

What About Age Segregation?

Elder Podcast

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Scott Brown:

So here we are in early morning elder podcast again and we are tackling a controversial subject, age segregation, which has become the predominant method of discipleship and really everything that we do in the church. The big question on the table here this morning is: How does the Church advance the gospel?

Now we know what the gospel is. Our question this morning, though, is: How do we carry the gospel? How do we bring it to the Church itself and to the outside world?

And so right now we exist in an environment where the concept of age segregation has been broadly embraced and it really has almost become the gospel. If you contradict age segregation in the Church it is almost like you are attacking the gospel itself.

That is actually not true. The gospel is different than the delivery method.

And so we have three basic arguments against age segregation. The first is a biblical argument, the second is a historical argument and the third is really a pragmatic argument.

Regarding the biblical argument I have just in terms of a broad stroke we would say there is no pattern for age segregated discipleship anywhere in the Bible. So this idea of comprehensive age segregated discipleship and youth ministry is foreign to Scripture. It is not commanded by God. It is not demonstrated or identified in Scripture as a godly pattern. It is not illustrated or legitimized by biblical principle. It is contrary to New Testament patterns which are very explicit in church life, that it subverts the role of fathers, it turns the hearts of children away from their parents, it places youth in peer environments, it leads churches to create offices that are not biblical, it separates youth from adults which is contrary to the teaching of Scripture. And so our proposition here is that this whole idea of age segregation is unbiblical. If all you had was the Bible would you come up with age segregation?

And the answer, really, is no. You have to go to another epistemological well. You have to go to a different book than the Bible. If you want age segregation don't go to the Bible because it isn't there. You have to go to another book.

Well, what books do you have to go to? We want to discuss that.

Then there is the historical argument we would like to discuss as well and really to present the idea and discuss this truth that there really is no pattern of systematic age segregation in the Church until perhaps the last century. And the age segregated principle has very specific historically documented roots and we would like to discuss that.

And then we would also like to discuss the pragmatic argument. Is it working?

Well, we don't think it is working. We think it is producing bad fruit and it is producing bad fruit because it came out of a bad epistemological well. And root produces fruit. And so we are also here to discuss the roots of age segregation.

That is sort of a framing of the subject.

Let's bear down on the matter of the biblical argument. I have stated that there is no pattern for age segregation anywhere in the Bible. Let's discuss that in a little bit more detail.

Dan Horn:

I think the first thing that we need to start with is we can talk about these three categories, but let's be clear. The first category is sufficient. The Bible has spoken. We are to obey God. God knows what he is doing. God has told us what to do. We can look at these other things to confirm that God actually blesses obedience, but we need to start with the authoritative Word of God. God has spoken. We have a responsibility. The Church has a responsibility to do exactly what God has commanded it to do.

And, just like you said, Scott, nowhere does it say that we should be splitting up the children from their parents. It says exactly the opposite, right? Deuteronomy six is very clear who has the primary responsibility for instruction of children.

Steve Breagy:

Yes. I completely agree with that and I was thinking about what you were saying, Scott. Yeah, the biblical argument is, by far, the most important. And so we say we look at the argument for age segregation and you say, "We just don't see it." You can look at the Bible from cover to cover, you are not going to find it in Scripture. And that is exactly true.

And so the question is: What do we find when we read this Bible from cover to cover? Because we, as Christians, we want to support and embrace the idea of the sufficiency of Scripture that God speaks to all things, that there is no neutral area. And so if God has spoken to all things how has he spoken to the idea of how we are to disciple in the meeting of the Church, let's say.

And so when we are considering the biblical argument for age integration we have to go to the Scripture. And so when you look at the Scripture, what does it have to say?

Well, it has plenty to say about how we are to gather. We are not left in the dark about how to do this. Here is a couple of examples and I am not going to read all of these, but if you look even just at the Old Testament you see in the law, in the prophets and the writings each one of those categories of the Old Testament speaks of how we are to gather.

So, for instance, go to Deuteronomy 31:12-13 where God has given Moses the law and then Moses goes to the priests and then the elders of Israel and this is what he says.

And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. ¹

Well, who is all Israel?

Well, he tells us in verse 12.

Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law: And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.²

It is a clear pattern there that you see and it emphasizes that the children would learn to fear the Lord. So there is a call to obedience. And so they have got to be there to hear that.

Here are some other ones which I won't read, but they can easily be looked up: Joshua 8:34 and 35 where Joshua restates the law and he says the same thing, that the children and the men and the women, everyone is to be gathered there. You look at Nehemiah 8:1-3. You got Ezra 10, same thing you see there. You see a weeping and confessing, but it is before everyone. And then you go to Joel 2:15 and 16 and you see the same thing and it actually even says nursing babes. It even includes the nursing babes.

And so, again, if we are looking for a pattern, I think the Bible is pretty clear even in the Old Testament and there is a pattern. You go to the New Testament you see Ephesians 6:1-4. You see in Colossians 3:20 and 21 Paul is directly addressing two groups of people. He is addressing fathers and he is also addressing the children.

¹ Deuteronomy 31:10-11.

² Deuteronomy 31:12-13.

So let's assume that the children are there to hear what Paul has to say. And so all I am saying is—and there is more to bring and I don't want to consume all the time—but just as far as the biblical argument is concerned, we have a pattern. We are not left in the dark about this. So let's obey the pattern and pattern our church life after that.

