Countering the Criminalization of Youth:

A Denominational Strategy for Developing a Holistic Ecclesiastical Approach

By Richard Griffith

ABSTRACT

 The United States still has the largest number of incarcerated juveniles in the industrialized world. Often, marginalized foster children are victims of criminalization. With a significant number of ACE’s, many of these youth face both juvenile and adult incarceration due to youth-focused institutions not being adequately trained to deal with youth coming from traumatic backgrounds. The Church has an opportunity to become The Church AS Family to minister to marginalized foster children and youth.

*Keywords:* Trauma, faith-based mentoring, theology, trust.

**Introduction**

Child development experts have shown that systemic abandonment includes an emphasis on adult-driven agendas.[[1]](#footnote-1)[1] Children who come from difficult and challenging backgrounds are often the unintended victims of growing adult-driven agendas – especially once they enter institutional care. This is especially true of foster children. While the microcosm of home may have been very dysfunctional and harmful for a child, a child becomes thrust into micro, meso, and macro-systems that typically follow policies and procedures that are “cookie cutter” in nature. One such system is education. There is a growing concern among educators and other youth service professionals in regards to what has been called “the school to prison pipeline.” This is “the intersection of the K-12 educational system and the juvenile justice system, which too often fail to serve our nation’s at-risk youth.”[[2]](#footnote-2) [2] While a growing number of youth are falling victim to a culture of criminalization, youth of color and of lower socioeconomic status, as well as those in foster care, are at particular risk. The purpose of this paper is to create a strategy involving The Church in order to counter the criminalization of youth by engaging in holistic and intergenerational approaches.

*The Path To Criminalization*

The path to criminalization of foster care children starts with systemic abandonment. Today’s youth, children, and families are in a mode of survival only to view thriving as some distant dream they wish they could obtain. In its simplest form, systemic abandonment of young people can be defined as any action that surrenders best practices for the healthy development of young people to the pursuit of adult-driven agendas.[[3]](#footnote-3)[3] These adult-driven agendas produce unforeseen outcomes resulting in non-optimal circumstances that impact the very young people the agenda was intended to help. As Michael Langford observes, “Perhaps what makes the crisis of adult abandonment of youth so compelling is that it is a phenomenon that cuts across all traditional demographics used in studying adolescence. In a strange way, abandonment is a rather egalitarian affliction. Rich and poor, dominant and minority culture, boys and girls, younger and older adolescents of many different ilk suffer from systemic abandonment.”[[4]](#footnote-4) [4]

Fractured family and societal disconnections have caused adults to turn inward

and focus on seeking their own pursuits. Clark observes, “Unfortunately, such selfishness

reflects a growing trend of parents placing their own needs ahead of those of their children.”[[5]](#footnote-5) [5] It is also evident that this selfishness does not stop at the family level and it does not matter if the family model is nuclear or permeable. Society is selfish in its political parties, industry, marketers, media, and so many other elements of a culture that puts its needs ahead of the needs of children. Nowhere have these observations been more palpable than in the lives of foster children. The statistics of homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, drug addiction,

domestic abuse, and reliance on public assistance among current and former foster care

children are staggering. A whopping 30 percent of the homeless population, and in some

cases as much as 80 percent of incarcerated adults, are comprised of former foster

children.[[6]](#footnote-6) [6]

The possibility of criminalization is multiplied for foster care children, who

experience a greater degree of instability than non-foster care children. At particular risk

are children who have aged out of long-term foster care. These young people are at

higher risk of teen pregnancy and incarceration as juveniles. This is because the transition

to becoming healthy adults who can provide for themselves becomes hindered when

children age out of the Child Protective system. Child Trends, “the nation’s leading

nonprofit research organization focused exclusively on improving the lives and prospects

of children, youth, and their families,”[[7]](#footnote-7) [7] offers the following comment:

“Youth who “age out” of foster care (instead of returning home or being adopted)

may face challenges to making a successful transition to adulthood. According to

the only national study of youth aging out of foster care, 38 percent had emotional

problems, 50 percent had used illegal drugs, and 25 percent were involved with

the legal system. Preparation for further education and career was also a problem

for these young people. Only 48 percent of foster youth who had “aged out” of the

system had graduated from high school at the time of discharge, and only 54

percent had graduated from high school two to four years after discharge. As

adults, children who spent long periods of time in multiple foster care homes were

more likely than other children to encounter problems such as unemployment,

homelessness, and incarceration, as well as to experience early pregnancy.”[[8]](#footnote-8) [8]

Simply put, youth who lack adequate support systems have a more difficult challenge of avoiding criminalization.

