" (quoted in Pitkin, p. 171).

Affirmation of the Historical Value of Children in the Church of God of Prophecy

From its inception, the Church of God of Prophecy has placed a high value on children. Discussions on discipling children in an official Assembly can be found as early as 1906. These earliest dialogs usually involved the discussion of Sunday school or some other auxiliary, but, it was evident from the context that children were the primary focus:

We highly favor this important service as a means to teach the children to reverence God's Word and the house appointed for worship, and also, to elevate the morals of a community. It is, therefore, the sense of this Assembly to recommend, advise, and urge every local Church to have a Sunday school every Sunday during the whole year.¹⁴

As the church expanded rapidly so did its ideas and thoughts toward children. Although the Church of God of Prophecy was taking root in rural areas of the southeastern United States, during a time when children were largely thought by the wider culture of the region to need very little attention, the church found itself going against this cultural norm. A great example of this developing thought is found in a discourse by A. J. Lawson. His sermon to the 1912 Assembly is notable for its progressive ideas of children in the Sunday school being likened unto a horticultural nursery full of young and tender plants. Perhaps his most surprising statements are those in which he stresses what he calls the "shallow idea" that if a class of boys and girls can be made to sit quietly and hear the lesson a suitable goal has been achieved. He sees in children kernels of valuable seed that, if given attention, will soon become a great harvest. His discourse is as follows:

I will commence by asking a question. What relation has the Sunday school to the church? It is the nursery of the church. I never realized the need of a nursery until I visited one in a large florist establishment. The gentleman in charge of it told me that they take any kind of seed, just so it has a kernel, and plant it. They depend upon the budding for the fruit. I have since thought that we ought to bring into the Sunday school all the material we can find, not matter what they are and see if we can't raise sturdy men and women, with clean, pure characters for Christ. In a few years, the church will look for new members from the ranks of the Sunday school. There is not enough attention given by the teachers to the salvation of their pupils. It is thought that just so long as a class has someone

standing in front of it, and the children do not misbehave too much, it is all right, but that is a shallow idea. The teacher has in his or her hands the lives of boys and girls who will one day become the very ones who will sit in the seats of authority, and the after life depends largely on the training in Sunday school.¹⁵

From this time forward the push for Sunday schools as means for reaching children was given great emphasis. Only one year later, in the 1913 Assembly, the church began to feel a great burden and yielded themselves to the Holy Spirit—which produced cries, tears, and prayers for children to be reached. The official Church wanted a Sunday school in every town.

Following these early years, the Church of God developed and talked about many avenues for reaching children with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Programs such as the Cradle Roll, Gleaners, Vacation Bible Schools, Victory Leaders Band, and youth camps were developed and promoted. Children were encouraged and expected to receive the full blessings of God.

In the letter to Timothy from the apostle Paul, there is a clear indication of the importance of children being brought up in the faith. When Timothy's spiritual father addresses the faith that "dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois and thy mother Eunice" (2 Timothy 1:5), he is clearly alluding to the positive benefits of children being exposed early in childhood to God. In many areas of the COGOP, we have had a wonderful heritage of children being reared and discipled in Jesus Christ. Many of our greatest leaders are the product of the great value we have placed on a child in our community of faith. Thankfully, we have a strong heritage of ministering to children and recognizing their value. Yet, by honest confession, we must admit that in our present times, we have been lacking the same due diligence. Therefore, moving forward, we must continue to create a greater recognition for intentional discipleship, the need of providing better facilities and ministers for them, and also by fostering an accepting environment and attitude that sees children for their inestimable worth to God, to our families, to this church, and to our communities.

The Practical Witness

God's Presence and Work—Conception, Infancy, and Dedication

Conception is not just the beginning of physical life but also the beginning of a child's spiritual life. Throughout the Scripture we find examples of this truth. The Lord spoke to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" (Jeremiah 1:5 NIV). David declares, "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:16 NIV). Isaiah 49:1 says, "Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name." We understand through these Scripture verses that God is present and at work even before a child's birth. Because of this biblical understanding, the Church can proclaim the value of and protect the life of the unborn.