Jason Dohm:

And when you challenge the defenders of age segregation on this they will come up with their own laundry list that represents a pattern for their side in the debate. You end up getting Scripture references that are really absurd if you look at the passages in the context. There is really not another laundry list that stacks up.

One of the things that is critical to us is that we understand, that we apply and that we defend the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. And that is probably best summarized by 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 which just says that a believer with Bible in hand may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. And it just means that the Bible is all that we need and it is all that we have ever needed. And so the thought that there is a new methodology which is sprung up in the last 100 or 200 years that has been hidden from the Church from time past and hasn't come from the Bible is now the thing that we should comprehensively give all the best of our time and resources to is absurd.

Dan Horn:

And frequently, as you were saying, Jason, the verses that are pointed to... that critics would point to like Ephesians 6:1-4 where they say, "Well, Paul is clearly writing to the children..."

I mean, do people really think that when that letter was read that they gathered the children... And then they get to those three verses and they take them out to another room and read these two verses because, you know, the next two verses are to fathers so they have to split them up. And when you start to hear... because people do try to say, "Here is a list of arguments for it."

Right? Titus two, older women are teaching younger women therefore we should bring the Greek model of having one person stand in front of a classroom and teach a group of people, that that somehow is the new biblical model instead of that passage actually what it refers to is more of a mentoring relationship that everybody in the body should be encouraging and exhorting and teaching one another. And then when you separate the children from the older people what a horrible waste it is, right? God gives strength to the youth and he gives wisdom to the old and they are supposed to be mixed up so that the youth get wisdom from them and the old people get strength from the youth. And, instead, we separate the youth from the wisdom and both of them suffer for it.

Scott Brown:

Right and what you end up doing is you end up creating generational fragmentation. You create multiple generations that can't relate to one another. And, of course, that is a gigantic problem in our culture as a whole. But we create that same problem in the Church where we create multiple generations instead of one body, one body which moves together, the older, the younger, all classes of people together. It is a fragmentation of the unity of the body of Christ when you break it up generationally.

Dan Horn:

Right. We talk about the generation gap. I mean, I know when I was growing up that was a big thing, the generation gap.

That is only a 100 year old concept. Before that there was no concept that one generation would be substantially different than the other generation. We are all called to obey the same gospel. The fact that technology is slightly different does not make a generation gap if people are being trained together. But you can create a generation gap if you are training people separately so that one generation is not like another. That is an evolutionary concept that is not something that is from the Word of God. The Word of God is we are supposed to hold fast the form of sound words that have been given to us. Every generation is supposed to be seeking the same God and every generation is supposed to be being conformed to the same image of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Steve Breagy:

And we go back to what Scott said initially in the opening comments that it is not in the Bible. And if you are going to make an argument about doing something in the Church and you cannot support it from the Bible, you have to go somewhere. You have to go to some type of, what you will call an authoritative source in order to support the reason why you are doing what you are doing. And I just keep coming back to what Paul said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians one. He talks about we see the foolishness of God is wiser than men. I mean, just even the foolishness of God. And hasn't God made the wisdom of this world look foolish? And it is so true. I mean we should be appealing to God's wisdom all the time. We should never, as Christians, want to be in a position where we are going to use our wisdom to subvert or to ignore God's wisdom and he has clearly given us wisdom in this area.

Scott Brown:

When you think about the biblical argument you have to acknowledge that there are explicit commands and patterns for church life. That is critical to understand that is not left up for men to invent. It is left up for God to define and to govern. And so what is the church to do and how is the church to do it?

Well, it is very clear. The Church is to gather to read Scripture, to preach the Word, to pray, to sing, to celebrate the Lord's table, to baptize, to evangelize, to take care of the

poor. What are all those things done in? Well, they are done in a context of age integration, not age segregation.

You don't see the reading of Scripture, the reading of the Word, prayer, singing, communion, any of those things done in any other context except in intergenerational context except in intergenerational contexts. And I think that is the heart of the matter for us. We don't see anything but this pattern in Scripture, so why in the world have we created a Christianity whose financial structure is based on age segregation, whose staff mix is based on age segregation and whose programmatic initiatives are all governed by age segregation. How did that happen?

Jason Dohm:

So one of the critical things that needs to be addressed is the question of jurisdiction. Who has God given the primary responsibility for the discipleship of children to? And I think it is clear from Scripture that God has given that to fathers and mothers in home life, not exclusively. Does the Church have a role to play? Absolutely. And as the Church has been given a role to play the Church has been given methods, too. And so the preaching of the Word, corporate prayer, fellowship, communion... All those things factor into discipleship for children at the corporate level. But there is no indication that that was split out by age groups for sure.

So fathers and mothers have been given the primary responsibility for discipleship with children. The classic Old Testament text for that is Deuteronomy 6. The classic New Testament text for that is Ephesians 6. That is one thing that really needs to be considered because when you start crossing over jurisdictional lines and reassigning the primary responsibility to another institution then you really end up with a world of trouble.

Dan Horn:

And I think what we end up with is that because it is easier for the Church just to usurp the authority of the parent and they say, "We are not usurping the authority of the parents." What they say is, "Look, these fathers won't do it and so therefore what we need to do is we need to take their role."

