

# 11

## "Suffer The Little Children"

- Mk 10:14

At a recent house church conference, before a panel discussion was about to begin, I whispered to a friend that I bet the first question was going to be: "How do we handle the children?" Sure enough, it was. This, in my opinion, is the number one question asked by those contemplating the house church. It is a tremendous stumbling block, but it shouldn't be.

This chapter will examine three things: first, the differing philosophies or mindsets that the institutional and house church have toward children and the church; second, practical issues that arise; and third, the advantage to children of the church in the home.

In an article I once wrote, I asked the question: "What do you do *for* the children?" I am ashamed to say that the first draft of that article read: "What do you do *with* the children?" I had subconsciously succumbed to the philosophy or mindset of much of the institutional church: children are a problem, they interfere with the almighty "service," where important, paid professionals in robes or coats and ties give important speeches, and where serious, quiet, and holy listeners sit deathly still in pews. So, the question becomes, what do we do with the children while we are doing the important things in the "service"?

Neither Jesus, nor the apostles, ever worried about what to do with the children. Jesus never, ever said: "Suffer the little children to be packed away in the nursery." Can you imagine the children being led to Children's Church during the Sermon on the Mount?

The Scripture doesn't say much, if anything, on handling children when believers gather. But I can't imagine that the believers back then didn't have children. I imagine nothing was ever said, because the early Christians didn't make such a big deal about the issue. The churches were in the home; families lived in homes; children met with the church in the home. And despite the Scriptural silence on kids and church, I can guarantee one thing: there weren't any Sunday Schools and Children's Churches.

If Sunday Schools are essential adjuncts to church life, why is the Bible silent on this subject? His building plan, the Bible, is complete in every detail. Where is the Christian who would deny that the Bible is a perfect blueprint? Interestingly, there is not even a hint of Sunday Schools in God's blueprint.

Sunday Schools were not even originated to teach Bible stories or Christian morality, but were started in nineteenth century England to give poor children of mill and mine laborers a chance to read and write. Who had primary responsibility for training children before the appearance of Sunday Schools? The family. I think it is the contention of most house churches that the family still has the primary responsibility for the instruction and nurturing of Christian children. They may be the reason most home churches (just like the biblical NT church) don't have Sunday Schools. And this really is a barrier to Christians who contemplate leaving the institutional church for the home church. It is

amazing how many Christians worry about the spiritual welfare of their kids to the point that the parents will poison themselves to death on the corrupt religiosity of the institutional church, just so long as there's a good youth program. I am convinced that many institutional churches realize this, and capitalize on it by providing jam-up "youth ministries," in order to keep their "tithe-payers" from leaving (of course, I realize that often there are other, sincere motives involved, too).

Although it is the family's primary duty to raise children up in the Lord, it does not follow that the home church should be uninterested in their welfare. Quite the contrary. If kids see their parents' church as a drag, they'll tend to think Jesus is a drag, too. Thus we must discuss practical ways for the home church to make children know that the church belongs to them as well as to their parents.

In discussing practical ways to integrate children into the life of the home church, we must understand at the onset that if parents bring the traditional mindset of the institutional church into the house church, nothing will work for the kids. The institutional church has the mentality of juvenile segregation: push them out into the Sunday School wing, so everything can be Holy and Quiet. This, of course, is unbiblical. How quiet do you think the kids were during the Sermon on the Mount? The institutional church is liturgically rigid in its "order of service," and kids, being as unprogrammed and unpredictable as they are, can never fit within that rigidity. So the first practical thing to do in the church in the home is to relax-there's going to be more noise and interruption in the house church. People with children need to quit feeling guilty about it, and people without children need to exercise more tolerance than they would in the institutional church.

The second practical thing to do is to develop close relationships between each adult, and between all adults and all children. This development is possible in the home church, in a way that it is not possible in the organized church. With close relationships, when little Johnny is about to flush the cherry bomb down the toilet, an adult who is not Johnny's parent can firmly request that the little hellion extinguish the wick, without fear of alienating little Johnny or little Johnny's mom. Close relationships are extremely important.

The third practical thing that should be done is to find creative, workable ways to involve the kids in the meeting with the adults. Where did the idea come from that the meeting (or the church) belongs exclusively to the adults? I know of one house church in which the children are generally musically gifted. The young folks play guitars, violins, and flutes, and feel free to lead out in song or music. Other home churches encourage kids to share testimonies, or to recite memorized scripture, or to ask for prayer requests. During one meeting, my particular home church allowed the teen-age young people to lead the meeting with Scripture and music. The meeting was entirely different-it gave us variety, and helped the young people join in. During another meeting in my home church, one of the sisters conducted a "Sunday School lesson" for the young children with the adults present. The adults were forced to adapt to a young child's viewpoint (something that all adults should do periodically), and the kids were able to have fun with their parents as they learned the spiritual lesson being taught.

The fourth practical thing I would suggest is not to be hidebound by "house church theology." Sure, we don't believe in Sunday Schools, but the world's not going to end if someone has something special for the kids, or if he takes them aside in another room once in a while. And we don't believe in pacifying the kids with entertainment to keep them out of our hair, but there's nothing wrong with showing them a video once in a while (even, heaven forbid, if the video is a Bugs Bunny cartoon, and not spiritual).

A fifth practical suggestion that one house church has suggested is for each meeting home to have

announced house rules, so that children and parents might not inadvertently harm anything (for instance, "no eating in the living room.").

A sixth practical suggestion is to tolerate fussing infants as much as you can, but if they get too loud, make sure the parents understand that the baby should be taken out of the meeting until he cools off. If a parent doesn't do this, the parent should be communicated with. Remember, relationships are important.

My seventh, and last, practical suggestion, is never to let the meeting become boring-neither for the children, nor for the adults. If the meeting is dead or too long for the adults, imagine what its like for the kids! Their attention span is probably about half of ours. We need to constantly put ourselves in the shoes of our brothers and sisters-and our kids are, in the body of Christ, our brothers and sisters. Let's prefer them in love.

We finish these thoughts on children and the house church by presenting the manifest advantages of the home church for young folks. We should not look upon children as an obstacle to getting folks into the house church. We should look at the advantages of the house church for kids, and point out these advantages to potential house church converts.

One big advantage of the home church for young people is that the youth get to see their parents in loving, supportive relationships with one another. They get to see their parents open their hearts to God in a real, personal, non-religious, un-phony fashion.

Another tremendous advantage is that the kids are not given second-class status in the church: they are not segregated, put out of sight, out of mind in nurseries, Sunday Schools, and youth ministries.

One of the biggest advantages, in my view, is the close relationships that develop between adults and children of other adults. In my home church, I constantly pray for the children involved. There are only six couples in the church, and only fourteen children. It's very easy to find out what's going on in the kid's lives, and easy to pray for them daily, individually, by name. I submit to you that this doesn't happen very often in the mega-church.

- D.T.

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