Infancy is a time of developing a trusting relationship between parents and the infant. A trusting relationship with the infant is built through caring touches, affectionate tone of voice, and appropriate, timely responses to the infant's physical needs. A strong relationship between the infant and parents forms a foundation for all future relationships. As the parents are developing this bond of trust by attending to the child's physical needs, they must also be attentive to the child's spiritual development.

The church has an important role to play during infancy as well. They provide support and guidance to the parents of infants and young children. They declare God's love for the infant by providing a safe, loving environment where the infant's needs are met and foundational truths about who God is are taught using age-appropriate methods.

Dedication of an infant or young child reflects the parents' commitment to their child's spiritual development. Infant dedication is a ceremony in which believing parents, and sometimes entire families, make a commitment before the Lord to submit a child to God's will and to raise

that child according to God's Word and God's ways. While infant dedication is not a scriptural command, we do see an example in Hannah's dedication of Samuel. Hannah intentionally gave her child back to the Lord in fulfillment of a vow she made while praying at the tabernacle (1 Samuel 1:11). The words Hannah spoke when she presented her son to Eli the priest expresses what should be the sincere desire of believing parents. "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:27, 28 NIV). Infant or child dedication is a commitment the parents make before the faith community to accept their scriptural responsibility to love God, keep His commandments foremost in their hearts, and impress them on their children through everyday instruction and modeling (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

Dedication allows the community of faith to express its commitment and responsibility toward the child as well. Passages from both the Old and New Testament help us understand that the community of faith (the local church) should encircle the family providing love, support, and guidance. The community of faith is responsible to tell the next generation (infants, children, and youth) about the works of God (Psalm 78:4). It is responsible to help believing children become spiritually mature (Ephesians 4:12, 13). And it is responsible to prepare parents for the work of service God has assigned to them, to bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 4:12, 6:4).

Infant dedication does not assure the child's salvation. An infant is not able to understand sin, forgiveness, the sacrifice our Savior made for us, and what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Infant dedication represents a commitment made by the infant's family and by the congregation. It is not a decision made by the infant and therefore cannot be seen as a response to salvation. Only after the child understands that he is a sinner, willingly admits his sinfulness, and believes on Jesus as his Savior from sin can he choose to be baptized as a testimony of his personal decision to follow Christ.

Pregnancy, birth, and infancy are significant opportunities for the local church to establish the value of children and affirm God's work in their lives. This understanding of God's presence and work in the life of the unborn and infants:

Provides scriptural basis for the church to proclaim the value of and protect the life of the unborn.

Offers parents the opportunity through the process of child dedication to understand and embrace their Scriptural responsibility (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:4) and make a public commitment to fulfill that responsibility.

Offers the church an opportunity to celebrate life and make a public commitment to partner with parents in nurturing faith in the soul of every child.

Mandates that the church fulfill its role of preparing Christian families for the "works of service" God has purposed for them to do, namely, the spiritual training of their children (Ephesians 2:10; 4:12; 6:4). The church accepts its scriptural responsibility to provide expectant and adopting families, as well as families of young children, with scriptural guidance, relevant parenting tools, and a relational support system.

Mandates that the church affirm the value and spiritual life of infants and young children by providing age-appropriate biblical instruction in a loving and safe environment.

The Child's Response

Salvation

God desires a relationship with every child and is reaching out to all children. Even children who are not exposed to biblical teaching can sense God's presence and care through creation (Psalm 19:1–3), through circumstances, and through relationships.

Can a child be saved? A significant step in responding to the presence and work of God is admission of sin and repentance that brings salvation. Some individuals question whether or not a child can be saved. They doubt that a child has the intellectual or spiritual understanding to grasp the biblical truths of salvation. What is the requirement for being saved? In Matthew 18:6 Jesus describes children as "these little ones who *believe* in me." When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Acts 16:30, 31 NIV). According to this and other verses such as John 3:16, the requisite for being saved from our sins is believing in Jesus. If children can believe (Matthew 18: 6), then it follows that children can be saved.

