

JARED KENNEDY

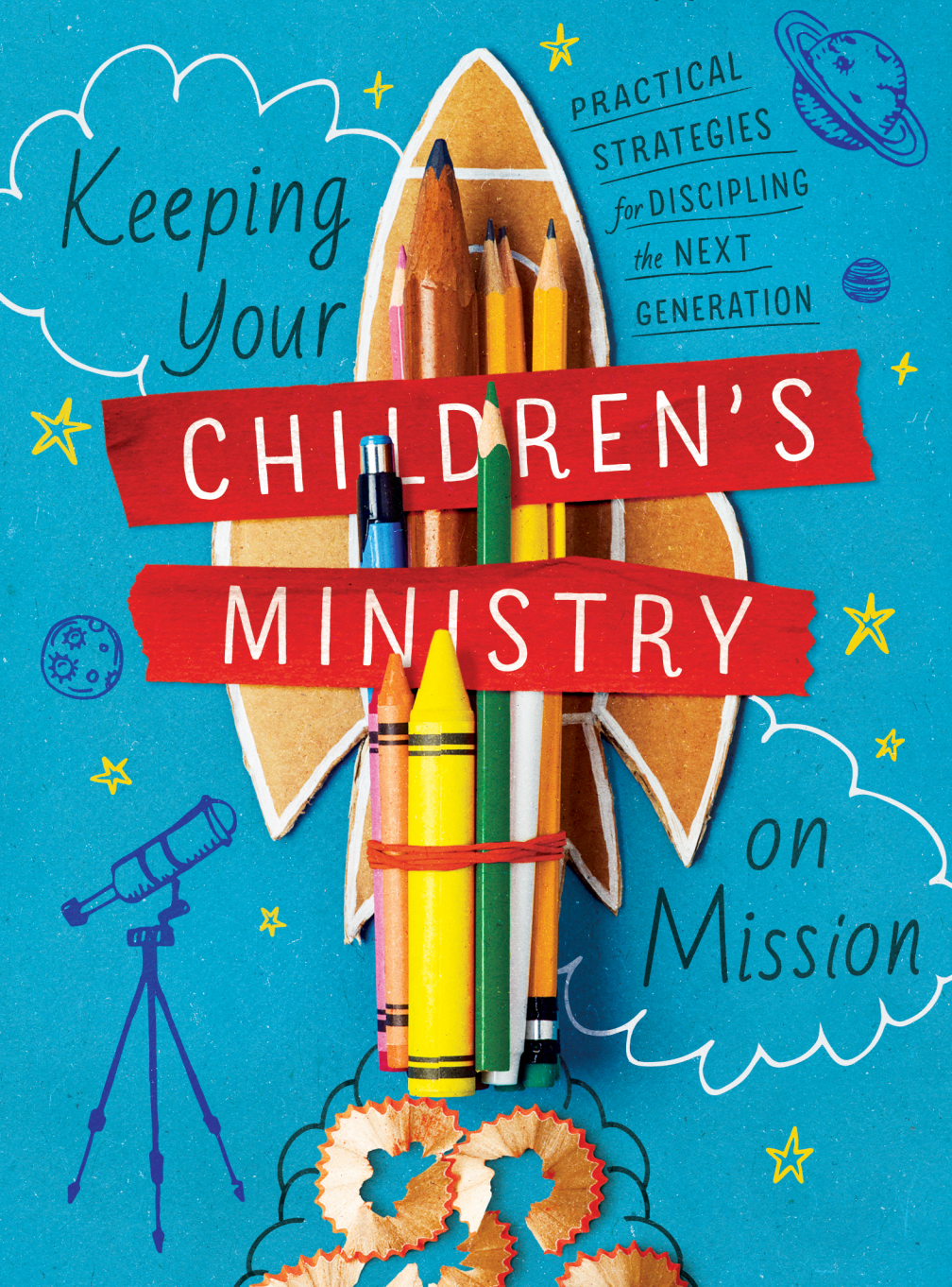
Keeping
Your

PRACTICAL
STRATEGIES
for DISCIPLING
the NEXT
GENERATION

CHILDREN'S

MINISTRY

on
Mission



“For years, when students have asked me, ‘What’s the one children’s ministry book that I should read first?’ I couldn’t recommend just one. Instead, I recommended three: one about organization, one about teaching, and one about keeping children safe. Now I can recommend just one to read first because Jared Kennedy has managed to fit all of those essential elements into a single book!”