What we forget is God did give the Church a role. He gave the Church Matthew 18. The father, a godly father has a responsibility to raise his children in the training and the admonition of the Lord. If they are not doing that, that is worthy of Church discipline. And so instead of usurping the authority of the father, instead of saying, "We are going to create a program that allows the father to fail to do his duty," what the Church needs to do is hold the fathers accountable. We have churches that are filled with people who don't recognize the power of the gospel. I mean it transforms lives and we need to be back to a church that transforms lives. And part of that is you call fathers to what they are told to do and you hold them accountable to it.

Jason Dohm:

And so what has happened is many times a well intentioned church has created what they believe is a safety net to catch children whose fathers will not fulfill their God given role and instead of a safety net, it becomes an escape hatch where millions and millions of fathers pull the lever, say, "Thank you very much," they drop through the trap door and they are never to be seen again in the context of discipling their own children.

What the modern Church needs to understand is there is a connection between the dots. Structuring the resources of the Church this way has actually created a problem. And so when we get to the question of what do we do about children whose fathers won't act responsibly, the Church needs to understand that the place that we have to start is: Let's not create more.

The current structure creates more of those fathers by saying, "We will do that."

All fathers have a nature that inclines them towards passivity and when this structure is created fathers say, "Thank you very much," and then they are gone from the discipleship scene.

Steve Breagy:

If I could, I would like to bring Scripture to bear on the whole idea of good intentions because I think that is part of what you are talking about, this idea of filling in the gap and usurping authority because I think there are good intentions out there. I mean, I think the Church sees problems. They see what is going on. They just don't implement the biblical solution, but they try to implement a solution. And the problem is the good intentioned argument, the good intentions, they don't work. They don't necessarily matter. And I go to 2 Samuel six. That is the story of Uzzah and we see the ark being transported in a way that God did not call the ark to be transported. And as the oxen stumble and the ark is about to collapse and fall on to the ground we see Uzzah with good intentions. You don't want to see the ark get crashed upon the ground. With good intentions he puts his hand up to stop it from falling and does God turn around and say, "I am so thankful that you did that, Uzzah. I am so thankful that you protected the ark"?

No. What did he do? He struck down Uzzah dead.

And you look at that and say, "Oh, my goodness. How unfair, how unloving could that be?"

Well, the problem is you have to understand the whole context. You have to go to Numbers 4:15 and that gives you the answer to why God had to strike Uzzah dead. It was because of Numbers 4:15 it says that he, Uzzah, and then anybody else, is not to touch any holy thing. That is exactly what Uzzah did.

So in his good intention of saving the ark he neglected a command from God not to touch this holy thing. And so here we see the idea that good intentions will get you killed.

Jason Dohm:

I think all of us could give a personal testimony of what it was like when we began implementing these practices in our own home, right? I remember very distinctly when we first began going to a family integrated church. My wife articulated one of her concerns to me was that the church was providing these things for our very young daughters and she was worried that I wouldn't pick up the ball and that was just based on her observing the practices of my life. That really stung.

But I had to recognize that it was based on her history with me. That was really a call to action for me and as I began to actually do these things in my home because I did not have a safety net beneath me any longer, as I began to do it, what a blessing that has been for me and I think it is robbery of the men in the Church when we take this from them, say, "Thank you very much. We will do this for you as a Church." And what we are really doing is we are robbing men of one of the greatest pleasures and honors in life. And we are setting them free to engage in all sorts of activities that have nothing to do with the kingdom of God, but they have plenty of free time on their hands because they are not discipling their children.

Dan Horn:

Right. You said pleasure and all those other things. The other things is it is one of the most edifying things that you can do. I mean, teaching your children is one of the best ways to learn. And so what we do is we get a bunch of immature Christians because they don't have to teach their children which is what God intended them to do and that was one of God's methods of discipleship of the father.

Scott Brown:

The burden of proof for the legitimacy of age segregation really lies in the laps of those who use it. And we have yet to hear a biblical argument, an exclusively biblical argument for age segregation. Please, someone give us a biblical argument for age segregation. We just haven't found anyone to come to the table with it.

Dan Horn:

And that is why for 1900 years in the history of the Church this has never happened. What caused it to start all of the sudden? Because if they could make the biblical argument, how come when you read the reformers they are not making the argument?

The reason they are not making the argument is: It is not in Scripture.

Scott Brown:

There actually is one documented instance of youth gathering together, 42 youth were teasing the prophet Elisha and calling him baldy indicating their stupidity and their foolishness, so much so that they were eaten by bears. That youth group was exterminated.

Now, we actually think the youth groups of today need to be exterminated, not by bears, but by godly leaders who would see the light, who would see the biblical patterns and say, "This dog don't hunt."

So the roots of age segregation have personalities and philosophical movements associated with them.

You can go back to Plato who believed that children absolutely should be, must be separated from their parents in order for them to progress. So Plato's vision for life included children being taken from their parents at a young age and raised by the state.

Or you could fast forward to the French revolutionary thinker Jean Jacques Rousseau who believed the same thing, that children should be taken away from their parents. Rousseau himself dropped all of his children at birth on the doorstep of an orphanage for someone else to raise because he believed that children were not important.

