

WHAT ARE WE TEACHING OUR CHILDREN?

By Andy McClish

All conscientious Christian parents have a keen sense of their responsibility concerning the spiritual training of their children. Bible classes in conjunction with the regular assembly periods of the church are designed and provided to help parents with this responsibility. The efforts of faithful teachers everywhere should be recognized, appreciated, praised, and encouraged.

However, as James Rogers noted in his article, "God's Youth Directors" (*The Gospel Journal*, May, p. 23), it is a serious but common mistake to conceive of the church as having young people. It is parents who have young people, and parents who will answer to God for how they have invested these precious resources (cf. Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:20–21; Deu. 6:4–9). No right-thinking parent will contend that two or even three hours a week of Bible classes at the church building is enough for children or adults. Nevertheless, we should take advantage of every opportunity to instill our children with basic Bible knowledge.

It is quite common for parents, upon collecting their children after Bible classes, to inquire, "What did you learn today?" This question should indicate not just idle curiosity, but a serious interest in our children's spiritual development and in what they are being taught. I fear that in many congregations our offspring (particularly the younger ones) are learning things we do not realize or intend. On one recent Wednesday evening, for example, our three-year-old son's response to the question was, "Um...I got some dessert." If we are going to provide Bible classes for our children,

then, should it not go without saying that the focal point of such classes would be the Bible (consistently, clearly, identifiably, preeminently)?

When our children associate their time spent in class with candy, crackers, or crafts rather than with learning God's Word, then something is seriously wrong. Being the father of two small children, I have seen in more than one congregation where we have attended that the "goodies" could be counted on in Bible class just as surely as they could on Halloween night. It was simply a "given." If one asked a typical group of youngsters what they think of first when "VBS" is mentioned, many (or most) of them would probably say, "cookies and Kool-Aid." Of course, it is possible (and for younger ages, appropriate) to illustrate a particular lesson via some item of food or craftwork (e.g., manna, unleavened bread, loaves and fish, altars, scrolls, etc.). My remarks here are not aimed at such practices, but rather, at the indiscriminate, routine use of things that really amount to nothing more than gimmicks—"bread and circuses" for the miniature masses.

Presumably, those who employ these "entitlement programs" justify them based on such factors as the immature level of the children involved, the desire to have a calm and orderly classroom, and/or the desire to promote regular attendance. However, few (if any) parents would likely apply this type of thinking concerning the secular classroom. This fact illustrates and emphasizes a gross disparity between what we expect for our children's secular development as opposed to their spiritual development. Would we not be concerned at least to some degree if we became aware that during every single day of public school our children were being given cookies and candy and

were spending a substantial portion of their class time making "toys"? Would we not wonder what our youngsters were actually learning in that environment?

When we create in our children the expectation that Bible class and worship will always include some type of physical treat (i.e., will always appeal to or satisfy some physical desire), we have done them and the cause of Christ a great disservice. Our children need to learn to enjoy and to appreciate the inherent value of studying and learning from God's Word, rather than learning to seek Him for some material reward (cf. John 6:26–27).

Furthermore, the principles at issue here extend to our expectations (and those of our children) during the worship assemblies. The basic line of reasoning discussed above—immaturity, desire for order, and regular attendance—prompted the creation of separate "worship" services for youngsters (variously termed "Children's Bible Hour," "Children's Church," "Junior Church," et al.). In this setting, its proponents argue, our children can learn about and experience "worship on their level" without becoming bored or causing disruptions in the "adult assembly."

Even at congregations where the children are not separated from the assembly, many parents permit (and thereby encourage) them to tune the entire service out, as if it were only for the adults. If there is nothing wrong with allowing our grade-school youngsters to play with toy cars, read Sports Illustrated, draw pictures, or sleep during worship, then why make them "endure" the experience to begin with? If such behaviors are valid during worship assemblies, then certain conclusions would also have to follow, such as: (1) Children are simply not capable of learning how to behave properly or to appreciate or to participate in the worship services in any meaningful way (in other

words, they are not capable of maturing spiritually); and/or (2) worship is not important enough for them to learn these skills (i.e., it is not worth the effort to try to teach them). We are only deceiving ourselves if we think that our children do not "pick up" on these unspoken messages.

We can also readily observe that many adult saints have been indoctrinated with and have never outgrown the "what's-in-it-for-me?" mentality. How common is it, for example, for members of all ages to complain about how the worship hour is just not exciting/uplifting/moving enough? Often Christians lament, "I'm just not getting anything out of worship." This attitude, when carried to its logical end, will result (and has resulted) in all kinds of innovations in the worship of the church, which are purely (not to mention transparently) sensual and emotional in their appeal. There is no other basis (certainly no Scriptural one) for such activities as hand clapping, light dimming, body swaying, humming, choir or "vocal band" performances, or dramatic presentations.

Many brethren and congregations are apparently able to justify this type of nonsense based on the increase in attendance and the superficial "feel-good" atmosphere it typically produces. A serious question (and the thrust of this article) that needs to be considered is this: If some type of gimmick or treat is necessary to keep certain people (younger or older) interested in Bible classes and worship services, then to what or by what have these people actually been "converted"? This "conversion" process likely begins much earlier in life than many of us realize.

When members of the Lord's body come together for periods of study and worship, the entire occasion (as nearly as humanly possible) needs to be centered upon

two essential questions: (1) What has God said to us (through His inspired, infallible Word)? (2) What is our proper response to that Truth?

As a fundamental part of their spiritual development, we need to teach, encourage, and expect our children to participate in Bible study and worship to the maximum extent that their maturity level will allow. Whatever the subject happens to be in the classes at the church building can be discussed and studied further at home (including memory verses). Before children can even talk, they can begin to learn that worship is a very special occasion, which demands special behavior. They can also learn that being taken out in the middle of the service is something to be avoided, rather than desired. If children can talk, they can learn the songs and participate in the singing. If they know their numbers, they can get a songbook and turn to each song. If they can read, they can look up Scriptures during the sermon or read a Bible story book. If they can write, they can take notes or work on a Bible crossword puzzle.

The influences of this world are powerful and deceptive. Time is fleeting and the consequences of our behavior in this life are eternal. To be a healthy, productive member of the Lord's body is the greatest privilege and responsibility that human beings have ever been given. Knowledge of God's Truth is the most important knowledge we can possess. Children, however, do not instinctively know these things. That is the reason God gave them parents. May we never waste our opportunities to teach our children by word and by deed!

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