Timothy Paul Jones, C. Edwin Gheens Professor of Christian Family Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Family Ministry Field Guide*

“*Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission* delivers as advertised. Kennedy rightly knows that the gospel is the only means by which we will have a lasting impact on the next generation. To this thesis Kennedy adds a wealth of practical help and instruction to guide your ministry. Every senior pastor and children’s ministry director should read this book and get it into the hands of all their teachers, helpers, and parents.”

Marty Machowski, family pastor; author, *Build on Jesus, The Ology*, and *WonderFull*

“I can’t think of a ministry in the church more complex than children’s ministry, and I can’t think of a better guide through that complexity than *Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission*. Whether you’ve worked with kids for days or years, you’ll find this book comprehensive (from abuse policies to age-graded teaching), balanced (holding onto what’s biblically ideal and practically realistic), and immediately helpful. Jared has packed more than a decade of experience and breadth of perspective into ten short chapters. It’s like having your own children’s ministry consultant only a shelf away.”

Champ Thornton, Associate Pastor, Ogleton Baptist Church; author, *The Radical Book for Kid* and *Wonders of His Love: Finding Jesus in Isaiah*

“Are you passionate for kids to embrace the good news about Jesus and follow him throughout life? In this outstanding resource, Jared Kennedy offers us an essential biblical vision and engaging strategic plan to pursue Christ-exalting child and youth discipleship at church and home.”

Barbara Reaoch, Former Director of the Children’s Division, Bible Study Fellowship International; author, *A Better Than Anything Christmas*

“What truly happens when the gospel shapes our goals for children’s ministry? Jared Kennedy knows. As a studied pastor-practitioner, Jared understands how to help leaders and churches connect the gospel to the nuts and bolts—policy-making, recruiting, training, protecting, and reproducing—of children’s ministry. If that’s your mission, you have your manual!”

Dave Harvey, President, Great Commission Collective; author, *I Still Do!*

“In *Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission*, Jared Kennedy provides a richly theological, accessible, and practical resource that is not only instructional but intriguing to read. This book written by an experienced family pastor is a sure guide for churches equipping servant leaders to make disciples for the next generation.”

Jamaal Williams, Lead Pastor, Sojourn Church Midtown; President, Harbor Network

“Many Christians groan about the future of the church instead of realizing the future is in their children’s ministries. Kennedy not only reminds us about how foundational children’s ministries can be in building God’s Kingdom, but he also provides a practical guide for everything from how to keep children safe to how to teach gospel-centered lessons. Churches that follow his counsel will not only thrive now as families are strengthened, but will also invest in their own future.”

Brian J. Arnold, President, Phoenix Seminary

“Reading Jared Kennedy’s *Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission* took me back to all the Sundays I’ve spent on my hands and knees in the nursery, passing out snacks in children’s church, or teaching kids to sing God’s praises. As theologically rich as it is practical, Kennedy guides us from the early church fathers through the roots of the Sunday school movement to contemporary protocols that safeguard the most vulnerable among us. Along the way, he casts a vision for children’s ministry that welcomes children to their Savior and helps them find their place in God’s family. As both a mother and a children’s ministry worker for almost three decades, I heartily recommend it.”

Hannah Anderson, author; *Humble Roots: How Humility Grounds and Nourishes Your Soul* and *Turning of Days: Lessons from Nature, Season, and Spirit*

“Jared has labored in the trenches of children’s ministry for years. You can tell by the wisdom that’s dripping off of every page. If you work with children, do yourself a favor and read *Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission* from cover to cover. You’ll be encouraged, challenged, and reoriented around the gospel of God’s marvelous grace.”