Dan Horn:

Yeah, when we consider Darwin, Darwin believed that phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny which means that the way things were created, the way that they came about to being gets recreated in the growth of every single person. And so Heckles diagram where he shows that a fetus is supposed to go through these various stages that at one point it looks like a fish and then it looks like a frog and then it looks like a mammal and then it looks like a human and so, therefore, as a child grows up that they go through these same stages and so, therefore, you can't teach a third grader who is like a fish, you can't teach them like a fourth grader who is more like a frog. And so they come up with these completely ridiculous and absurd things. And the sad thing is the Church has decided to adopt these methods instead of saying, "What does Scripture actually say?" It said, "Look at how wise the world is."

Well, the world had rejected God as it rejected the idea of a Creator and yet the Church is adopting these things.

And now fast forward 100 years and we are looking at these same things saying, "Oh, there is no way we can overthrow these. These are crucial to the ministry of the Church."

Why are they crucial to the ministry of the Church? They don't come from godly thought. They don't come from an understanding of the Creator God inherent in them as a rejecter of the Creator God.

Steve Breagy:

And it has already been said this morning. If you don't appeal to Scripture you have to appeal to something else. If you don't appeal to the authority of Scripture you are appealing to the authority of something else. And so when we consider the issue of how families gather for worship, if you don't appeal to the Bible for how you do that—and we have talked about those who would promote an age segregated model—are not appealing to the Bible to do that. You have to appeal to something else. And so in a sense there is an appeal to history. And there has been much written about age segregation and it is based on the philosophy of the men that we have just spoken about.

And so you just have to realize. If you are going to adopt an age segregated way of worshipping, of coming to church on Sunday and gathering together in an age segregated way, you have to realize that you are not appealing to the Bible. You are not appealing to the wisdom of God. You are appealing to the wisdom of men. And you are appealing to the wisdom of men like Charles Darwin, John Jacques Rousseau, many of the other men that we have already talked about. And that, to me, is a very frightening thing.

Dan Horn:

When we consider this historically, too, we have to recognize what happens historically is that when this whole education movement started and the education there... the Church is about edifying the saint and there is education. But this whole separate education thing, that came through a humanist view of education. Not educating about God, but educating about human things and salvation through education which comes from Reke's view.

And so when you look at these things and how they adapted into the Church, these ended up taking a huge amount of resources from other things in the Church. If you are going to have an age segregated Sunday school program what you need is a whole bunch of teachers that you didn't need before. So where God says that everybody in the body has a different role and let not many of you be teachers, all of the sudden there is this much greater demand for teachers, not mentoring relationships like in Titus two, but these people that are going to stand in front of a classroom and teach. There is this huge demand for it. There is a demand for building space that wasn't there before. There is a demand for all these other expenses so that now you look at the modern church and which percent do they spend on youth and on Sunday school? It is a huge percentage of their budget. What have they failed to do? They have failed to aid widows and orphans in their distress.

So because we look at the government and say, "Why is the government doing all these welfare programs when this is the responsibility of the families and of the Church?"

Well, the reason is because the Church is spending its resources where it was not commanded to do it, so it doesn't have resources left to do the things that it was told to do. At any church if you look at their church and if their benevolence budget is less than

their youth group and their Sunday school budget, they have got things way out of whack with what God has commanded them to do.

Steve Breagy:

I think when you look at those resources, too, a big part of that which you mentioned, Dan, is the human resource. And when you have got a machine like that and you have got a machine where you have got to supply teachers, where you have got to supply administrators, where you have got to supply logisticians, then those people, those adult who are teaching, what not, instead of being in the worship meeting of the Church, instead of hearing the Word preached, instead of being with the people and partaking in the Lord's Supper and hearing the singing and the praying and the reading from the Scripture, all the things that Scott said that the Church should be doing. When you have got that much invested as far as human resource, they are not in the meting of the Church to be edified because they have got to keep this machine going. And so you see the spiraling effect for sure.

Dan Horn:

Right. And so what you end up with instead of the teachers continuing to grow in God, what they do is become stagnant and then the next group that they have trained, well, they are not going to reach the same level as their teachers in every, you know, 10 years the situation gets worse instead of getting better. The Church has become less and less understanding of the doctrines of God.

Scott Brown:

So when we talk about the historical argument against age segregation, our proposition is that age segregation is new. It has not come out of a biblical worldview or certainly not biblical directives. Rather, it has come of particular philosophies that ended up invading the Church. And also it ends up being promoted often by well meaning people who end up believing things like, "Well, the kids need kid time." Instead of creating their programs after the pattern of Scripture, they are creating them after their own feelings and their own understanding of what they think the Church needs.

"The teens need to be together."

Those are the kinds of sentiments and philosophies that are created in the modern youth ministry and age segregated discipleship program.

We came by it honestly. We wanted to meet needs. We grew up in a Darwinistic world that really misunderstood the nature of man and also the needs of man.

And so the historical argument causes us to reject the whole idea of age segregated discipleship in the Church.

Jason Dohm:

In terms of another pragmatic argument, we are sensitive to this because we want our strongest, best, most powerful arguments to be on the biblical side of the equation because we believe that pragmatism has got us into this mess and we don't want to default to pragmatic arguments. But we do think there are some strong pragmatic arguments against age segregation and one of those is that when you take the primary role of discipleship away from parents and you hand it to a Sunday school teacher you are taking it out of the hands that God has inherently given a lot of capital to.

