Children spiritual education

by Murni Sitanggang

Children's Spiritual Education As A Shared Responsibility Between Parents And The Church

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ABSTRACT: All parents oblige to nurture their children from their earlier days to know God personally. However, some parents sometimes do not realize this and neglect their responsibility. Thus, this study explore how parents and the church should develop a mutual synergy in children's spiritual education. The author used a qualitative method with a literature approach to investigate the problem and propose suggestions. The conclusion is that parent is the most responsible party in educating children. But they cannot do this task independently without the church's help. Therefore, the church's service should develop a program that supports parents do their job effectively.

Keywords: children, spiritual education, church, Sunday School, parents.

INTRODUCTION (IN CAPITAL LETTERS, BOLD, 11 PT FONT SIZE)

Who is the most responsible for children's spiritual education? Is it the church or the parents? This question always comes up when we talk about Christian education for children. For some, the answer is clear since a family is the first unit for a child to be nurtured. However, in reality, some parents think educating children is the foremost duty of the church. Every day they send their children to school for adequate education; they relate the same way with the church. They expect their churches will provide the most for their children's spiritual needs since they have many other things to do (Habermas, 2009). While it is undeniable that serving and guiding the children as members of a faith community is the primary calling for church ministry, putting the onus of children's spiritual growth on Sunday School as part of church ministry for children is improper. Parents share a responsibility to teach their children, and their share is even more significant since they spend more time with their progeny.

To answer which party is most responsible for fostering children's spirituality, whether church or family, Barna Group research in California, the United States, in 2018 stated that the parents were the most accountable and then followed by the church (*Who Is Responsible for Children's Faith Formation?*, 2019). Christian communities and schools also play a role, even though they are not as significant as family and church. Unfortunately, despite recognizing parents' critical role in spiritually educating their children, not every church provides services that equip parents in this regard. Often the church does not offer an explicit spiritual education curriculum and forgets to emphasize the vital role of parents in the growth of children's faith (*Who Is Responsible for Children's Faith Formation?*, 2019).

Thus, the church and the parent should have a mutual responsibility for nurturing faith. But we rarely found the link between the teaching at home

with what a child receives from the church. Many parents are clueless about what their children have received in their Sunday School and do not think they need to educate them spiritually (M. J. Bunge, 2008). They thought their children automatically got to know Jesus personally by attending the Sunday School weekly. With this paradigm, they are slacking off and even stupefying their part in evangelizing their children. As stated by Mambo, this discontinuity results in the sad reality that a child could diligently attend Sunday School for years but still does not hear the simple gospel (Mambo, 2019).

Moreover, Sunday School is often considered a secondary service in the church (Pranoto, 2012). Many Sunday schools struggle to give the best service to children because of the lack of facilities. Not every church can afford divided classes for different ages, making it challenging to create an ideal teaching-learning activity. If one class comprises children from 0 to 10, we can imagine how difficult for teachers to communicate and teach the children (Supartini, 2017). Besides, Sunday School lasts only about one to two hours, which is very short compared to children's other activities. No matter how excellent or creative the programs and contents Sunday School offers, it would be inadequate if it is not supported by spiritual education in families where children spend more time than in the church. A synergy between the family and the church in educating children could maximize the process of Christian education for children. Home should be the first place where a child gets spiritual education, and the church functions to strengthen the core.

Before this article, plenty of writings discussed children's spiritual education since this topic is popular and related closely to the aspect of the life of believers. Usually, most writers focus on one side, whether offering biblical theology of parenting or how to teach faith at the church or schools. Because of the pandemic, Thomson Siallagan has proposed in his article the importance

of synergism between families, schools, and churches to make families the center of Christian education (Siallagan, 2021). Although this recommendation sounds excellent, it will be hard to realize since the school is an independent institution whose curriculum is under government provision. Therefore, it is easier to correlate faith education in the family with the church. And this will be the aim of this article.

METHOD

This study uses qualitative research methods with a library research approach. The author collects data from various literary sources that discuss children's spiritual education. The Bible, multiple books, and Christian journals focusing on children's education and spirituality are the sources the author uses. This writing also integrated those resources with the author's experience as a Sunday School teacher in a local church.