Deepak Reju, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry, Capitol Hill Baptist Church; coauthor, *Build on Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide to Gospel-Based Children’s Ministry*

“What a treasure this book is! It’s jam-packed with biblical wisdom and relies richly on church history, which makes it a deeply edifying read for anyone concerned with the nurture of the next generation for Christ. It is immensely practical, with helpful illustrations to illuminate how the theory translates practically into ministry among children and families. It’s clear that Jared is a seasoned practitioner with the critical ability to think theologically about ministry methodology. That’s exactly the kind of person I want to train others for ministry and why I’ll be recommending this book to all those striving to develop and direct Christ-centered, robust children’s ministries.”

Melanie Lacy, Executive Director, Growing Young Disciples

Keeping Your Children's Ministry on Mission

*Practical Strategies for
Discipling the Next Generation*

Jared Kennedy

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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*For the children's ministry leaders and volunteers
of the Harbor Network churches.*

*"They are the excellent ones, in whom
is all [the Savior's] delight."*

PSALM 16:3

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Introduction

YEARS AGO, I attended a family-ministry conference. At the end of the event, the keynote speakers sat on a panel to discuss the state of family ministry. There was one moment during that discussion I'll never forget. The moderator looked at one of the panelists, a pastor named Steve Wright, and asked, "How can we make our children's and youth ministries more family centered?"

Steve sat quietly for a moment and then answered, "We shouldn't."

Everyone was stunned. This conference was designed to help leaders equip parents to disciple their kids. We all assumed—at least I did—that the goal was to orient our ministries around the family.

Steve allowed his answer to sink in before continuing, "We should be concerned about centering our children's and youth ministries around Jesus. That's what will aim our families in the right direction."

The Bible is clear about the responsibility that *both* parents *and* the believing community have to pass on our faith to the next generation (Deut. 6:6–9; Ps. 78:1–8). But in spite of that

clarity, there are many different approaches to family discipleship. Some church leaders, like those of us who were shocked by Steve's response at the conference, have put their hope in parents as the primary faith trainers for the next generation. Others have been more jaded about parents' willingness to take up this mantle without help. As a result, they've put an emphasis upon the church's educational ministry, whether that's through schools, parachurch ministries, Sunday schools, or youth and children's ministries within the church.

But whatever our philosophy, Steve's comment points to an even bigger problem: a temptation to let the trappings of doing ministry with excellence keep us from seeing where the real glory is.

When leading local church children's ministry, I've experienced this temptation practically. I've let the un-mopped floor, the stalled check-in computer, and the missing activity sheet stress me out. While it's not a bad thing to want to welcome families to our church with warm hospitality, there are times when my worry over doing children's ministry well has revealed a misplaced faith. The level of anxiety I feel reveals that I'm trusting my hard work or the glitz and glam of attractional programming instead of trusting in Christ and the gospel. That's where our strategy for children's ministry must be centered.

Knowing Nothing Except Jesus

The apostle Paul stands in stark contrast to the way we tend to operate. In his letters to the Corinthian church, Paul gives us his vision for courageous, gospel-centered ministry—the kind of ministry that finds strength even in the midst of weakness. We

find one of the best summaries of this theme in 1 Corinthians 1:31–2:5:

It is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Today, we admire the apostle for his missionary focus and the way he suffered for the sake of Christ. But Paul found it necessary to defend his apostleship against the charges of some vocal opponents. I love how Jack Klumpenower describes the difference between Paul and his detractors in the Corinthian church:

Corinth was a stopping point for traveling sages who spouted wisdom about personal success and religious insight. But Paul would not be one of them. His message about the cross of Christ was so superior that he spoke it plainly—weakly, he says, with trembling. He let the cross itself do the talking.¹

While many of his hearers would have been tempted to think he lacked wisdom and had flunked out of Communications 101, Paul was confident that he had enough for ministry because he had the message of the cross.

