

Review Article

The Shema Injunction and the Challenge for Children Ministry

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Abstract: Nurturing children to grow and become well-integrated into the faith community is one of the greatest and most rewarding or satisfying duties of every community. This paper focuses on the clear instruction that God gave the Jews and by extension to all Christians on the necessity to groom the young ones in the way of the Lord. It explains the critical components of the *Shema* and its implications for children ministry which include the caregivers, the children and the ministry approach. The paper further elucidates a little on the nature of children as it affect how they are to be ministered to, noting that their developmental realities determine the teaching content and approach. The last part focuses on the challenges that the *Shema* injunction has for the modern-day children ministry. It concludes by firmly noting that the historical point in which the *Shema* was given makes it very important to observe.

Keywords: Shema, Children Ministry, Child Development.

INTRODUCTION

God is a God of generations, meaning that His dealings with an individual goes way beyond such individual but goes far into the future yet unseen and children yet unborn. It therefore, becomes a necessity that every man that has a relationship with God seek to perpetrate such love and knowledge of God. God gave a testimony about Abraham that he would teach his children (Gen. 18:18-19), and 2Timothy 1:5-7 also recorded Paul's observation of how the faith has been perpetrated in the lineage of Lois, Eunice and Timothy. Every generation owes the next the duty of observing, preserving and perpetrating the way of the Lord. The future of the Church and the society depends on the way children are being trained up and groomed in every aspect of life.

This task of ministering to and with children is so important to God that He gave clear instructions and models all-through the scripture. One common and very important of such instructions is the *Shema* as recorded in Deut. 6:4-9. The importance of this assignment as shown by scripture will invalidate the wrong attitudes of many churches and pastors who have low or no provision for children and teenagers' ministry in terms of space, finance and personnel, and even some who are genuinely ignorant of how to minister to the children and make no attempt to get help from either internal or external sources. It is no doubt that the Church family is so blessed with effective children ministry that is helping the effectiveness of local churches in ministering to and with children, but there are still more work to be done in order to reach more children. This paper seeks to examine the injunction of the *Shema* and then draw out relevant challenges needed for more effectiveness in our context.

The Shema

The *Shema* is the central prayer in the Jewish prayer book and is often the first section of Scripture that a Jewish child learns. It is an affirmation of Judaism and a declaration of faith in one God and has been the standard to which the life and faith of Israel walk with God is measured [1]. It should be noted very strongly that the original recipients of the *Shema* were not pastors or children workers but parents of the children, so it is important that the church equip not just the workers but also the parents to become effective in training the children. The *Shema* is very cardinal in the upbringing of Jewish children [2] and it is contained in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 as stated below;

4Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

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8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

The book of Deuteronomy is the valedictory message of Moses to the Israelites and that fact also makes this injunction very crucial. For example, in Africa the last words of an ancestor or any deceased is held in so much honour that the recipients dare not ignore such words and seek to carry out whatever instruction therein. The content of Moses' farewell address serves as reminder to the faith community about God's laws and instructions and the Israelites were duly informed of the benefits of obeying God's law and the consequences of disobedience. The content of the injunction states the affirmation that the God of Israel is One True God; it also reveals the expected responses and responsibilities of the parents to God and their children respectively.

The Hebrew word *echad* translated as "one" expresses the nature and person of YHWH who is the only true God of Israel. The people were instructed not to worship any other god with Him or beside Him. This emphasis by Moses is necessary because, across the Ancient Near East, the worship of many gods was predominant. Even where some people group believed in one god or divine being, such divine being would be presented as the leader of other gods [3]. Israel's exclusive attention, affection, and worship are to be towards God alone and never to be shared with any other. It is not a pantheon of gods, each of whose personalities has a disconcerting way of being split up by rival adherents and sanctuaries, so that the attention of the worshipper cannot be concentrated [4]. Israel's worship attention must be undivided, so it is confined to one definite being whose name is Yahweh. This truth is to be rooted firmly in the children especially in this postmodern generation where pluralism is the order of the day.

The Israelites were to respond to this injunction not just by hearing alone but by hearing to obey. Necessity is placed upon those who hear it to carry it out in order to be blessed by God. "If the Israelites did not obey this command, it means they did not hear at all because *shema* itself carries the idea of obeying what ones hears [5]". The hearing and knowing will only be complete when it is obeyed. This is very important for Christians today as many believers know so much but do so little. While significant number of pastors, parents and children workers will affirm the importance of ministering to children and display enormous knowledge; insignificant portion really carryout this ministry as expected. This obedience is expected to be done with so much love for God that could be seen by the children and emulated. Constable [6], describing this love noted that the injunction to love implies loving with abundance and force.