To produce descriptive and systematic writing, the author presents brief biblical theology for children's spiritual education as a fundamental theory. Then the author suggests recommendations to parents and the church on how they should play their roles mutually in educating children's spirituality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Christian Education and Spiritual Formation

Two terms often overlap when we speak about Christian education and spiritual formation. Some people even think of both as synonymous; these terms are inevitably ambiguous for others. However, although we cannot separate them as two disconnected things, they have different meanings. Various literature presents Christian education vis-a-vis spiritual formation in two views: some consider both to have the same role, and some assume both as two other things. Both are different but complementary since both focus on identifying

ways to implement Christian education with integrity (Steibel, 2010).

Holistic Christian education should be present in every child's life. Holistic here means the teaching demands sharing information, nurturing spiritual formation, and exploring the transformation to become like Christ. This education should foster to alter, recharge, and reform persons by the Heavenly Spirit's power to comply with God's revealed will as expressed in the Bible. In short, Christian spiritual education requires spiritual information, formation, and transformation; Pazmino suggests that Christians should not emphasize spiritual formation without the rigors of study and transformation risks (Pazmiño, 2010). Only then can Christian education retain a holistic view of a person growing and becoming more like Christ with the principles and practices of spiritual formation (Setran & Wilhoit, 2020).

Biblical Theology For Christian Education

J. T. Caroll suggested there is a profound cultural vagueness about children's position in the Bible and the Jewish and Christian communal practices (Carroll, 2001). Although a child is considered a blessing from God, their social position is marginal in the Bible (Carroll, 2001). Therefore, one of Jesus' missions is to present Him as "the friend of the children" to transform the Jewish tradition's view of children. However, when talking about the theology of childhood, Andersen et al. remind us that from the very beginning, God created human beings, including children, in His image, and He saw all he had made was very good (Andersen et al., 2003). Children are worthy of honor, respect, and ultimate values regardless of their origins and conditions. Teaching them to know God, then, is a must.

In Mark 10:13-16 the author records how important children are in Jesus's eyes. He even rebuked his disciples for preventing parents from bringing their children to Him. Jesus then

encourages parents to bring their children to Him and states He will never reject those who come to Him. In other verses, Luke 18:15-17 and its parallel verses Mark 10:13-16, both writers used the word βρεφη *brephe,* which comes from the word *brephos,* which means "*infants*" or "small children." Both passages proclaim that for Jesus, children are also participants in the Kingdom of Heaven, just like adults. He acknowledges their existence and encourages spiritual growth (Borgo, 2016). He shows His acceptance by hugging the children when their parents bring them to Him. Thus, the first step in giving spiritual education to children is to do it with love. We shall imitate what Jesus has done in this story: He opens His arms and receives those children warmly.

God also reminds us about the source as the second aspect of spiritual education in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. These verses undeniably are the most famous verse as the foundation of children's education in the Old Testament. In his commentary of Deuteronomy, Duane L. Christensen states that verses 4-9 are a separate unit marked by the cry, "Hear, O Israel," in verse 4 and accompanied by the paragraph markers called *setuma* in verse 9 (Marfo & Tembo, 2017). These verses contain commands for God's people to love God with their whole hearts, with their entire souls, and with their absolute strength. In the Jewish tradition, this text is essential in teaching about the oneness of God, and every parent has a responsibility to pass this truth to their offspring. The New Translation of the Bible reads verse 6 as follows: "What I command you today must be noticed," while the King James Version of the English translation writes in more depth as follows: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart." This command emphasizes that the source of the teaching is the word of God.

The word "teach" in verse 7 was written *weshinantam* in Hebrew, the original Old Testament language. According to the NET Bible, the primary verb for this word means "to engrave,"

which indicates something that needs to be repeated until it forms the desired results. It suggests that parents must ensure what they teach is embedded in their children's hearts. Because it is an uneasy task, they should regularly do it with patience and sincerity, not noticeably endorsing it (*Benson Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:7*, n.d.). Moses commands the Israelites to bind God's truth in their hands, foreheads, and on the pillars of their houses and gates. The hand signifies physical growth, the forehead speaks of intellectual abilities, the house's pillar refers to spiritual intelligence, and the gate symbolizes the social aspect. Thus, educating a child is a duty not only for parents but also for teachers, pastors, Levites, and everyone involved in the child's life (Marfo & Tembo, 2017). They must give this education continues to make sure its roots deeply in children's hearts and minds.

