

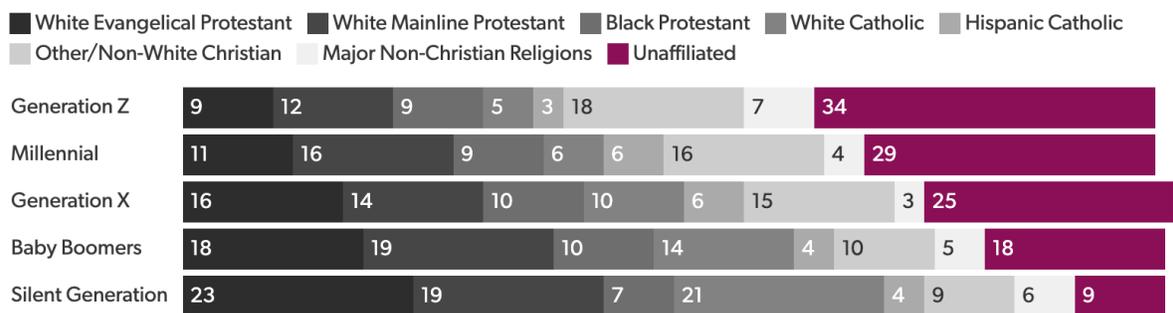
Date: 11/13/2022

Title: Week 7 - Sunday School (Philosophy of Next Generation Ministry)

Speaker: Rev. Tony Thomas

Introduction

- We're in a 3 week series on Church Gathered - Sundays - and what do we do on Sundays?
 - Corporate Prayer
 - Sunday School
 - Corporate Worship
 - * Today will be Sunday school...and by Sunday school - I mean age divided instruction - Adults, Youth, Children
 - * But, while I will get into that topic - I plan to go a little bigger picture and provide our philosophy of ministry to the next generation - and from there I hope the specific practices will make sense and flow from our philosophy
- I'll start with a few statistics and general things we are I think all observing in our culture
 - Lifeway Research (2017)
 - Age 17 - 69% attendance
 - Age 18 - 58% attendance
 - Age 19 - 40% attendance
 - Age 20s - 34% attendance
 - * About 2/3 (66%) drop out of church (think in our current congregation we have about 20 kids...14 of them when they grow up wouldn't be part of the church anymore)
 - * The data is obviously not there concerning our children - Gen Z (Age 9-27) and Gen Alpha (Age 8 and under) - and the projections would be that our kids would be church dropouts even more than 66%
 - Because Gen Z is the most unaffiliated to faith of any previous generation - 34%
 - * But the concern for our kids, this next generation is NOT JUST an apathy towards Christianity...there's actually antagonism towards Christianity



Note: "Other" religions and refusals are not shown. Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US Adults [N=5,030].

Source: American National Family Life Survey, December 2021

- And that's tied to people equating the beliefs of Christians to be not accepting and tolerant - whether fair assessment or not - it is seen as a faith that has been tied to politics, racism, and also being not affirming of the LGBTQ community
- And then add to that the massive influence of social media which is affecting people's social development and also increasing anxiety because of the comparison game young people are thrown into so quickly before they have emotional maturity to really handle well
- Now, I am sure every generation has always been worried about the next generation - I don't think that's novel to our time per se
 - * But I don't think I'm just trying to be alarmist - but I do think parents have genuinely HIGHER concerns than there has been with any other recent generation because of what is going on in the culture, in social media, now even in public schools at some level
 - I think a lot of people are wondering...what in the world do we do to help our children hold onto their faith in this culture increasingly devoid of Christian values
- Anyone here tracking with me?
 - * So yes...I hope you all see - this is a relevant topic - and honestly it is one I am passionate about and is one I've been thinking about for some time
- Personal journey - So now before I get into what I think is hopefully a Biblically faithful and fruitful approach to the issue of reaching the next generation - let me start by sharing some of my own personal journey as a child myself and then being a pastor especially of college students over 12 years
 - CSI / Family
 - * Personally, I grew up in the church (Church of South India - CSI)
 - * I grew up with believing parents, we had family prayer pretty much every evening where we sang, read Scripture, and prayed
 - * And we went to church on Sundays and we never missed church - it was a priority to be there every Sunday
 - * And yet CSI like a lot of Indian immigrant churches - rotated week to week from Malayalam to English and we had a lot of liturgy and a pastor from India
 - And we never had a separate children or youth service - we worshipped together as families
 - * And so if I were honest as I came to personal faith in Christ later in high school - I resented that we had to sit in a church service we didn't understand versus I knew of friends who had youth group and retreats they went to and how much they seemed to understand and be passionate about Christ...I was envious!
 - CFC - fast forward from that to maybe 10-15 years later
 - * Now I'm a pastor at a largely Pan-Asian - Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Indian, Filipino
 - * As a pastor...here was my observation
 - The some students came in mostly as believers and passionate about faith - and they had youth pastors and retreats and things like that