Besides the responses expected of the hearers, great responsibilities were also laid on them. The first one is the responsibility to keeping the Law as treasure in the hearts as it is in verse 6. The commands must exist in their hearts so that it will reflect in their character. This necessitated the need for reading, studying, meditating and memorizing the Torah by the Jews. The Jews were extremely good at memorizing and some Jewish Rabbis were known to have learned the whole Pentateuch by heart and were able to recite it completely from memory [7]. The second responsibility is to teach the law to the children and this effort is seen as children are made to recite the *Shema* both in the morning and evening [8]. The teaching is so important that it should be done while sitting down, walking, lying down, and rising up, it should take place at all times, places and occasions. The teaching is meant to permeate all activities, everywhere and every time, as there is no limit to the transmission medium of the love of God [9].

Caregivers are, therefore, meant to have a good command of the knowledge of scripture not just cognitively but it should reflect in their character by modeling it. They are also expected to be ready to teach and give answers to the questions raised by the children. Diverse teaching aids and teachable moments are to be employed to remind the children and instill the law and love of God into their hearts [8]. Some other scriptures like Proverbs 22:6, Mark 10:13-16 and Ephesians 6:4 give credence to the importance of raising the children in the fear of God and salvage them from forces against them [10].

The Nature of Children

Child development is the soul of any society. Child development is an all-round growth and nurturing of a baby within the age of one to twelve years is of great importance. This childhood age is so important in any baby's life for a solid foundation in life to be laid. Such development should include mental, moral, physical, spiritual and educational upon which if well developed, the child would continue to build his or her life in the future. The first twelve years of any child is fundamental to the life of such a child because it would be difficult if not impossible to break away from both the home and religious training he or she has obtained earlier in life [11].

John Wesley presumes that a child can know God and thus be truly happy. Through study and observation of children, he came to appreciate the faith potential in children. He saw children as developmentally different from adults but with incredible cognitive and spiritual potential [12]. Wesley's theology saw human nature after the fall as being self-focused, self-determined and following after one's own will and posited that this self-will must be broken early and exchanged for obedience. Breaking of the will should be done with patience and mildness. He emphasized that physical correction should be used as a final option. Wesley felt it was foundational in the transformation process for children to change the focus of their desire from selfish and self-focused to other-focused. Submission and obedience were the critical first step in a child's move away from self-centeredness to God-centered living. Parents (and children ministry workers) were petitioned to command obedience or honour in an effort to move their children from their self-willed ways to an attitude of submission with the ultimate desire for them to live a life submitted to the will of God [13]. Wesley postulated that children must first learn to obey their earthly parents before they could learn to obey God; his or her heavenly parent.

In fact, Wesley called parents 'cruel' who did not 'break' or redirect their child's will early and called for obedience to be the first thing taught; obedience to parents that led to obedience to God (Ibid.).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) suggested that children are born with an innate goodness and are "contaminated" by a "morally corrupt society." John Locke (1632-1704) suggested that the mind of a child was a 'tabula rasa' or 'blank slate' that acquired ideas through the use of senses. Children are born neither totally corrupt nor innately good but blank slates to be written on, impressed, and molded. He stressed experience and suggested that children had a great capacity for knowledge [12]. Children believe whatever they are taught especially from someone they trust and that places great responsibility on caregivers to be careful of what they expose the children to.

Locke further considered nurture or external forces as routes for development of the child. He believed interactions with people and the environment affected children's development, and that parents were the first educators. Locke theorized that people are born with a "blank slate" meaning infants and children learn from experiences rather than being innately provided with skills and knowledge of themselves and the world. He therefore placed great importance on early life experiences, stating should infants and children have negative or unhelpful experiences, they would suffer the consequences of this throughout their adult life. He also proposed infants and children are born with some innate talents and capabilities, and following this argument suggested it was necessary for parents to observe their children's natural abilities and interests and tailor learning to these rather than imposing their own views on children's activities engaging them in activities they dislike [14].

The welfare of children calls for steady growth in all ways. It requires that each child be provided with all the nourishment and encouragement needed to promote growth. At the same time it requires that care be taken to avoid over-stimulation which will push the child too rapidly. Those who are interested in a child's welfare wish to understand the normal rate of growth for children, so that they may know what to expect of the child. But, they come to know, also that each child has his or her own individual rate of growth. And so they do not go into panic when their children is a little below the average, nor become smug when he or she is a little above [22]. In teaching children, it must be noted that they have short attention span which may affect their ability to concentrate for a long time without distraction. They learn faster through the use of media as the popular saying that "a picture is worth thousand words."