Now here is what I mean. Every parent knows particularly in the young years how your children look at you, how they look up to you, how every word that comes out of your mouth is the gospel truth. And so you take that position that God has inherently given to you and you hand it off to someone who has imminently less credibility with your child and then you give them only a small fraction of the time and we expect good results from that. That doesn't make any sense.

Dan Horn:

In this picture that God has given us, right, from Ephesians five that the husband is like Christ and the wife is like the Church, I mean, we are given this picture of gospel in the home that every child sees. Whether they recognize they see it or not, it is every child sees it because marriage is a picture of the gospel. And when you take it and you move the proclamation of the gospel into the Sunday school, you are removing that picture that God gave: the family gathering around where the mother and father are speaking the words of God. You have the visual picture there at the same time that you have the words of Scripture being read. When you move it to Sunday school you lose all that.

Scott Brown:

And that is one of the reasons why age segregation is inherently corrupting because it deprives people of the natural pictures of the gospel, the husband's love for his wife, the wife's submission to her husband, children's submission to the parents. Those are all pictures of the gospel. They all carry within them elements of the gospel message.

And so we sincerely believe that age segregation is inherently corrupting for lots of reasons. That is one reason.

Another reason is it puts 13 year olds with 13 year olds. It is inherently corrupting for that reason. The companion of fools suffers harm.³ Thirteen year olds are fools typically and they will cause more harm.

You know, my observation as a youth pastor, as having been, you know, intimately involved in church life since I was in my teens is that when you put children together you get hyper childhood. You get more problems. It is inherently corrupting.

³ See Proverbs 13:20.

This is a self destructive practice. It implodes upon itself. It destroys those who participate in it because it gathers fools, concentrates that foolishness and then spreads it. And that is why age segregation is wrong from a pragmatic standpoint. There are many pragmatic problems that you have to consider that are associated with age segregation.

Of course, like we have said, the pragmatic arguments are not the primary ones, but we have to acknowledge that there is fruit associated with this root.

Steve Breagy:

I was thinking, Jason, what you said that the parents have a tremendous amount of inherent capital. And the other thing that they also have is context. And what I mean by that is the children are with the parents for a considerable amount of time. You said that the children are given to the Church for only a fraction of the time. And so just in the whole idea of discipline and training and instructing the child when the child is sent to another room to be taught or what not, whether it be a nursery, you know, we know that a children at a very young age are disobedient and rebellious. When they are sent to another room and they act up, that teacher has no context in why that child is acting up. They may have had a week of the same problem over and over again and the parent has been trying to instruct that child to the heart and speak to those heart issues. That teacher is not going to be equipped to do that. They are not going to even know that. They are not going to even know that. They won't really know how to address that. And so when those things occur they really ought to be with the parents who have the context as to why that is going on and to be able to address that immediately.

And, more often than not, those issues probably aren't even addressed in the classroom. They are just kind of glossed over. And so the child is getting a missed message. He can disobey when he is not around the real authority, the parents, but they have to obey when they are with... and that is not really heart obedience at all.

Dan Horn:

And that context is so important for evangelism, too. I mean, we have created this idea of evangelism that evangelism's context is, well, you have revival where you invite all these people to a stadium and then you preach the gospel. The normal gospel is to be preached in life. When the person is suffering you go to them and you tell them why there is a reason for hope. You tell them these things and that child, if all you are going to do is evangelize them on Sunday the context is really important.

When they are feeling guilt for their sin, that is when you go to them and you talk to them about conviction of sin and about repentance and about the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that will pay for their sins. That is when you do it. And if all you are going to do is do it Sunday morning you are going to miss the obvious opportunities that happen in life where that person recognizes that they need a Savior. That is when you need to tell them they need the Savior, not when they are sitting in a classroom on Sunday morning.

Jason Dohm:

You know, one of the things that drives the desire for age segregation is the thought that there should be a pristine worship environment for adults. And, honestly, Jesus was very disturbed by this sentiment when his disciples wanted to extract the children from what was happening.

I think it betrays a couple of things. One of the things it betrays is that worship is not part of life anymore and so we really need to get our juices flowing on Sunday so that it can sustain us until our next pristine worship experience.

We really want to advocate a model where worship is integrated to life, worship is part of the activity of the home and Sunday isn't a come get plugged in to a high powered worship experience. Sunday is the culmination of all the worship that has been happening in the home during the week.

Dan Horn:

And we want worship to happen to us rather than us actually worshipping. Worship is not supposed to be without work.

When you think of Jesus Christ teaching he is teaching on the tope of Mount Olive. He is teaching sitting in a boat.

Have you ever sat outside and listened to somebody speak? It is not easy because you have the wind. You have bugs. You have all the reality of life. And that is hard and you actually have to work at it. And when we want to say, "Well, we need to have this pristine environment for worship," what we are really saying is we want worship that requires no effort on our part. We just want to sit there and have us absorb worship.

No. Worship is a work. It is something that you do. You come before God and you work to have the focus. You work to be paying attention to the sermon. It is not that you are just spoon fed. It is an active thing that you are supposed to be doing in that worship service.

Steve Breagy:

It always amazes me that people have the gall to say and to determine what their children can and cannot learn, at what age a child can or cannot get something out of the worship service. They want that pristine worship experience. And, again, it is that experience. It is experiential.

And part of that is, well, the children aren't getting anything out of it anyway, why have them in there? And so they choose an arbitrary age or some level of maturity that the children shouldn't be in there because they are not going to get anything out of it anyway.