I believe there are at least four ways the simple gospel message shapes our goals for children’s ministry, and we can see each of them present in Paul’s affirmation in 1 Corinthians 1:31–2:5. First, the gospel *seasons our hospitality* with humility; we don’t come to children with lofty speech but with humble and full hearts, boasting only in the Lord. Second, the gospel *centers our teaching* on Jesus Christ and him crucified. All else pales in comparison to the central place of this message. Third, the gospel *forms our discipleship*; we’re intentional about training children, and we have confidence that the Spirit’s goal is to grow kids in conformity with Christ’s story. Finally, the gospel *fuels our mission* so that the next generation’s faith does not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Chart 0.1

How the Gospel Shapes Our Goals for Children’s Ministry²

Hospitality	Teaching	Discipleship	Mission
Gospel-Seasoned Presence	Gospel-Centered Message	Gospel-Formed Identity	Gospel-Fueled Witness
We welcome children in Jesus’s name.	The content of the message matters; it must be about Jesus.	The cross of Christ shapes the entire Christian life.	Risk-taking, courageous faith comes from God.

Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission unpacks this four-fold strategy for gospel-centered, missional children’s ministry—a ministry that equips parents, ministry leaders, and volunteers to engage children, point them to Christ and the larger church community, and then send them on mission. In

chapter 1, we'll unpack the gospel and its implications for kids and explore how this good news moves both parents and the church community to pursue the next generation. In chapter 2, we'll view the history of children's and family ministry and directly address the temptation to let cultural assumptions and ministry ideals eclipse the glory of the gospel. Then over this book's final eight chapters, I'll encourage you to do the following:

- ***Create welcoming environments for building relationships with kids and families.*** Welcoming environments are the front door of children's ministry. We show Jesus to kids through the way we practice hospitality. We want facilities that are kid-friendly and safe. We want to season our environments with humility, prayer, and dependence on the Lord.
- ***Connect kids and families to Christ through gospel-centered Bible lessons.*** After kids have stepped through our front door, we want them to see Jesus in what we teach. This means preparing creative and educationally excellent Bible lessons that connect kids to Christ.
- ***Grow alongside families by helping them take next steps in their spiritual journeys.*** After families become regular parts of our community, we want to encourage them along in their journey of faith. We must be intentional both to call kids to appropriate faith responses and to equip parents with resources and rhythms that will help them walk with their children on a journey of discipleship.
- ***Go with kids and families, sending them out on gospel-fueled mission.*** Growth for kids moves beyond their own discipleship.

INTRODUCTION

Faith should move them to be ambassadors for Christ who love their neighbors and take the good news to the world.

My prayer for those who read this book is that your confidence will be rooted in the simple message of “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” It was all Paul needed, and it’s all we need as well.

As you dive into these chapters, trust that God’s actions through Jesus Christ are also truly enough to make you strong for children’s ministry. As we consider the one who welcomed children himself, know that the Savior and his good news is enough to keep you, and to keep your children’s ministry on mission.

PART 1

A GOSPEL-CENTERED
VISION FOR
CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

Stop! Believe! Christ Sent Me.

Our Both-And Mission to the Next Generation

THERE'S A LEGEND about John the apostle that's tucked away in a book you may have never read, especially if you're a children's or student minister. Musty second-century sermon manuscripts aren't top-shelf reading material for those of us who spend our days shopping at Costco for Goldfish crackers, leading early morning discipleship at Chick-fil-A, sanitizing toys in the nursery, or ordering pizza for Wednesday night gatherings. But if you've missed this story, you've missed a treasure.

At the conclusion of one of his sermons, Clement of Alexandria provides a beautiful account of ministry to the next generation. The story begins shortly after John, the beloved and now elderly disciple, was released from prison on the isle of Patmos:

After the tyrant's death [likely Clement is referring to the Roman emperor, Domitian], John returned from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus and used to go, when asked, to neighboring Gentile districts to appoint pastors, reconcile churches, or ordain someone designated by the Spirit. Arriving at a city nearby [probably the city of Smyrna in modern-day Turkey], he settled disputes among the brethren and then, noticing a spirited youth of superior physique and handsome appearance, commended him to the appointed pastor with the words: "I leave this young man in your keeping with Christ as my witness."¹

In his later years, John served the church as an itinerant preacher and traveling advisor. As a wise senior saint, John was also on the lookout for young talent. After finding a young man with some leadership potential, he commended the boy to the local pastor for training. Then, John returned to his home church, and the local pastor took the young man home, raised him, and when he had confessed faith, baptized him.