Children learn through story, which provides a narrative framework for interpreting meaning. Relationships with others also contribute to how a young child makes meaning since there is connection between cognitive and social learning. Children also make meaning through everyday lived experiences; which can shape a child's attitude and values and provides knowledge about many things. One common everyday live experience for a child is play, which also enables him or her to make meaning. Play provides a foundation for social awareness and skills [15].

Challenges for Children Ministry

The following are the challenges that ensued from the consideration of the *Shema* injunction and the realities of the children ministry in this postmodern age:

- The foremost challenge goes to the adult populations which are the parents, pastors, and children workers. The injunction begins with a call to them to listen to God, love Him and serve Him, thereby demonstrating to the children how they are to relate to God. The children will only grow up to become the kind of adults that nurture them. The revival in children ministry will need to start with revival in the lives of the caregivers [16].
- The fulfillment of the injunction begins right from the home so parents should devote time to train the children. Parents are not to shift their responsibilities to the church but are to be equipped by the church. In today's world, many parents are too busy to give the kind of attention the *Shema* required to their wards. Parents are meant to spend quality time with children but the moral and economic realities seem to be hindrances to such quality and loving relationship [16].
- The church should pay special attention to children and teenagers' ministry as she does to all other parts of church ministry. Building the children up in the Lord is more important than having a mighty church edifice. Priority should be given to ministering to the young ones; churches are to provide adequate resources in terms of space, personnel, materials such as books, writing materials, media equipment [17] and finances.
- The parents and teachers need to engage divers methods by sharpening their skills [18]
- The injunction reveals that God expects children to grow in an intergenerational atmosphere. Although due to their unique developmental needs there is need to have age-graded activities for the children and teens, but this must be done without giving them the idea that they are minors. They are to have a strong sense of ownership of the church and feel the love and warmth of fellowship with the adults as often as possible [19, 7].
- The annual budget of a church will vividly reveal the value placed on children ministry by the church. Proper care must be taken to adequately budget for the children ministry without consideration for how much they gather as offering. It is of no use to God keeping church money in the bank and boast of a fat account when there are so many things the church can use money for, especially providing materials and equipment for children ministry [20].
- Individuals must be encouraged to support the ministry of the church to children as a way of enhancing the church's efforts and also involving more hands. Care must be taken that all the children are not abandoned to few caregivers known as children

workers; the church should attempt to equip the whole adult population to provide oversight for the total upbringing of the children.

- Aesthetics plays a major role in developing the children mentally and spiritually. So, there is need to build a conducive and suitable worship auditorium for the children and equip it with adequate modern facilities to aid their holistic development.
- Allow the children and teenagers take leadership roles in the church and society. Organize special worship programs for the children and teenagers and let them lead the programs [21].
- The church leadership should encourage workers in children and teenagers' ministry by providing resources needed for the ministry for them. Sponsor them to seminars and workshops on children and teenagers' ministry to help them be more effective in ministry. Training volunteer workers is a major sign of commitment to the various ministries of the church.
- Reviewing the curriculum of the theological institutions may be needed, so that every student will take a course in children ministry before graduation. Besides the religious educators, the church pastors who are mostly theologians need to be exposed to the religious education of preschooler, children and teenagers. This will help the commitment of church pastors to children ministry and enhance the working relationship of the pastors with the ministers working in the children and teenagers' ministry.

CONCLUSION

This critical injunction from God coming in the valedictory speech gives no room for carelessness in the ministry of the church to children. The training of children and of the parents who are to be the primary trainers in the way of the Lord is a divine mandate that needs to be taken with all seriousness. Just as God began the instruction by speaking directly to the adults, the ministry to children begins with the quality of adults that care for them. Parents and children workers are to labour to see that they have a walk with God that is worthy of emulation. The life of obedience of the parent will achieve greater result than many teachings.

Every church is encouraged to critically examine their efforts in ministering to and with children to see if there would be need for improvement. Effective children ministry is needed to secure the future of denomination and the society. Neglecting the children will amount to being careless with the future. Great efforts must be made to disciple the parents and all adults in order to create a community that will not be counter-productive to the efforts of the few children workers. The *Shema* injunction still holds a great deal of relevance to the ministry of the church to children, teenagers and youth in this generation. Efforts to realign the situations and current realities of churches and homes will be a praiseworthy one and it is therefore encouraged. The injunction must be expressly obeyed as fitting to various cultural and church contexts.

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