Well, how do we know that? We all know from experience our children come to Christ at different ages. How do we know and say definitively at what age a child is ready to receive spiritual things? Can a child not receive spiritual things in the womb as you are reading Scripture and they hear the reading of Scripture?

We should not be in a position where we are going to tell God, “When my child is five, then they are ready to receive spiritual things, but until then they need to be sent to the nursery.”

I just think it is the height of arrogance to presume upon God like that and to dictate to him when the child is ready to learn. Let’s just let God be God. Let’s be obedient to the pattern that we see in Scripture. Let’s have the children in the worship service and then deal with that.

And, as Jason said, it should reinforce exactly what has happened every day of the week where the family gathers for worship and there is singing and there is praying by the mother and the father and the children. And so when they come on Sunday, just like you said, it is just a reinforcement. It is a culmination of a week’s worth of worship where you gather corporately with a body of brothers and sisters.

Dan Horn:

One of the worst effects that I would say especially of children’s church is that the children think that church is a joke. One of the reasons that I think that they leave largely at college years is it has been a joke. Worship is not a serious act. It is not a serious thing where you are bowing before a living God. What it is is a time to have juice and crackers with your friends.

And what we have done is we have made worship something that is about man, worship something that has nothing to do with coming before a holy God. And so when they are later in life, it is a childish thing because everything that they have seen about worship is a childish thing. So if they get nothing out when they are five except the fact that their parents think that this is an important thing to do, that their parents come before a living God with awe, that is enough. It doesn’t matter if they get nothing from the sermon if what they get is the picture that God deserves to be worshipped and they see that every week so that when they are 40 they think it is important to worship God. They see the seriousness of worship. It has been plenty. It has been enough.

Jason Dohm:

If we are not establishing the importance of worshipping a living God with our children, then later as soon as something more interesting presents itself it becomes the option that is chosen.

Scott Brown:

So what have been the fruits of this age segregated discipleship format?

Dan Horn:

I would argue that the fruits are broken families because the children... they are not even being disciplined by their own parents. I mean one of the great tasks, one of the great blessings that God gives us both in marriage is that the husband and wife work together to raise the children. When we give it over to the state during the week and when we give it over to the Church during the weekends what ends up doing is the husband and the wife instead of working together for this great work of God, what they end up doing is working on different things and working separately.

So God uses the discipleship of children as one of the ways that he brings the family closer together. And so as we tend to usurp this we are undermining the family. So when we consider broken families we have to consider that part of this is what is generating the broken families. I mean, obviously it is sin that generates the broken families, but this is something that is feeding the brokenness of our families. And we look at the modern youth movement and what do you get? You get 80 percent, 90 percent loss rate. Is this what we should be doing? At what point do you even just look at the situation in the Church today and say, "We have to abandon this system"?

But there is a fear and unless we make the biblical case loud enough what you end up with is there is this fear that this we have at least, kind of what Jason was saying before. At least we have this.

Well, this isn't really working. It really doesn't matter if you lose something. It is losing everybody anyway.

Jason Dohm:

Yeah, when you look at it in terms of the numbers with 80 to 90 percent of children who go through this system then abandoning the Church by their sophomore year in college and not coming back. When you look at those kind of results it is madness to say, "Let's improve it."

I don't know any other context where you would not say, "Let's abandon this." And yet there is a clamor to just improve the thing that everything about the study screams that there is a fatal flaw, right? I mean, if there is anything that would point to a fatal flaw to something that just can't be redeemed or rehabilitated it would be results like 80 to 90 percent lost.

I wish in a business context you could achieve result like that and just keep plugging away at it and making incremental improvements to that. It is madness.

Dan Horn:

And one segment, I think, that is crucial for us to understand here is we look at the society and we say, “Look at all these broken families out there.”

Let’s start with the idea that we need to stop the hemorrhaging first. One of the problems we have is we are looking and saying, “How do we fix these broken families?”

Let me give you a definition of a broken family. A broken family is a family where the father hasn’t disciplined their children because the manifestation of that is that the children might be in rebellion. The manifestation of that is in various ways that we call broken families. But what really broke first was the father wasn’t disciplining his children.

And so unless we fix that, we will never stop creating broken families. Instead of healing broken families—which is a crucial role for the Church. I am not discounting that. But we have got to stop creating them first. And the way to stop creating them first is to hold the father accountable to the role that God has given him. Once you do that in that you can give a picture of a healthy family. Then all of the sudden you can do what God is talking about in Psalm 68:6 where he says he puts the solitary into families. You have healthy families that can come and minister to these people because they do need ministering to.

And one of the crucial things that they need ministering to, is they need to be able to see a picture of a non broken family and a picture of a non broken family starts with a father who is disciplining his sons and daughters.

Scott Brown:

And, you know, we have to recognize that we live in a world of broken families. That is a problem. Honest, godly Church leaders look at that and say, “What do we do? How do we heal these terrible wounds that are found in these families?”

You know, so broken families are a problem in our churches.

And, you know, one of the big criticisms of the family integrated church movement is that you can’t engage anything but healthy families. So what do you do about all those broken families? And so there are a couple of things that we want to say about that. One is that we think the modern Church has missed the mark in ministering to those families. But what should the Church do?