During Christ's earthly ministry, he made his heart for children clear (Matt. 18:1–6; 19:13–15). Though his disciples missed the point at first, Clement's story about John encourages us to believe they eventually came around. John, after all, was on the lookout for future leaders who would continue his ministry in the next generation. And if you picked up this book, I imagine this passion to see the next generation know, trust, and follow God's ways has been passed along to you too. Children's ministry exists so that kids might hear the good news about Jesus and follow him all their days.

Children Need the Good News

We can summarize the gospel story as a fourfold movement: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. What does this storyline teach us about kids?

First, we discover that God *created* children for himself. Kids are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14). Their lives are imbued with the glory of a universe that reflects God's beauty; they've been endowed with imagination and an ability to think and know. A child's life has value because he or she is made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27). As image-bearers, children are also made for worship. From childhood, every human is fashioned for giving praise. Our desire as Christians is to bring up a generation that is dazzled by God, captured by his world and his works and always talking about them to one another (Ps. 145:3–7).²

Second, our children are *fallen and sinful*. They inhabit a world marred by sin, abuse, suffering, and death; they feel its pain. “Sometimes, people talk about coming from dysfunctional families,” writes Robert Plummer. “The reality is that, because of sin, we are all ‘dysfunctional’ at the deepest level.”³ You've probably seen that children's program where the woolly mammoth, vampire, monsters, aliens, and an overgrown canary have all invaded a side street in Manhattan. In his brilliance, Jim Henson took some of our greatest fears and made them cute and educational. The child-friendly terrors that live together on Sesame Street should remind us of the hidden reality of childhood. Children are glorious and beautiful gifts from God and yet within each child—behind the cuteness—there's a fallen heart that's twisted from the moment of conception.

More often than not, our kids act like the monsters that destroy poor Guy Smiley's stage set. Every child is a sinner. It can be difficult for us to shoot straight with kids about this, but even they need to be faced with the reality of their brokenness. Charles Spurgeon says it well:

Do not flatter the child with delusive rubbish about his nature being good and needing to be developed. Tell him he must be born again. Don't bolster him up with the fancy of his own innocence, but show him his sin. Mention the childish sins to which he is prone, and pray the Holy Spirit to work conviction in his heart and conscience.⁴

Even kids exchange delight in God's glory for delight in the pleasures of the moment (Rom. 1:21; 3:23). Just think about what happens when kids are called away from their toys to bath time or bed. There is a battle for affections going on in kids' hearts. Yes, children need comfort, care, and a healing touch. But they also need honest correction, because it's only when kids see the terror of their sin that they'll see their need for redemption. We need to hear Spurgeon's warning: "Do not hesitate to tell the child his ruin; he will not else desire the remedy."⁵

Third, redemption comes for children through Jesus. Remember, Jesus himself said, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are like these children" (Matt. 19:14 NLT). Jesus's rebuke of his friends who would've kept kids at a distance should inspire us to include children in the life of our church communities. We must call even the youngest children to faith. We need to help each child

see that Christ is his or her only hope. Children need us to help them to look outside of themselves to the salvation Jesus offers.

Through vacation Bible school programs, many of us have been trained to emphasize the ABCs with kids: *admit* you are a sinner, *believe* in Jesus, and *confess* faith in Him. We find this pattern in Scripture (Rom. 10:9–10), and there’s nothing wrong with it so long as we make clear that salvation isn’t about what we do but about what Christ has done.⁶ If we only talk to kids about what they should do, we run the risk of confusing or discouraging them. When a child becomes aware of personal sin, he may become introspective and worry, “Did I do enough? How can Jesus live in my heart when I still get so angry?” What Jesus has done for us is the most important thing—so much more important than what we do. He saves us; we don’t save ourselves. We must teach kids to look to the forgiveness that comes as a result of Christ’s substitutionary death.