Why do children need to be saved? Romans 3:23 verifies that all of us are sinners, including children. Children inherited a sin nature because of Adam's disobedience (Romans 5:12). Because of that sin nature individuals, including children, commit acts of sin.

How can a child be saved? The Scripture teaches that when we become aware of our sinfulness, there must be an appropriate response (Acts 2:37, 16:30). The child's response to his conscious and deliberate sinfulness is repentance. Repentance leads to a change of heart and lifestyle. Children can admit their sins to God. To lay a biblical foundation that enables the child to make the appropriate response to the awareness of sin, we must teach the following biblical truths:

Who God is, including the holiness of God and the love of God

The nature of sin and the need for a Savior

The provision made by Christ's death on the cross

The response the child must make

The assurance of salvation

Experiencing a Sanctified Life

The Greek word for sanctify is *hagiazō*, which means to be "separate" or "set apart." Throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, people, places, and things were set apart by God in order that His purposes could be accomplished. Believing children are also "set apart" through sanctification. (See the Biblical Witness section, "Children Set Apart.")

Even though through sanctification they are "set apart", children continue to experience an inner struggle—a struggle between their Spirit-led nature that wants to do what pleases God and their self nature that wants to do what pleases self. Paul understood this conflict and describes it in Galatians 5:17 (NIV),

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.

This inner conflict can be detrimental to believing children. Their struggle with sin can cause them to doubt their salvation and their ability to live lives that are pleasing to God. If children are to experience victorious Christian living and become fully mature, they must understand their part in sanctification and become fully engaged in the sanctification process.

While sanctification is God's ongoing work in the heart of a child, the child has a responsibility to do his part in the sanctification process. A believing child must learn to yield self-will to God, to give Him lordship in particular areas of their lives. Through a time of repentance, children can cleanse themselves from sinful thoughts, desires, attitudes, and actions. Children can work with God in the process of spiritual growth by participating in spiritual disciplines such as prayer, reading God's Word, worship, service, fasting, solitude, etc.

Children can learn what temptation is and how to respond to temptation. Children can understand why they sometimes "give in" to temptation. These experiences can be used to help children understand the wrong desires that are in their hearts, confess them and turn away from them. Children can learn to respond correctly to temptation. Children can learn to respond correctly when they sin.

Living a Spirit Filled Life

Believing children can live a Spirit-filled life. Every believing child has the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life. When a child believes in Jesus as his Savior from sin and receives God's gift of salvation, the Holy Spirit comes to live in his life. (Scriptures that verify this truth include Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 6:19, and 2 Timothy 1:14.)

Holy Spirit Baptism

The prophet Joel prophesied of the outpouring of Holy Spirit baptism saying, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions" (Joel 2:28, 29 NIV). This prophecy, which was first fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost after Jesus' return to heaven, states clearly that Holy Spirit baptism is for all people, including children. Parents, pastors, and those who minister to children in the local church are to prepare children's hearts to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Children can understand the truths related to Holy Spirit baptism. Share biblical accounts of the Holy Spirit's work and Holy Spirit baptism.

Share accounts of children who have recently experienced Holy Spirit baptism and of the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of children.

Create an environment of praise that allows children to focus on God and freely express their worship to Him.

The Holy Spirit comes to us as we ask in faith. Increase children's faith by reminding them of God's desire to baptize them in the Holy Spirit. Encourage the children to ask God for the gift of Holy Spirit baptism and believe that He is going to answer using the biblical illustration in Luke 11:9-13.

Invite children to receive the gift of Holy Spirit baptism. Fear and doubt often keep us from inviting children to receive Holy Spirit baptism. We are afraid that the children will not respond, that we won't know how to pray with them, or that the children who do respond will be disappointed. But it is God's responsibility to baptize children in the Holy Spirit. As parents, pastors, and children's

ministers we are to do our part—teach basic truths, create an atmosphere of worship and expectation, and invite children to receive what God has for them.