The Church should do a number of things to minister to broken families. First of all, broken families need a biblical Church family. They need fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters that are in the state who can be part of their greater family. You also have to give broken families qualified elders, biblically qualified elders who manage their households well so that the broken families can know what it looks like not to have a broken family.

And you also have to give these broken families Titus two women. You have to give older women who know how to instruct the younger women how to love their husbands, to be chaste and all the things that Titus two mentions. You minister to broken families by giving them the real church and not some program that is targeted at some kind of a need. You give broken families biblical discipleship methodology. You gather the generations together and you preach the Word and you pray and you take communion and you weep with those who weep and you rejoice with those who rejoice. That is what you do.

What do you do with these broken families? You give them biblical Church life and that is your approach. You don't have to come up with some creative way to bless them. God has already given his Church biblically ordered as his method to heal those broken families.

And, like you said, Dan, engaging the father to his biblical role begins to stop the hemorrhaging and we have to stop the hemorrhaging somewhere. You can't minister to the weak families in your culture unless you have strong families in your church. And how are you going to get them?

So if you never have healthy families what are you calling people to, anyway? And what does a healthy family look like? And if you don't have healthy families you are reproducing unhealthy families. And that is the crux of the problem.

And the whole age segregation model destroys the production of healthy families because it is unbiblical.

Steve Breagy:

And we see that all of these are connected. You can talk about what is the fruit from this and, Dan, you talked about broken families. And broken families are going to lead to broken churches and what I mean by that is that the Church is not functioning and going back to jurisdictions in the role that God has called the Church to play. They are not the salt and the light anymore. And so many evangelicals sit back and they admit the culture is just going down the tubes. We just can't get the right government in there. We just can't get the right leader in there. You know, we try all sorts of ways to get the right people into government so that they will change. That is not the way we are going to implement change.

And so when we see that the fruit of the age segregated movement is broken families which leads to ineffective churches, churches that are not being the salt and the light to the community like they are supposed to be, we are going to see a culture that is not being spoken to. And the Church should be speaking to the culture and it is just not and it is just that trickle down effect.

And so, really, if you are really serious about wanting to see an improvement in the culture, that you want to see a government that is returning to more God ordained principles then it does. It does start really with the individual in salvation. The individual has got to be regenerated which would lead to families that are doing proper discipleship which will bring the strong families into the Church that are going to use their God given gifts and to, of course, edify the body so that they can go out and be that salt and the light to the culture like we are supposed to.

Dan Horn:

The gospel is supposed to be the good news and the good news is, yes, eventually it is eternal life and that is the great hope. But the good news is that we will have life more abundantly now. And when we fail to do these things what we end up with is the Church looks exactly like society.

And you talk about evangelism and this is a method of evangelism to use age segregated ministry. You have your bus ministry that you bus people in that are between certain ages and you sit there and you tell them the gospel. But what gospel are you actually telling them? Are you telling them a gospel that affects lives? Are you telling them a gospel that makes a person that looks regenerate, right, that gives them a new life, that they are living a different life?

And when our churches are filled with broken families just like the world around, it destroys evangelism. It destroys the ability of the Church to evangelize.

You know, the gospel is that Jesus Christ came to save sinners, but he saves them. And unless you can say, "Look, it changes you," what are you calling them to? You are calling them to a false gospel. You are calling them to a gospel that doesn't have effect in lives. And it does. The true gospel has effect in lives.

Jason Dohm:

And often in the debate it is positioned as if it is a discipleship versus the gospel. In other words, "You family integrated people, all you are about is discipleship and it is at the expense of the gospel. You don't care about the Great Commission."

And we just want to point to the numbers and say, "You know, when you have a hole in the bottom of the bucket that leaks out 80 to 90 percent of what you put in there, that is not on the side of the gospel."

The starting point for the gospel really needs to be an effective communication of it from one generation to the other. And do you work outside of that context as well? Absolutely. But we don't think it should be a revivalist model where you bring people into the Church for evangelism. No.

When people come to your church do they hear the gospel? Of course they should hear the gospel and if you have communion during your church time they will see the gospel. But at the same time we think evangelism is most effective when it is an infiltration model with properly disciplined people have been equipped to be salt and light in their neighborhood so that your neighbors who are unbelievers see the gospel in action and hear it through your mouth and the same with your coworkers and the people you meet out in the community.

Dan Horn:

And it is a fundamental question that the Church needs to understand is: Who is responsible for evangelism? Is it the Church or is it Christians? Christians are responsible for evangelism. It is not the job of the Church. It is not something that you hire out. It is not something that everybody gathers money together and you hire this pastor who is going to evangelize during Sunday morning.

No. Every Christian has the responsibility to proclaim the gospel in the society and in the life that he has. And once we have delegated the training of children what we have also done is pass on the delegation of evangelism and we now say it is the church leader's responsibility to evangelize.

No. It is every Christian's responsibility to evangelize. And if they can't learn how to evangelize their own children, why do you think that they will be able to successfully evangelize the person next door if they don't even evangelize the person that is in their household?

And one of the things of destruction that I think it is easy for us to forget is we have destroyed the older generation, too. I mean this older generation that is sitting there with years and years and wisdom and knowledge, but is feeling old, right? What they are supposed to be surrounded with is vitality and youth which gives them vitality and gives them a purpose and gives them an understanding of their purpose. And what we end up doing is we look at the Scriptural requirement to take care of your parents and, right, our society takes them and puts them into a nursing home or assisted living center.