Finally, in light of the coming *consummation*, our children are potential brothers and sisters in Christ. When we get to glory, the most enduring relational reality will be our relationship to the Savior (Matt. 22:30). To be embraced by God’s redemption is to be adopted as God’s child, gaining a new identity, which transcends every earthly status and relationship. Plummer describes it this way: “If our children stand beside us in eternity, it will not be as our children but as our blood-redeemed brothers and sisters (Rev. 7:9–12).”⁷ But if our children are going to join us as brothers and sisters in glory, they must hear the gospel now.

Our *Both-And* Responsibility

John knew this, and that’s why he left the newly converted young man in the care of the local pastor in Smyrna. Sadly, things didn’t

go as the old apostle had hoped. We don't know all the details. Clement just says that after the young man was saved and baptized, the pastor "relaxed his oversight." At that point, as Clement explains, things went sideways:

Some idle and morally lax youths corrupted the young man with lavish entertainment and then took him with them when they went out at night to commit robbery or worse crimes. Soon, he joined them and like a stallion taking the bit in mouth, he dashed off the straight road and down the cliff. Renouncing God's salvation, he went from petty offenses to major crimes and formed the young renegades into a gang of bandits with himself as chief, surpassing them all in violence and bloody cruelty.⁸

How should we respond when a young person turns away from the faith? Certainly, the fallen youth bears responsibility. But can we say each prodigal is just a bad seed? That's what the pastor in Smyrna thought:

Time passed, and some necessity having emerged, they send again for John. He, when he had settled the other matters on account of which he came, said, "Come now, O bishop, restore to us the deposit which I and the Savior committed to thee. . . . I demand the young man, and the soul of the brother."

The old [bishop], groaning deeply, and bursting into tears, said, "He is dead."

"How and what kind of death?"

"He is dead," [the bishop] said, "to God. For he turned

wicked and abandoned, and at last a robber; and now he has taken possession of the mountain in front of the church, along with a band like him.”⁹

The pastor in Smyrna adopts a blame-the-kid approach. As we’ll see in a moment, the story makes clear this is wrong. But before we learn how the story ends, consider the assumption that John makes about the young man’s faith. He sees it as a deposit that he and Christ have “committed to *thee*.”

So who is it that is responsible for the faith of youth and children?

The kids in our children’s ministry on an average Sunday are, by God’s grace, the next generation of pastors, church planters, worship leaders, counselors, small group leaders, and parents; they’re the next generation of Christians. And if you’re a parent or a church member, the Bible says that teaching the gospel to these children is your responsibility:

[Things] that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.
He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,

and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments. (Ps. 78:3–7)

This psalm reminds us how God, throughout Israel's history, had children in mind (cf. Deut. 6:7–9). God wanted Israel's children to remember what he'd done to rescue and save. He wanted them to remember his laws and commands. He wanted the kids to hope and trust in him. And God gave the responsibility for training kids in the faith to two distinct groups: to Israelite *parents* and to their *covenant community*.

God commanded Israel's "fathers to teach . . . their children" (Ps. 78:5). No one has more potential to influence a child's spiritual direction than her parents. No Sunday children's ministry will come close to mom or dad's level of influence. Family ministry leader Reggie Joiner once compared the number of hours an average parent spends with a child to the number his church ministry team spent with the kids in their care:

At best, with those who attended our church consistently, we would only have about forty hours in a given year to influence a child. . . . The same fourth-grader who would spend nearly four hundred hours playing video games and studying math would spend forty hours in our environments with our leaders and teachers. That same day we calculated another number that shocked us: the amount of time the average parent had to spend with their children. It was three thousand hours in a single year.¹⁰

Joiner's 3,000/40 ratio is stunning. Family discipleship will happen in planned moments when parents pull out a Bible storybook, and it will happen in unplanned moments when a child is heartbroken, and her parents give comfort. It's in living rooms and cars, at bedsides and the breakfast table when many kids will hear and see their most consistent presentation of the gospel.