- But other students came from church backgrounds like mine - and came in mostly nominal in faith - and so our ministry was basically evangelizing the church - but thankfully by God's grace many of them came to faith
- * But here was an interesting thing that I started to notice after some years pastoring
 - Generally speaking I found in ministering to the students that went to youth group focused churches - so many of them came from difficult home situations where a lot of times parents (one or both) were absent. And over time I found if I graphed their spiritual life - there was big swings of ups and downs.
 - But the other students who generally came from fairly stable homes and were in settings where they worshipped with their parents...and so their growth was steady and stable
 - And if I were to be honest - tracking people over several years now...while not 100% the case, but I've found as a general trend more of the youth group students started to fall away in their faith after college while more of the family based churches and stable home students maintained a longevity to their faith
- * And so, I do think years spent there also forced me to think a little more deeply about how are we to think about God's Scriptural wisdom and patterns for forming long-term disciples...and especially among the next generation
- OK - long introduction - I realize...let me know start to give you my high level philosophy about ministry to the next generation and then get into my outline:
 - Passing faith to the next generation happens most fruitfully when parents are the main disciplers of their children - and when children are raised in godly, stable, and Bible and prayer and kingdom saturated homes
 - And in fact, a corollary to the principle about parents discipling - is integrating children INTO the life of the church and worship service actually accords with the pattern of Scripture and also research is showing produces more long-term disciples than the church doing age-segregated ministry
 - * MORE than having a good kids program or youth group at church
 - * And that idea seems completely counter-intuitive and even foolish - how can having children be part of a worship service they don't understand fully be better than doing a separate worship and teaching they can understand better?
- So, those are the things I'm going to try and show and defend and explain how I hope it will work out in our church
 - That being said - I am not calling this a major doctrine like its salvation - different churches will do this differently and maybe even we will do things differently later - but again, I am convicted about this and want to bring you on a journey with me
- So here's the outline
 - 1. What does Scripture teach us about discipling children?
 - 2. What does history teach us about discipling children?
 - 3. How will Joy of All Nations approach discipling children?

1. What does Scripture teach us about discipling children?

- **1. Parents are the ones mainly called to disciple their children in the Lord**