Experiencing the Spirit-filled Life

Children can experience the Spirit filled life by examining the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. God’s Word tells us in Galatians 5:22 that the Holy Spirit produces good fruit in our lives. Children can work with God, allowing the fruit of the Holy Spirit to grow in their lives.

Children can experience the Spirit-filled life as they recognize and exercise the spiritual gifts that God has given them to serve others. We must:

Provide a variety of opportunities for the children to serve so that they can begin to recognize their spiritual gifts.

Make sure that these opportunities begin and end with prayer so that the children understand that these spiritual gifts are effective only as we depend on the Holy Spirit to work through us.

The Church’s Response

Discipleship

Statistical research by various Christian research organizations reveals that a majority of young adults who attended church throughout childhood and youth are no longer committed to Christ. Their lifestyles do not reflect a strong adherence to biblical teaching. Ministry to children in the local church seems to have strayed from its original purpose—leading children to Christ and helping them become mature disciples.¹⁶

Responsibility

If the church is to reverse this trend and develop strategies that effectively disciple children, we must first understand and accept our responsibility. Passages in both the Old and New Testament clearly place responsibility for spiritual development of children not only on the family but also on the community of believers, the local church.

The writer of Psalm 78 was addressing the Israelite community when he said, “My people, hear my teachings,” (v. 1). He continues his instructions saying, “We (the Israelite community) will not hide them (God’s laws) from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done” (v. 4). What would be the result of the Israelite community telling the next generation? “So the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children” (v. 6). Ephesians 4:11–16 outlines the church’s responsibility to disciple using phrases such as “prepare God’s people for works of service”, “until we all...become mature”, and “we will in all things grow up in him.” Often we infer that this passage refers to the discipleship of adults, not children. However, in chapters 5 and 6 of the same book Paul gives specific instruction to husbands, wives, parents, children, slaves, and masters. The inclusion of children in Paul’s address fully suggests that Paul considered children to be members of the Body of Christ who are in need of spiritual instruction and discipline.

Transformational

The church must not only accept responsibility for the spiritual development of children and young people, it must also have an accurate understanding of what discipleship is. The church often equates discipleship with Bible knowledge. Children's programs focus on learning the stories of the Bible and memorizing Bible passages and Bible facts. While Bible knowledge is foundational in discipleship, the essence of discipleship is not informational. Jesus did not merely ask us to teach everything He commanded. He asked us to teach people to obey everything He commanded (Matthew 28:19). The end result of discipleship is not just the knowledge of all Jesus commanded but the obedience to all Jesus commanded.

Intentional

When we develop a discipleship plan for the children of our congregations we should plan with the end in mind:

What do we want children to know?
What do we want children to do?
What do we want children to become?

To effectively disciple children three elements must be in place—prayer, relationship, and content. These elements must not occur randomly. They must be intentionally and strategically implemented.

Prayer

Throughout the Scriptures, we understand that transformational discipleship is God's work. Philippians 1:6 says, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:13 says, "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Dependence on God is always evidenced in prayer. We see this dependence exhibited in Jesus when He corrected Peter during His last supper with the disciples:

And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren (Luke 22:31, 32).

Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers (NIV).

Effective discipleship ministries are birthed in prayer and sustained by consistent prayer. Children are prayed over by individuals and groups of people in the faith community. These prayers are consistent and focused prayers. Children are taught the value of prayer, learn how to pray, and are involved in the ministry of prayer.

Relationship

Effective discipleship ministries are relational ministries. Jesus recognized the powerful influence of relationship. Mark 3:14 tells that He chose twelve men to "be with Him." It was in the context of relationship that they became disciples. Children will never become Christ-centered simply through programs and events. They, too, will become true disciples in the context of relationships. Again, effective discipleship ministries must strategically plan to develop impacting relationships between the child and his family, the congregation and children's ministers.

Content

The final element of discipleship is content. We must look intently at the content we are teaching children. Before children reach adolescence their belief system is in place. In children's ministry we have the opportunity to help them develop a belief system that is consistent with the truths of God's Word. How will we do this?

