

Family Ministry at Genesis

When it comes to the concept of family ministry in the church, competing philosophies exist. At one end of the spectrum, churches might put time, money, staffing, and energy into building excellent and dynamic children's and youth ministries that effectually try to do the bulk of disciple-making for families. Unfortunately, these structures are often not effective at building long-term disciples for Christ.¹

On the other end, some churches completely remove any ministry geared toward children and youth because they view this type of ministry as preventing parents (and fathers, specifically) from leading and discipling their families.

At Genesis, we reject both of these approaches. We recognize the incredible opportunity that exists in our context to uniquely minister to children, youth, and their families, and we also want to put the primary disciple-making responsibility where it belongs—in the home. This perspective is driven by three ideas: our understanding of (1) the mission of God, (2) the family of God, and (3) the family unit.

The Mission of God

God has always been a sending God—in love, he moves toward his creation. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Lk 19:10) and provide a way for all people to be reconciled to the Father. Through faith in Christ, the church is now sent into the world to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18-20). The church is empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) and serves as ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5:20). Our desire is to see the world know him.

Along with this is the simple fact that Jesus loves children (Mark 10:13-16). Children are unique in that they display a quality of faith that Jesus wants in all of his disciples (Matt 18:2-4). We also know that many life-long convictions and beliefs form early in development and that many professions of faith occur before one leaves the home.

With these in mind, we recognize that we have an opportunity to minister directly to children, youth, and their families. We recognize that in our context there are a lot of hurting families, parents who are unsure how to disciple their

¹ For a detailed collection of research on the subject of younger people leaving the church, see J. Warner Wallace, "Updated: Are Young People Really Leaving Christianity?," Cold-Case Christianity, accessed August 15, 2019, <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/are-young-people-really-leaving-christianity/>.

children, and children who have unbelieving parents. Thus, we want to honor the Lord and be good stewards of what (and who) he has given us.

The Family of God

Jesus changes the way we view a family. When Jesus' own family members come looking for him, he tells the crowd around him that his true family are those who do the will of his Father (Mk 3:31-35). This statement—which is a shocking statement coming from a cultural context that puts a priority on the family of origin—broadens our understanding of a family. About this concept, New Testament professor Joseph Hellerman writes, “Jesus radically challenged His disciples to disavow primary loyalty to their natural families in order to join a new surrogate family of siblings He was establishing—the family of God. Relationships among God’s children were to take priority over blood family ties.”²

The local church—people who are members together and brothers and sisters in God’s family—takes primacy in how we relate to one another and how we understand family. Why? Because Jesus has moved us from death to life and given us a new, eternal family. This reality does not *subvert* the family but rather demonstrates the counter-cultural expectation Jesus had for his disciples. Especially in environments where only one family member might follow Jesus, the words of Jesus ring all the more true.

What does this truth mean for family ministry at Genesis? It means that we focus on building up the whole family of God to maturity in Christ—not just the family of origin. We will minister to children, youth, married, and singles because we are committed to building up our brothers and sisters in the faith family. This concept further means that we need each other—spiritual fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles—to become all that God has for us and welcome the input and care of others who are a part of our church family.

The Family Unit

Jesus' focus on obedience to the Father within the family of God does not remove family bonds. However, Jesus' words for family come within the context of the larger family of God. We best live out our God-given roles of father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, or other family members through the lens of our ultimate identity as disciples of Jesus within the context of the local church.

² Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 64.

God has—from the beginning of the nation of Israel—expected the family unit to be a place where his truths are known and regularly rehearsed (Deut 6:4-9, 20-25). In the New Testament, through the apostles Paul and Peter, God gives specific instructions for how husbands, wives, and households are to operate in light of the finished work of Jesus (Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-25; 1 Pet 3:1-7). God also recognizes the value of singleness within the faith family—a marker of undivided devotion to Jesus (1 Cor 7:32-35). Men love their wives and lead their family to follow the Lord; women support their husbands and teach their children about the goodness of God; children obey their parents—and all of this happens within the larger, eternal family of God. We serve together, pray together, and care for one another together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thus, healthy households in the church are not marriage-centric, child-centric, or even family-centric—they are Christ-centric. As faithful disciples of Jesus, together in the faith family, we pursue our God-given and God-ordained roles obediently, sacrificially, and lovingly.

Core Convictions

The conclusions above create tensions within the church. We seek to honor families but reject the idolatry of family. We uphold marriage as a unique reflection of Christ and the church but recognize singleness as a God-given way to honor the Lord and serve the church. We embrace the missional component of family ministry but also understand that it affects our disciple-making strategies by having varying levels of belief together in the same room. Still, we want to be faithful to all we see in Scripture. Thus, we live out our family disciple-making with the following convictions:

- We recognize the role of parents as the *primary* disciple-makers of their children and accommodate unique situations that arise in culture today (single parents, foster care, etc.).
- We value the contributions of other brothers and sisters—young, old, married, and single—in the local church to partner with parents to build up their households.
- We build our children’s, youth, and other family-based ministries with an eye toward (1) supporting parents and marriages, (2) challenging children and youth to be devoted to Jesus, and (3) launching them out of the home with a Christian worldview.
- We embrace a missional understanding for family ministry in the church, using it as a means to reach and mature families for Christ.