- ***Deuteronomy 6:4-7 - 4 “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.***
 - * The greatest commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength we see in Deuteronomy 6 and we see that the way that is to be instructed to Israelites is IN THE HOME first - parents to children
 - We are to find ways to do that when you sit in your house, walk, bed time, morning time
- ***Proverbs 22:6 - Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.***
 - * We see the Proverbs have several verses about parents instructing their children in the Lord and with wisdom for life - and general principle is given here (not an absolute promise because we know NOT every child will walk with the Lord even though you raised them in the Lord) - but the general principle is... God ordains that the deepest, most fruitful long-term passing of faith and faithfulness to the next generation happens through parents being the main disciplers of their children
- Now, does this mean there aren't other disciplers for children other than parents? Of course there are - and especially sometimes children don't have believing parents or are in difficult home situations - and also we do have many other godly influences which are good - but the main point is this - ORDINARILY, the first and primary responsibility of discipleship of children belongs to parents
 - * And so...we should ask ourselves...how should that conviction shape how we do church? We'll get to that...but know this principle that parents are the main disciplers of their children is an important conviction for our church
- **2. Church is a place where children are included as belonging to the church**
 - Now something maybe a lot of grew up or at least have become comfortable with is the idea of churches where parents can go to worship service and have a place to leave children for children's church
 - * And again, please don't hear me being dogmatic or making this a primary doctrine issue - the Lord is certainly at work in all those churches in adults and children
 - But I do want to challenge us to consider Scripture and what pattern we see in Scripture about the place of children inside the church
 - **1. Children are included as God's covenant people**
 - * Now this is a unique part of our theology as a Presbyterian Church to some extent - and also I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this point here, but that's why I wanted to do a seminar afterwards on infant baptism
 - * ***Genesis 17:7 - And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.***
 - OK so the Abrahamic covenant God said...this covenant is for you and your children

- Thus, the believer and his children were included in God's covenant people
- * And in the New Testament - God's covenant people are STILL believing parents and their children
 - *Acts 2:38-39 - 38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."*
- * So the idea is this - when God looks at a church and says...I want to bless Joy of All Nations
 - He isn't JUST looking down and saying...well obviously these kids are not born again - forget them!
 - But in admittedly a mysteriously, but real way (because we DON'T believe every child is saved or will be saved even though they are baptized) - but God looks at us as parents AND our children and says - these are my covenant people and I love them and will bless them
- * Connected to that idea then is - IF children are included as God's covenant people... well then it follows that:
 - **2. Children are included in worship with God's covenant people**
 - * Consider the covenant renewal ceremony in Deuteronomy 29 - we see all ages... husbands, wives, children are gathered before the Lord in worship
 - *Deuteronomy 29:10-12 - 10 "You are standing today, all of you, before the Lord your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, 11 your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, 12 so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is making with you today,*
 - * Also, consider Paul's epistles - we know actually from Colossians 4:16 that the letter was meant to be read to the WHOLE church...and we know that includes children because part of the letter was written directly with instruction for children
 - *Colossians 3:18-21 - 18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.*
 - So that just leads us to conclude - OK it certainly seems like children were part of the worship and sitting under teaching of God's Word in corporate worship
- OK so to summarize again the main principles from Scripture:
 - 1. Parents are to be the main disciplers of children
 - 2. Children are considered included as members of the church...and that means we saw them as included in corporate worship with their parents
- So we see that from Scripture, but its always good to consider what we can learn from history too