We must help our children develop a commanding knowledge of the Bible. A commanding knowledge of the Bible goes beyond being able to retell a Bible story or recite a Bible verse. A commanding knowledge of the Bible is a knowledge that includes:

Understanding principle Bible truths

Committing Bible verses to long term memory that affirm these principles and provide insight on how to live out Bible truth

Correctly applying Bible truths to life situations so that the child's responses honor God

The ability to use the Bible and basic study tools so the child is able to study God's Word independently

Children in Ministry

"What would happen if we got kids excited about doing something with their faith at an earlier age? Perhaps the next generation would grow up with the understanding that serving was simply a way of life for a follower of Christ."¹⁷

Throughout the Old and New Testament, we see children involved in ministry. Miriam carefully guarded her infant brother Moses. The slave girl witnessed to her unbelieving master Naaman and he experienced healing. Josiah who became king at the age of eight brought religious reform to Israel. A boy shared his lunch allowing five thousand people to be fed. The children in the Temple recognized Jesus as God's Son and shouted His praises.

Perhaps the most significant biblical instance of children in ministry is Samuel's service at the tabernacle. The Scripture tells us that Samuel ministered before the Lord, a child wearing a linen ephod (1 Samuel 2:18). We also learn from the beginning chapters of first Samuel that Samuel lit the lamps and opened the doors of the tabernacle (1 Samuel 3:15).

Samuel's ministry helps us to understand that children can serve God practically just as Samuel lit the lamps and opened the doors of the tabernacle, the children of our local churches can greet visitors, serve as ushers, provide care for younger children (with supervision), help with janitorial and maintenance duties, serve on technical teams, and more. But children can also minister before the Lord as Samuel did. With inspirational and practical training children can be powerful intercessors, witnesses, and worshipers. As children minister before the Lord we can help them identify and develop their spiritual gifts, gifts such as giving, leadership, teaching, pastoring, evangelizing, healing and more.

Statistically, it is true that many children choose to leave the church when they become young adults. But what if we engaged them as children in kingdom work? What if we challenged them to find God's purpose for their lives and begin fulfilling it NOW? What if we invited them to minister before the Lord as children? Teaching children to participate in ministry, we allow opportunities not only for spiritual growth, but to identify and develop their spiritual gifts.

Recommendations

We recommend that—

1. The Church of God of Prophecy prioritize this facet of ministry through its global vision and mission statements so that each local church values children and encourages their spiritual development.
2. Each local church assesses its present view of children and ministry to them using a diagnostic tool available through the international children's ministry office.
3. Each local church develops and implements a ministry model that includes evangelization of unchurched children and on going discipleship of all children.
4. That every pastor becomes an advocate speaking out for the value of children and ministry to them and takes a leading role to ensure that qualified individuals lead children's ministry.
5. Each local church provides a safe environment using the Church of God of Prophecy Child, Youth, and Worker Protection Policy.
6. Each local church provides adequate resources (human, physical, and financial) to support effective ministry to children.
7. Each local church provides ministry training and leadership development for those who serve children. Ministry training and leadership development resources and events are available through the international children's ministry office.
8. Each local church provides support, resources, and guidance to families so that they may accomplish the task of spiritually nurturing their children.
9. Each local church is sensitive and responsive to diverse and broken families.
10. Each local church creates an environment that encourages children to be saved, live a holy life, and receive Holy Spirit baptism.
11. Children be incorporated into the life and worship of the local church.
12. Believing children be instructed in the meaning of the sacraments (i.e. baptism and communion) and be given opportunity to participate under the guidance of church leadership and Christian parents.
13. The spiritual gifts of children be recognized and developed so they are prepared for a life of service now and in the future.

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² *Ibid.* (Ps. 139:15-16).

³ *Ibid.* (Ps. 24:1).

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¹¹ John Chrysostom (excerpt from *Christian Reading*, 1838, Part 4, p. 242).

¹² John Chrysostom (excerpt from *Christian Reading*, 1838, Part 4, p. 242)

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¹⁶ Ivy Beckwith, *Postmodern Children’s Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 9–11.

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