

HCC's Fifth and Six Grade Program

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One of the most exciting new developments at Harpeth Community Church is our 5th and 6th grade program. This paper has been written to explain why we have developed this program and how it will work.

Infants and Children Are Spiritually Safe

The New Testament makes positive statements on the status of children and it assumes that they are innocent and spiritually safe until they reach an age where they are responsible for their behavior and they must make the commitment to trust and follow Christ to be saved from their sins.

According to Matthew 18:1-4 a person must become like a child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven and, then again, Jesus taught in Matthew 19:13-15 that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as the little children. These statements are important declarations on the condition of children in God's sight. Clearly, if the kingdom of heaven belongs to little children, parents do not need to be concerned about their status with God.

Another passage also indicates that a child of a Christian home normally has some kind of relation to the Lord because this is how they are addressed – "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord . . .*" (Ephesians 6:1-4). Children should develop and maintain this relationship with the Lord long before they are able to fully commit themselves to him as a life-long path and decide to be baptized. I also personally believe that children come under the umbrella of spiritual protection provided by their Christian parent(s). As 1 Corinthians 7:14 puts it "*For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*"

The Age of Accountability

At the same time, there comes a day when each young person is responsible for himself or herself. Once this stage comes, each young person should be equipped to make the decision – for himself or herself – to accept Christ and become a Christian.

When a young person is ready to commit himself or herself to Christ as a personal choice, it does not have to be a radical break from a sinful life. We hope that our children will be able to avoid the path of sinful lifestyles. A Biblical baptism can be a break with sin through repentance – by conviction about sin through anticipation and resolve – but before there is a substantive experience with a sinful lifestyle.

This is a delicate but important point. Jesus can only become our Savior once we see ourselves as lost sinners, so there must be a sense of guilt and the need for forgiveness, but there does not have to be a clear pattern of sin. The key factor is the genuine personal decision to trust and follow Christ in contradistinction to the choice of a life focused on self, sin, and apathy toward the things of God.

Most human cultures recognize that children reach an age where they are responsible for themselves in a new, more adult way. Judaism has its "bar mitzvah," or "bat mitzvah,"

when a child becomes a "son" or "daughter" of the law. Secular society makes a definitive distinction between juveniles and adults in courts of law. And most primitive societies, anthropologists tell us, have their puberty rites (rites of passage) in which persons become responsible for themselves in new ways.

We also know that the age range from 10 through 13 years is the key age for moral development in children. Most adults have value systems that were established at this age. Some even argue that this age becomes the template upon which adults will later evaluate what should be normative in many other areas of their lives.¹

In short, the consensus of experience and the wisdom of the entire human race establishes the point that there is a period in life in which a person is capable of making decisions for themselves, in responsible ways. This has usually been designated as the "age of accountability" or the age of "spiritual and moral responsibility" and it sets the path that youth will follow into adulthood. This concept fits in very comfortably with the Biblical teaching on believer's baptism.²

A Christian Basics or Catechism Classes

This age of accountability has been the driving force behind the historic practice of catechism classes in Christianity. Most Christian traditions – from Baptist to Lutheran to Catholic – have believed that in the transition from childhood to early adulthood, young people need explicit instruction in the core teachings of the faith. This practice is witnessing a renaissance in Baptist Churches³ and three sociologists recently completed a major study of mainline Protestant churches that pointed to the importance of this practice. They discovered that inadequacies in teaching young people and adults the distinctive, core elements of orthodox Christian faith and adhering to them is the single biggest reason for decline in mainline denominations.⁴

At Harpeth Community Church, we believe that the key factors in conversion are knowledge of the core elements of Biblical faith and the personal decision to place submissive faith in these teaching and the Lord Jesus Christ, who stands behind them. Our young people need the training and opportunity to make this decision – even as a future life-path that each one decides for himself or herself, even with the help of the church and parents. We believe that until our children are capable of making this decision for themselves, the Bible assumes that they are safely in the hands of God. But, once they are capable of making this decision, we must prepare and equip them to make it.

The Unique Challenge Our Children Face

¹ See Bob Biehl, *The Fourth Grade* (Video Training Seminar).

² Marlin Jesche, *Believers Baptism for Children of the Church* (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1983).

³ Tom Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts: The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life* (Amityville, New York: Calvary Press Publishing, 1998).

⁴ See Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge and Donald A. Luidens, "Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline," *First Things* 31 (March 1993):13-18.

Our children are growing up in a culture where less and less of their peers are committing themselves to Christ. Unless there are radical changes, there will be fewer and fewer Christians in our land. By the time our 5th and 6th graders reach adulthood, we can anticipate that only 6% of their peers will have explicit Christian commitments, whereas 50 years ago about 60% of their peers would have had an explicit Christian commitment. The United States is following Canada and Europe by raising a generation that does not embrace the Christian faith and by sowing the seeds that will lead the nation away from our Christian roots, even in a general sense.

For example, in the early nineteen sixties 60% of Canadians attended church, but now only about 15-20% do and Canada has been removed for the United Nations list of Christian nations.⁵ The pattern is even more advanced in Europe where once strongly Christian nations are moving away from the faith that once dominated there lives: by the late 1980s, only 12% of the people were regularly going to church in England, 6% of the people in Germany and Italy, and between 1% to 2 % in Scandinavian countries.⁶

Here are the stark facts about the emerging generation in the United States. This generation is called by many names, but the most popular is the “Bridger Generation.” This generation is the second largest generation in America’s history, 72 million strong. Extensive study has been done on those Bridgers who are currently sixteen years of age and older, to determine those who have made explicit Christian commitments, especially in contradistinction to other generations. Those who have made such commitments were considered to be Christians for the purpose of the study; those who have not made them were considered to be “Non-Christians.”⁷

Remember, as you look at the following graph, that 82% of people who became Christians over the last 100 years in America did so before they were 20 years old.⁸ The following contrast between the generations reveals a gradual transformation that is occurring in our society; the contrast between the Builder generation and the Bridger generation reveals a shocking trend!⁹

⁵ Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods* (Toronto, Canada: Irwin Publishing, 1987).