2. What does history teach us about discipling children?

- **1. Communal and family-oriented discipleship and education was the norm for most of history - outside and inside the church**
 - C.S. Lewis made famous this phrase and idea of “chronologically snobbery”
 - * And what he was getting at is this idea that - everything of times past are definitely worse than what we do at present
 - But he was just arguing that is being arrogant and presumptuous - “snobbery”
 - * But I’d add to it - we’re sometimes not just snobbish about the past, but ignorant about the past - and we assume life as we know it today is just the way its always been
 - And I think when it comes to family life and children - it is definitely a topic which I think we can be guilty of this “chronological snobbery”
 - And one way I’d highlight our “chronological snobbery” is to highlight that - the idea that we are people here that mostly have jobs outside the home, a lot of times husband and wife, and children have their “work hours” at school and they start from age 5-22
 - * This is extremely normal to us, but over thousands of years of history - this rhythm is really just about 200 years old maybe 2% of human history
 - So for the vast majority, 98% of human history - before the industrial revolution - most work was done as a family, using farming or doing a family trade
 - * And so the husband, wife, and children and in a lot of cultures extended families too - worked together
 - And so the idea of instruction of fathers instructing their children in Israel all throughout the day - that made sense because that was the rhythm of life typically
 - * And then with the industrial revolution in the 1800s - we started to get specialized jobs that took work away from the home
 - * And then eventually in about the 1800s we started to get public education where children were educated in schools OUTSIDE the home
 - And again much of the emphasis of literacy and education actually was a legacy of the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther who believed the layman should be able to read the Scripture...so I’m not saying we’re against education
 - But my point is - we’ve gone through tremendous shifts in human life rhythms in the last couple hundred years
 - Now, I’m not going to come here and say - let’s tear it all down!
 - * Let’s go buy some land, build farms and take our kids out of school!
 - I actually know some friends like that - who honestly are THAT convicted - and I respect their conviction
 - But, I am saying - hey, let’s evaluate - if we have a general principle of God ordaining instruction of children...especially of faith...to happen through families
 - * How much of what we do in the church is a by-product of us being disciplined by our current age?
 - Well, my kid goes to school with other kids in their same age to learn math, science, reading
 - So, when my kid goes to church - it should look exactly like school where they must learn best with other kids their age and with a teacher trained to teach kids

- * And my pushback is to say - lets not have chronological snobbery - but lets step back and look at Scripture and history and ask ourselves
 - How would Scripture advocate discipleship of our children best happen?
- And I'd say - lets try to recover some of the God-ordained means of family discipleship and church discipleship we see in Scripture and in history

3. How will Joy of All Nations approach discipling children?

- So let me share 3 things that will shape our discipleship of children - 1. Covenant Worship, 2. Family Worship, 3. Sunday School
- **1. Covenant Worship**
 - This might be an unfamiliar term, but in Reformed church circles basically it refers to corporate worship is meant to be with God's covenant people which includes believers and their children
 - * And so, we believe part of our discipleship of children is training them from the youngest of ages to be present in worship with us - from beginning to end
 - Well, now let me answer some concerns or questions people typically have:
 - * 1. But aren't the kids not getting anything out of being in the service?
 - And I think my answer there is, certainly they cognitively can't understand everything - and I will say that as we get closer to launch - I do hope and pray the messages are going to be more sermons than lectures (so far I'm doing more lecture style) - and I think it will be more understandable for children
 - BUT, even if its over their heads in some sense - let's not only think pragmatically, but think spiritually - if God designed for worship to include children - then I think we can by faith believe there are deep spiritual things happening beyond cognition in the heart of a child as they hear the singing, as they hear the Word, as they see the Lord's Table
 - * 2. Don't parents need a break so that they can worship and hear the sermon?
 - And I would say, hey first of all, we should be sympathetic and especially to mom's that are tired and been with especially young kids all day and all week - its not easy
 - But, a few thoughts for us is - let's believe God will strengthen us and still feed us spiritually as we come hungry though tired
 - Also, let's believe even young children over time can be trained to sit in a worship service and not be disruptive and distracting...not 100%, but they can get better with practice and some instruction!
 - And listen - if we welcome little children...we know there's going to be some noise...and that's OK, we want them to be with us and honestly as a preacher I have been completely fine with our kids present - I love that they're here
 - Finally, as a practical point, one thing we'd like to try and do is have a "cry room" where nursery age children can be in a separate room with a video feed so parents have a space especially at an age where its really hard for them to sit in service - and one thing with that is I really hope husband and wife can switch off in that so that each spouse can have an opportunity to be free in their mind and heart

