

Church and school can't replace parents

The ministries of church and school should assist in the spiritual nurture of the home, not replace it.

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Several generations ago sharing the Word in the home seems to have been a more common practice. Our churches and schools assisted in supporting and reinforcing the spiritual truths that were taught at home. For those nurtured in the Word at home, catechism instruction wasn't so much covering new material but reinforcing what children had heard and seen from their parents.

But in recent generations, the regular sharing of the Word at home seems to have become less of a norm.

Replacing the spiritual nurture of the home

As church and school leaders noticed these changes, their first reaction was to make up for what was not happening at home by focusing on improving formal spiritual nurture at church and school. But in the process, they have often forgotten that the ministries at church and school should assist in the spiritual nurture of the home, not replace it.

Yes, the Holy Spirit has often used the gospel shared by a church or school to rescue a soul from a home that cared little or nothing for Christ. But doesn't Scripture's plan for the spiritual nurture of the next generation suggest that that is not the norm, but a glorious exception to the rule?

Whenever church and school become the primary source for spiritual nurture, there are some unintended side effects. Church and school leaders may even give this impression: "This sharing of the Word stuff is best left to the professionals. Don't try this at home!"

A Lutheran called worker, who was convinced that he had given just such an impression, says:

"I worked very hard at developing a church-centered youth and children's ministry. I said to families, 'Bring your kids to me. Let me teach them the faith, and I'll involve you in the process. Help me develop good Sunday schools, a great vacation Bible school, a midweek program, servant events, retreats, evangelism trips, youth-oriented worship,' and on and on. The message I was communicating to families was that the church should be the focal point for nurturing faith in their kids. I wanted families to invest their energy in what the church was about rather than the church investing its energy in what families are about. I was sucking the life out of families for the sake of the church's mission" (*The Family Friendly Church*, Ben Freudenburg, p. 28).

Dangers of that replacement

What happens to the God-given role of parents when all the attention is on what happens at church and school? Parents are in danger of missing their pivotal importance in the spiritual nurture of their children. They are in danger of being reduced to cheerleaders who applaud from the sidelines while pastors, teachers, and staff ministers carry out the "real" work of disciplining their children.

This snowballs into an additional, unintended problem—a potential canyon between learning and life that hinders children from seeing that the gospel is life, and life is all about the gospel. If our children don't hear Mom and Dad talk much about Jesus, but they do hear Mom and Dad discuss making money, playing sports, or pursuing the latest entertainment craze, should we be surprised if they conclude that that is what life is all about? What is talked about at home will seem to be real life, while what is heard at church and school will seem to be nothing but nice stories with little practical connection to life.

That apparent gap between religious education and the life of the home often explains what happens by the time our children reach confirmation age. Those little ones who so eagerly gobbled up every

morsel of God's truth in first grade have noticed that what they are learning at church and school doesn't seem to matter much outside of those walls. Their sinful nature is all too willing to draw the conclusion that this "Jesus" stuff isn't important, while making money, excelling at sports, or living for the next entertainment craze is. We are in danger of raising a generation of super-Marthas who are worried about "many things" but who have lost sight of the one thing needful (Luke 10:41).

This problem does not begin at confirmation. That is merely when we get alarmed because we see how many of our youth seem to leave their faith behind. The problem really begins when parents hear, "It's a girl!" "It's a boy!" and fail to recognize that they are the most influential pastor or teacher that their child will ever have.

Facing the challenge

The best answer for retaining our youth is not an excellent youth ministry at church. The best answer is training and equipping Christian homes to be spiritually strong youth groups that surround children in the protective armor of the gospel from cradle through college.

I must confess that in my ministry, I often acted as if what happened at church and school was more important than what happened at home. I much too easily allowed the role of confirmation students' parents to be little more than buying the flower and paying for the picture. My actions, if not my words, reduced them to humble assistants.

But even worse is when I wore my other "hats" as husband to my wife and father to my five sons. I soothed my conscience by telling myself that the time and attention I often should have devoted to their spiritual welfare was a gift devoted to the public ministry. But all my shortsightedness accomplished was to shortchange my family's spiritual growth as well as fail to set a clear example for my flock.

Thank God that our hope and confidence is in Christ and not ourselves. Thank God that his forgiveness covers our stumblings as God's gospel messengers in our homes. Thank God that the record of perfection in which we trust is not our own as gospel messengers, but our perfection is the gospel's message to us. Our joy is found at a cross where our Savior bled and died also for our failings as Christian parents.

But the gospel doesn't end there. Besides looking back to yesterday's sins to comfort us, it looks ahead to today's opportunities to empower us. As we face the challenge of being our children's most important pastors and teachers, we still have the promise that "it is God who works in [us] to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13).

In our personal ministry to those in our homes we can claim the same promise that comforts those whose calling is public ministry: "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Corinthians 3:4,5). God has called you to your role as Christian father or mother. God never fails to equip and empower for the roles to which he calls us.

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