⁶ George Hunter, *How To Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

⁷ The intent of the study was not to determine who truly is a Christian using explicit Biblical criteria, but rather to look at how people describe themselves in light of questions that get to the heart of what they believe about Christ and Christianity.

⁸ From 1900 to 2000, 82% of people who come to Christ in America did so before the age of 20. George Barna documents the life long probabilities that a person will become a Christian in America – notice the relatively high chance of becoming a Christian before 14 and the relatively low chance afterward.

Barna Probability Statistics:

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| 1. Ages 5-13 | 32% chance of becoming a Christian |
| 2. Ages 14-18 | 4% chance of becoming a Christian |
| 3. Ages 19 to death | 6% probability of becoming a Christian |

Generation Name	Birth Years	Number	Non-Christian
Builders	Before 1945	67 million	35%
Boomers	1946-1964	76 million	65%
Busters	1965-1976	44 million	85%
Bridgers	1977-1994	72 million	96%

Please note that the Bridger percentages are based strictly on those who are 16 years of age and older. These statistics demonstrate what many of us have been sensing for years: America is quickly turning its back on God and becoming a nation of non-believers. Our children are on a track to grow up in a world, if current rates continue, where as little as 5 or 6 out of every 100 of their peers will hold to explicit Christian commitments.

The best way for us to buck this trend and prepare our children to live as followers of Jesus Christ is for us to explicitly train and equip them for this emerging world. Thom Rainer, the author of the published study on the Bridger generation notes that, “these people do not know how to be saved! Nobody is telling them.”

Our Program

We are determined that, with God’s help, we will equip our children to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, even as they grow up in a country that is abandoning its Christian roots. Our 5th and 6th grade program at HCC is an extension of our broader children’s and youth programs, outlined in material that is available from the church office. In that material we point out how parents must be actively involved in the lives of their children, raising them to be faithful disciples of Jesus by 1) praying for them (constantly), 2) teaching them the Word of God (regularly), 3) being examples of faithful discipleship (in all things), and 4) by active and consistent involvement in their local church.

Specifically our 5th and 6th grade program is designed address the major issues that children must face as they move from childhood into middle school and the teen age years. Our program seeks to address five specific elements:

1. *The Mind – learning the core teachings of the Biblical faith.* On Sunday mornings and on Wednesday nights, the primary focus will usually be Bible study. This focus will be intensified every spring in when we will provide our students with in-depth thirteen week teaching on the basics of the Christian faith on Wednesday nights, called “5th and 6th Basic Christianity Class.” This 13 week course will be provided each spring and it involves memorizing 15 Bible verses, the Apostles Creed (the earliest version and summary statement of the Christian faith), regular attendance, and a final test. We will also provide in-depth teaching in the other weeks of classes, to supplement and develop each child’s understanding of the faith.
2. *The Heart – experiencing the relevance and meaning of the Biblical faith.* In all the teaching, groups, and gatherings, we will seek to touch the heart. We will seek to

⁹ Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997. In recent private conversations, Thom Rainer has told me that this trend is continuing right up to the present at the same level as when his study was first completed in 1996.

show how the Bible is relevant and how our relationship with God is meaningful in everyday life.

3. *The Will –making the decisions necessary to live out the Biblical faith.* We will encourage our 5th and 6th grade youth to make godly decisions. First and foremost, will be the decision to become a Christian. Secondly, we will constantly provide other opportunities and challenges where the students can make other godly decisions that will help them in the path toward faithful discipleship and Christ-likeness, especially in the summer and fall where we will teach our children how to be Christian teenagers.
4. *The Spirit –embracing the power of the Biblical Faith.* Although many 5th and 6th grade students are shy about praying, we will seek to teach them some of the basics about personal prayer and a life of the Spirit. We want to encourage each student to start developing a meaningful life in communion with God and to learn about the presence of the Holy Spirit.
5. *The Fellowship – finding friendships with others who are committed to the Biblical Faith.* It is fundamentally important that 5th and 6th grade students develop strong Christian friendships with other kids in church at an early age. If these relationships are started at this age, the students can join together to form a supportive, Christ-centered group before they experience the peer pressures and sinful influences that typically become dominant in 6th grade and reach their pinnacle in 10th and 11th grade in Williamson County. To accomplish this, we provide monthly social activities outside the Sunday morning and Wednesday night programs for these students. In this way, they can begin to join together as a strong youth group, even before they enter Junior High.

Summary of 5th and 6th Grade Program

To sum up, our new program will feature three monthly activities our for 5th and 6th Grade youth.

1. Sunday morning classes. Theses classes are held during on of our two main assembly (except for special “family Sundays” where children sit with their parents).
2. Wednesday night program, described above.
3. Monthly Social Events. These are fun events, designed to include new youth and help the young enjoy a fun Christian environment, where they can develop or enhance their friendships with each other.

If you have any questions about this new and exciting program, do not hesitate to call our children’s minister (790-0104).