Another important aspect of teaching the young generation is the content. In the New Testament, Matthew 18:1-6 is the passage that states unequivocally how precious a child is in the eyes of God. Jesus even taught His students to behave like children who are innocent and open to accepting His teachings. A child is easily impressed but also easily injured. Thus, Jesus warned the disciples in verse 6 that he would punish whoever deceives a little child. These verses warn parents, teachers, or all parties responsible for children's education to pay attention to their teaching contents and ensure it follows the Bible.

Besides the content, the Bible also emphasizes the importance of discipline as stated in Ephesians 6:4, "And you, fathers, do not arouse anger in the hearts of your children, but educate them in the teaching and God's advice." As the head of a family, every father is responsible for educating his children. If needed, he can use disciplinary action as long as the child believes it is done based on love (Barnes, n.d.). Therefore, a father should avoid emotional punishment; he must still control himself when he sanctions his children. When a parent decides to punish, it must be for the right

reason, not anger. Discipline is related closely with respect. Parents need to practice it so their children learn to respect them. Before they can submit to God, children must first learn to obey their parents. Punishing a child is sometimes considered cruel. However, John Wesley insisted otherwise, that parents who do not "break" or "redirect" their children are the ones who commit atrocities (Derr, 2014). What do parents have to break? Not their children's hearts, of course, but their sinful proclivity before it gets bigger.

Christian Education For Children As A Join Responsibility
Parents' Role

Before proposing how to develop the synergism between parents and churches, this article will explore both parties' roles in nurturing their children's faith. A family plays an essential role in a child's growth, and problems might evolve later if this foundation is not well established (Van Niekerk & Breed, 2018). It also has a prominent role in forming social behavior and a child's moral and religious values (Tighe, 2016). It is a place where a child gets basic needs, such as food, shelter, comfort, safety, and living facilities. In it, an individual experiences a sense of belonging and attachment to other members. A family should also be where a child finds his true identity.

A family that can meet the child's basic needs has an excellent opportunity to instill life values in him. When a child's needs for food, drink, and security are fulfilled, it will be easy for him to develop higher and noble life aims and become a person who pleases God and blesses others. Research conducted by the Fuller Youth Institute in the United Kingdom in 2017 showed that 46% of children raised in evangelical Christian families followed their parents' faith's footsteps even though they had no close relationship. However, that number boosted to 71% for children who grew up emotionally close to their parents (Care for the Family, n.d.). This research proves how vital

intimacy between parents and their children is in faith development.

As a prominent figure in the family, parents should begin teaching their children as soon as possible. It is never too early to introduce Jesus to a child's life. Parents have to work as a unit, giving instruction on how their children ought to live and correcting them when they slip away. Every parent must be aware of how dangerous when a child does not understand the ways of God. Scripture gives various examples of the great misfortune that happened to God's people when a generation did not know properly about God's mightiness (Judg. 2:10) (Davis, 2020). They better learn the unfortunate consequences of life without God from their parents than life itself teaches them.

Parents need to pay attention to a few principles in educating their children. First, the teaching should be done with sincerity, not artificial, like pretending to pray, for example. As adults, we better not underestimate children. Even small children can feel the sincerity or insincerity of grown-ups. Therefore, to be an effective teacher of God's word, parents must first have an intimate relationship with God. Parents can transfer faith into their children's lives if they fulfill this requirement. Parents themselves have to believe the words of God before they can teach them to their children. They must show how they live by faith in everyday life. The best way to teach children is not by emphasizing it verbally but by carrying out religious practices at home (M. J. Bunge, 2008). Learning from action tends to be more effective than only words.