In, *“From Education to Incarceration: Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline”,* Nancy Heitzeg tells some eye-opening stories. A nine-year old on the way to school found a manicure kit with a one-inch knife and was suspended for a day. “In Massachusetts, a five-year-old boy attending an after-school program made a gun out of Legos and pointed it at other students while ‘simulating the sound of gunfire,’ as one school official put it. He was expelled.”[[9]](#footnote-9)[9] In another cited situation, “an honors student in Houston, Texas, was forced to spend a night in jail when she missed class to go to work to support her family.”[[10]](#footnote-10)[10] These are only a few of the ridiculous reasons children are suspended, expelled, or criminalized at school. These individual stories reveal underlying adult-driven agendas, particularly with contributions from media and public education, such as “Zero Tolerance” and “No Child Left Behind” policies. Zero Tolerance policies are procedures intended to keep schools safe by doling out tough penalties for students who bring any sort of weapon onto a school campus but instead have become common-place for even minor infractions.[[11]](#footnote-11)[11] However, Zero Tolerance was not intended for minor infractions and typical public school classrooms. Kevin P. Brady sums up well its misuse: “Zero Tolerance policies, while initially directed at the most serious and dangerous criminal behaviors by students, have been used liberally to punish other violations of school policies such as use of tobacco, possession of drugs, suspected gang-related activities and fist fights.”[[12]](#footnote-12) [12]

No Child Left Behind was an educational, philosophical, and legal approach that

embraced standards, accountability, and the guarantee of high-quality education for all

children and especially focused on equity toward children who were being overlooked

due to racial and economic prejudices within the educational system. The policies also

implemented standardized testing intended to gage effectiveness of teachers and

educational practices. However, Hackney Gray LaRuth asserts, “The plan potentially

victimizes minority parents and students and sets a negative set of goals. It does not take

into account the much lower educational resources that poor African American and other

minority students start out with nor does it propose to remedy the discrepancy.”[[13]](#footnote-13)[13]

Along with the deconstruction of stable families, Zero Tolerance and No Child Left

Behind have contributed systemically to the criminalization of young people. The factors of broken families, heavy-handed consequences at school, and little room for failure combine to increase a growing distrust between adults and adolescents. The distrust is seen heavily in legislature and news media outlets that have portrayed young people as “super predators.”[[14]](#footnote-14)[14] Acted upon in education through fears among parents and legislators, this distrust gives license for adult authorities to start viewing children and youth as criminals when they commit even the tiniest infraction of the rules. In particular, this criminalization process is happening by those who are the power brokers in today’s society.

There is a correlation between the high numbers of youth of color and those in foster care, cultural and media bias, and criminalization of youth. If this were not so, African- American children would not make up nearly two-thirds of the foster care population and currently remain in care longer.[[15]](#footnote-15) [15] In an era of actually fearing children due to media hype with reports that they are becoming super-predators, it is no wonder that children have come under intense scrutiny. Ephebiphobia, or the fear of young people, has become a real issue.

The degree of scrutiny young people are going through has gone beyond rational. Another example is the absurd case of Josh Welch, an elementary school student who was suspended for two days for turning a pastry into the shape of a gun.[[16]](#footnote-16)[16] There have been similar cases where children have been disciplined and even handled in a criminal manner for doing things that are simply childish, whether it is pointing fingers in the shape of a gun or joking about bubble guns. It is becoming more common to see police cruisers at every school level, from high schools all the way down to elementary schools. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers, “School-based policing is the fastest growing area of law enforcement.”[[17]](#footnote-17) [17]

As a reaction to the perceived increase in school violence driven by media reports,

government entities have enacted policies designed to make public schools a safer place. As with any broad-sweeping legislation, systemic failures are bound to happen. In the 1980s, there was a prevailing perception that urban school settings were becoming more violent and unsafe. In the 1990s this perception moved to suburban school settings. At the same time during these two decades, the United States was engaged in a national “war on drugs.”[[18]](#footnote-18)[18] The perceptions of unsafe schools, the war on drugs, and the subsequent school shootings that occurred in the decade that followed all led to the implementation of public school policies that began the process of criminalizing youth and children. Foster care children who come from unstable environments often are seen as more problematic when it comes to the process of criminalization, due to the behaviors they display as a result of the variety of instability they experience in their lives.