But training the next generation isn't limited to homes. God's command for parents to teach their kids was given in the context of a *community* ("in Jacob . . . in Israel," Ps. 78:5). Christian parents won't fulfill their responsibility to be generational disciple makers unless fellow believers support them. Here are a few reasons why church ministry to children and students is necessary:

1. To surround young people with godly adults who can provide love and care, truth they can build their lives on, and a model to follow (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Pet. 5:2).
2. To reinforce a biblical view of the world. A child will sometimes listen to a children's or youth ministry volunteer more fully even though he has consistently heard the same truth from his parent (2 Tim. 4:2).
3. Because the family hasn't been given the keys to the kingdom, the church has. Therefore, the church is needed to affirm the salvation of children, and it's the ultimate spiritual accountability for the family (Matt. 16:19).
4. To be a neutral third party when there is a major family conflict, serving as an impartial advisor between parents and kids (2 Cor. 5:18).
5. To connect believing young people with other Christians, who support, encourage, and keep them accountable (Heb. 10:25).

6. To provide opportunities for young people to use their gifts to serve (1 Corinthians 12).
7. Because the church fights for truth and sound doctrine. It protects families from being drawn away by false teaching (1 Tim. 3:15).
8. Because spiritual growth generally happens within the context of community (Eph. 4:11–16).¹¹

Children and students benefit from the combined influences of godly parents *and* the discipleship ministries of their local church. If kids growing up in Christian homes need the larger church family, how much more is the church needed to reach out and model the gospel for children who do not have Christian parents (Matt. 19:14; 28:19–20)? That seemed to be the case with the young man in Smyrna. Even with the church on his side, the youth's life soon went downhill.

How should we respond when a young person in our care turns away from the faith? Is it a time for self-reflection? Should we ask, "What did we do wrong? Was there something missing in our children's and youth ministry model?" Perhaps. But I find John's response more challenging.

Your Mission: Sharing the Good News with Little Ones

John doesn't lament failed discipleship strategies. His response is more active:

The apostle tore his clothing, beat his head, and groaned. "A fine guardian I left for our brother's soul! But get me a horse and someone to show me the way." He rode off from the church,

just as he was. When he arrived at the hideout and was seized by the outlaws' sentries, he shouted, "This is what I have come for: take me to your leader!"

When John approached and the young leader recognized him, the young man turned and fled in shame. But John ran after him as hard as he could, forgetting his age, and calling out, "Why are you running away from me child—from your own father, unarmed and old? Pity me child, don't fear me! I will give account to Christ for you and, if necessary, gladly suffer death and give my life for yours as the Lord suffered death for us. Stop! Believe! Christ sent me."¹²

As soon as he heard about the straying son, this eighty-year-old minister mounted a horse and rode into the mountains to chase him down! It reminds me of what our Lord taught us in Matthew 18:10–14:

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. (NIV)

What can motivate an old pastor to chase down a rebellious teen in this way? Only a conviction that he himself had once been the

wandering lamb whom the Savior had pursued. As John wrote in one of his letters: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Clement tells us that the young gang leader "stopped, stared at the ground, threw down his weapons, and wept bitterly." He flung his arms around the old apostle and begged for mercy. John assured him that he'd found forgiveness from the Savior, and upon the young man's repentance, the Father rejoiced!

Brothers and sisters who serve in children's or youth ministry, this is your mission. The Savior has pursued and found you. Now you have the privilege of carrying the good news to little ones, and persevering with them throughout their lives. Remember John the apostle's example the next time you're stacking piles of cotton balls for a preschool craft or playing knockout with middle school boys. Allow this good news to move you to action, and call the kids in your care to believe, because Christ sent you!

Keeping Your Children's Ministry on Mission is meant to inspire and encourage you in the task of reaching and discipling the next generation with the gospel. I also want to give you a clear strategy for that task. But, as this book's title suggests, it's easy to get distracted from our simple commission. The truth is, we all come into ministry with experiences and assumptions that form our expectations about what a children's ministry should be. So, before I begin unpacking a strategy for gospel-centered children's ministry, let's look at history and think about how today's children's ministry came about.