Every Christian family may consider setting up a regular family altar to set up the exemplary. By doing it consistently, parents instill God's truth and set an example for their children. Horace Bushnell, a leading pastor and 19th-century well-known scholar in Christian education, postulated that family is the ultimate emissary of grace, not the church (M. J. Bunge, 2008). Thus, a family should function as a "little church" where

parents are priests and bishops to their children. A home is where God's grace is glorified and given the freedom to work (Andersen et al., 2003). Family worship would help parents form the spiritual foundation for their children and strengthen their spiritual bonding as a oneness. This nurturing act should begin as soon as possible since infancy. Of course, parents must deliver the education in a language appropriate to the child's development and ability in practice. The instruction must also be consistent, given daily, with patience and love (Derr, 2014).

Church's Role

An ancient African adage says, "It takes a village to raise a child." It sounds excessive but conveys the inevitable truth. Considering many factors that affect individual growth and development, a family cannot raise a child alone without help. Community is essential for a child's faith, and faith community needs to incorporate with the child (Morgenthaler et al., 2014). Nurturing faith should be a mutual exertion between home and congregation (M. Bunge, 2009).

The role of the church consists of two parts: directly or indirectly. Directly here is talking about Sunday School services targeting children from 0 to 13 years (the maximum age limit is usually different from one church to another) and providing spiritual education regularly. Meanwhile, indirect services speak about how the church equips parents to implant the truth in their children. Both services are essential, and parents should realize this to avoid the tendency to think Sunday school services are the most responsible ones. According to Jennifer Hooks in childrenministry.com, some parents assume children's ministries serve as a behavior-modification program (Hooks, n.d.). With the activity for only one to two hours every week, it is too grandiose if they hope it will effectively enable their child to become a sweet child, tractable to their elders. When that does not happen, sometimes

disappointment occurs. We should realize that this is an absurd hope.

The purpose of Sunday School service is to provide spiritual education to children in worship and fellowship. Usually, this committee's service also consists of collective praise and worship besides preaching. The problem which is quite common is no robust coordination between education in the church and at home. There must be a balance between knowledge and real spiritual education experience at the church and in the family. Christian education programs must operate as an extension of the home, not isolated from it (M. J. Bunge, 2008). The church's mission is to inform parents of their significant role in children's faith formation and equip them to do their tasks.

Spiritual education is like a circle of life. Even though parents are fully responsible for bringing their children to know the word of God, they can only do their utmost if they have already become disciples of Christ wholeheartedly (Derr, 2014). For this reason, the church should provide guidelines and opportunities for parents to share their faith experiences with their children (Barfield, 2019). Even better, the church can facilitate special classes that help parents carry out this noble duty. With the provision of the church, parents can be more confident when talking about God and His truth with their children. Thus, churches have a significant responsibility to empower parents to participate in the discipleship of their children (Nelson & Jones, 2010).

Besides attending Sunday School, children need to involve in community worship in church. This act will help them form their Christian identity through interactions with various community strata, such as practices, rituals, symbols, and relationships (Yust et al., 2010). By learning through socialization, children will have the chance to observe others of the world's views, values, and practices essential to the faith community. As a believer, a child must also have a sense of belonging as a part of the community (Morgenthaler et al., 2014). It does not mean that public community worship can supplant Sunday School. However, attending Sunday School and communal worship with their parents would benefit children's faith development.

CONCLUSION

Children's spiritual education needs the participation of everyone involved in the child's life. Because the family is the first unit of life that a child encounters when born, parents are automatically the central figures who educate children in all aspects of life, including spirituality. Parents undergo this task by applying the principle of example so that their children can learn to be disciples of Christ by seeing the way of life of their fathers and mothers.

To maximize their role, parents need help from the church. Therefore, the church is responsible for guiding and developing programs involving parents. The church should do this program regularly and continuously in courses or training, not only to mention it in a particular sermon. Although it functions as a complement, spiritual education in the church is crucial because humans are social creatures who need to interact with others.

In addition to equipping parents, the church also carries out its role in children's education through Sunday School services. The importance of this ministry requires the church to pay attention and allocate sufficient funds to maintain the quality of learning. As part of church ministry, the Sunday School must develop a sound and biblical curriculum and upgrade its teachers' qualities.

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