Well, where did they learn that? They learned that from the Church. The Church takes them and puts them in the elder saints group, puts them off to the side so that the young people don't need to see them. They don't need to look at them. They don't need to understand that this is the process of life. And, instead, they should be feeding off the youth and the vitality of the youth and at the same time giving their wisdom to the youth. And, instead we are destroying the elderly as much as we are destroying the youth.

Jason Dohm:

When we consider the model for discipleship you see in Deuteronomy six it is a walk along, talk along, totally integrated into life method of discipleship. And we are trading that off for something that is a classroom experience. So taking discipleship out of the

context of ordinary life and making it something that is in a compartment. It is separated. It is a classroom exercise is an awful trade. And we shouldn't be surprised by the results that it is generating.

Dan Horn:

And, right, it comes from the Greek philosophy which is dualistic philosophy where spiritual things are different from the physical things of this world and so what we have done is taught our children dualism so we shouldn't be surprised where they think spiritual things are for Sunday and the rest of the week is for the practical things of life.

The reality is if you follow the Deuteronomy six model God because the God of the whole world. He becomes the God of Monday as much as he is the God of Sunday. And as long as we... as long as we keep this model what we are doing is teaching our children dualism. And what do you expect? They then act like dualists.

Scott Brown:

You know, one of the great criticisms of the family integrated church movement is that people say that our message is you can only gather as whole families. So I would like for us to discuss that.

When we talk about age segregation and the wrong headedness of it and the unbiblicalness of it we have to answer this question. Are we saying that the Church can only meet with whole families? Let's talk about that.

Dan Horn:

Well, God does say that there is different parts of the body. Also in 1 John it talks about how the youth have strength. So if you need something that requires a lot of strength you get a bunch of youth together. That's the people to do it.

There are very practical things, but that is not the pattern of the Church. That doesn't mean that there aren't valid times to do it. Of course there is valid times to do it, but the issue is: Is that the pattern of discipleship? Is that the pattern of education? These are the things that you need to avoid. It doesn't mean that you say, "Oh, no. We have got, you know, just the youth together. That is evil."

No, it is why do you have them together? Are you replacing the responsibility of the father with something that the Church is doing or is it something that you are using the strength and the various parts of the duty to do the things that God would have the Church to do?

Scott Brown:

What would be some examples of ways that discipleship or celebration or evangelism happens where the whole family might not be required to be there?

Dan Horn:

Well, Titus two would be a good example, right? That would be where the older women are teaching the younger women. To have the husbands there is probably fairly inappropriate. Not that it would necessarily be that bad, but this is a mentoring relationship. The idea of having opportunities where the women can mentor each other and can speak to the things that are specific to women, how to love their husband. The husband is not that good at teaching another woman how to love her husband. But that is something that women are gifted at and so, I mean, that would be a scriptural thing.

But not age segregated. There is times of segregation, but I think that is the crucial thing is that it is not based on age. It is based on gifting. It is based on strength. It is based on the requirement of teaching. I just don't see any basis for doing it on the requirement of age.

Another example would be that if you are gathering the men together because you are working to train them in specific things so that they can be an elder, so that they can be a deacon. There would be times that it would be very appropriate to take those men aside that feel called towards that roll and to have special training for them and special times of edification for them to lead them to that role. That seems very valid. And that would not be the whole family together.

Steve Breagy:

I can think of times—and we do this after the actual meeting of the Church, the morning worship I guess you would call it—we have a meal together and we have a time of fellowship. And I think that can be an appropriate time for even young men to gather or young ladies to gather and to discuss, possibly, the sermon, discuss things that are going on in their own lives. There is a place for that in the fellowship of the Church. The men often get together and do that as well. And you could have your children with you as you engage with other adult and they get to see a picture of what fellowship is. They get to see how a father would minister to another brother. They can see how a mother would minister to another sister. There would also be an occasion, like I said, where the youth could get together and gather and talk about spiritual things, not to goof off, not to play around, but to talk about the things that are affecting their lives in a spiritual way.

Dan Horn:

And one thing that happens at our church is that on Sunday evenings I teach on the Second London Baptist Confession and various families feel that it is useful for their elder children to go, but for them not to go. Others the whole family goes. So it very much depends. But, again, it is not a gathering of the whole family, but it is a gathering of

those people who want to be instructed in those things. But is not based on age. It is based on need and it is done on usefulness.

Scott Brown:

So, in summary, the age segregated model of discipleship needs to be deconstructed. Why? Because it is not biblical. Why? Because it follows no godly historical pattern. Why? Because it is inherently corrupting and destructive.

And so what are we saying? We are saying that the Church needs to go back and do what the patriarchs did. The Church needs to go back and do what Moses advocated and did. The Church needs to go back and do what we see in the ministry of the prophets, what we see in the ministry of Jesus when he said, "Let the children come unto me." We need to go back to see the patterns of the apostles in which there were age integrated gatherings in the churches. And we need to go back to Ephesus where the children were in the meeting of the Church, hearing the teaching, the mature teaching of the apostles.

So the biblical pattern is indisputably age integrated. The modern, age segregated pattern of ministry is totally unbiblical without precedent in Scripture or in Christian history. So we think it is time to smell the coffee and to be honest about what the Bible really teaches and to be bold enough to get rid of something that has worked its way into the Church that is actually destroying it from within.