- **2. Family Worship**

- Again, studies are showing that 2 of the largest factors involved in the next generation continuing in faith and in commitment to the church is learning to worship in church weekly and then a family that worships together at home
- What can this look like? - Well let me share where we are at as a family
 - * We as a family have the goal of doing family worship every weekday at least, and Saturdays and Sundays the kids would do QT on their own - now we've definitely had better seasons than others. In the past we did evenings, but now, we've found it better to do it in the morning before school...and especially with my schedule it was more likely I could be present and lead if it was in the morning
 - * So our recent pattern is to listen to a children's audio Bible and then discuss together and then our car ride to school is where we pray together as a family
 - But having shared that - I would say...I really want to do better as a father and lead my family in more consistent and substantive family worship
- And my prayer is that our church would equip all of us as families to be engaged in worshipping in our homes - which actually leads me to the last point

- **3. Sunday School**

- So again our Sunday pattern is to have 1. Corporate Prayer, 2. Sunday School, 3. Corporate Worship
 - * Now part of Sunday School is to have a time for instruction for Adults - where we can offer classes to equip in theology and other special topics
- But we also want to have age-based instruction for children from the youngest to youth group age - but here's a couple distinctive I'd like us to be aware of how I'd like us to approach Sunday school
 - * And hopefully you see that it ties into our philosophy of equipping parents to be the main disciplers of their children
- **1. Parent-led Sunday School**
 - * Now most Sunday Schools - there's a single teacher of a class of students and again, nothing wrong with that per se
 - * But, I would like to attempt a model of where there's an age group where the parents of those children are working together on a rotation basis to be the teachers of their children
 - Now there will need to be vetting - that the parents are members and then there's some level of training for those parents as well
 - * But here's the thing again - our job as the church is to help equip parents to be involved in discipling their children
 - And so providing a space to do that on Sundays is one way we can do that...and the other connection and equipping would be this:
- **2. Curriculum which integrates into Family Worship**
 - * So we want to have curriculum that we do on a Sunday morning that you can then take home and use for Monday-Saturday as well
 - * NOW, I will admit - the logistics of how we can actually do this Parent-led Sunday school and also the curriculum...I really don't have the answers to, but I've talked

with Scott Lilly and him with Jennifer are involved with overseeing and thinking with me about this area of Sunday school and I know he's convicted about this topic

- And so bear with us and work with us as we figure this out together
- * But here's my prayer of what I hope you'll walk away with from this message is - our biggest aim as the church is not to exist to outsource the discipleship of your children, but its to equip - myself included - in the discipleship of our children
 - Now is that easy? - No it is going to cost us something...more effort FOR SURE than a typical church these days puts on parents
 - But my prayer is we'd all see that as worth it because I believe all of us here love our children and we love the Gospel and we want to see the next generation follow Jesus better and further than we ever did
 - And so I think us here and even others that especially in this cultural moment are VERY CONCERNED about the state of the next generation - I think we actually might be on to something that is actually going to be very attractive for a lot of families

Conclusion

- I'll end with this final story that I think helps us illustrate the power of godly families and lineages
- There was a study done by a man named A.E. Winship who did a study of the lineage of pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards and his wife Sarah Edwards and then compared it also to that of a criminal at the same time named Max Jukes.
 - Over 150 years - the legacy of Max Jukes: Jukes' descendants included: 7 murderers, 60 thieves, 190 prostitutes, 150 other convicts, 310 paupers, and 440 who were physically wrecked by addiction to alcohol. Of the 1,200 descendants that were studied, 300 died prematurely.
 - Here's the legacy of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards who was said to prioritize time in family worship and prayer daily with their 11 children
 - * Their legacy after 150 years includes: 1 U.S. Vice-President, 1 Dean of a law school, 1 dean of a medical school, 3 U.S. Senators, 3 governors, 3 mayors, 13 college presidents, 30 judges, 60 doctors, 65 professors, 75 Military officers, 80 public office holders, 100 lawyers, 100 clergymen, and 285 college graduates.
- And my prayer is Joy of All Nations and the families represented here - would by God's grace raise godly children that would bring blessing for generations upon generations and that would bless the city, bless the nation, bless the world
 - I pray that this vision and hope might compel you to say - I want to be part of a church that believes in that and will pursue that together