Martinez points out an interesting fact:

Zero Tolerance finds its roots as a program developed by U.S. Customs to target

drug lords. This policy was then put into effect in both elementary and secondary

schools. In essence, the “crackdown” on school violence, which was blown out of

proportion by media, began to reflect the approach designated for hardened criminals, drug traffickers and murderers. As school systems began to implement zero tolerance policies, U.S. Customs were actually phasing out such approaches as they were found to be ineffective.[[19]](#footnote-19)[19]

While Zero Tolerance initially was implemented to be used against hardened drug lords

and the most violent of criminals, it eventually took on a life of its own as school administrators began to use the policy “to crack down” on everything, from nail files to inappropriate language and clothing to anything an administrator might consider distracting to the educational process. “Hence, zero-tolerance policies have become a cop-out for school administrators, allowing them to bar students from receiving an education.”[[20]](#footnote-20)[20] Students who have frequent behavior problems are targeted for removal from the classroom, especially when it comes time for standardized testing. The purpose of removing students with behavioral issues is to avoid potential lower test scores. Lower test scores are perceived as a direct correlation between the school or teacher’s abilities to educate and therefore impact school ratings and funding.

The cost of incarcerating a child is consistently, and minimally, ten times greater

than educating a child. Nell Bernstein explains, “On average, we spend $88,000 per year

to incarcerate a young person in a state facility—more than eight times the $10,652 we

invest in her education. In many states, this gap is even wider. In California for example,

the cost of a year in a youth prison reached a high of $225,000, while education spending

31 dipped to less than $8,000.”[[21]](#footnote-21)[21] Whereas a quality education in the long term results in

quality contributions to a community, the lack of quality education inside the juvenile

justice system’s prisons can be seen as a misuse of taxpayers’ funds, since most taxpayers

likely would prefer to have their money spent improving education in communities where

the educational needs are greatest and funds can be more effective.

There are indications that youth are not being corrected through proper education

and their academic and social problems are only being exacerbated. Bernstein reveals an

even worse reality: “In fact, multiple studies have shown that putting youth behind bars not only fails to enhance public safety; it does just the opposite, driving low-level delinquents deeper into criminality and increasing the likelihood that they will wind up behind bars again and again.”[[22]](#footnote-22) [22] More than one scholar has noticed that young people who are removed from mainstream schools and placed either in alternative schools or a juvenile institution have a very difficult time re-entering mainstream education due to the punitive nature of the alternative “educational” options.[[23]](#footnote-23) [23]

With the high cost of incarcerating today’s children, the lack of positive transformation, and increasingly negative outcomes to communities, a glaring question begins to surface: “If incarcerating our children has little positive outcome on their education or rehabilitation, and if society is not benefitting from that incarceration, who gains from incarcerating our children?” It seems that the prison industrial complex does. As children and youth begin to experience incarceration, and with little success in rehabilitating through education, they enter a pipeline known as “the schoolhouse to jailhouse track” that ultimately services the financial pockets of the prison industrial complex. As Heitzeg notes:

While Advance Placement high school courses and vocational tracks prepare

students for their respective positions in the workforce, it is the “schoolhouse to

jailhouse track’” that prepares students for their futures as inmate neo-slave

laborers in the political economy of the prison industrial complex. The age of

mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex calls for the continual

replenishment of the ranks of the imprisoned, and it is youth of color who are the

most often selected to fill that onerous role.[[24]](#footnote-24)[24]

When children and youth are incarcerated and removed from their home,

community, and support systems, healthy individuation is much more difficult to achieve.

When healthy individuation does not occur, youth become unhealthy adults. Unhealthy

adults can become destructive, which damages society. As Bernstein puts it, “By worsening the problems that often contributed to their crimes in the first place, and increasing the odds that they will commit more crime in the future, these institutions actually undermine public safety in the longer term.”[[25]](#footnote-25)[25]

For this reason, attachment and bonding between parents and child should not be

undervalued. “Studies examining children longitudinally from infancy to middle childhood (i.e., ages 9 and 10) have demonstrated that children classified as securely attached in infancy are more likely to be rated as popular with peers, to be involved with reciprocal friendships, and have a higher number of friends than insecure children.”[[26]](#footnote-26)[26] Secure attachments foster positive self-image, giving a child a head start on healthy individuation. Furthermore, “insecure children are likely to have a negative view of themselves, and a view of others as unresponsive to their needs. Consequently, insecure children are likely to expect further rejections, and may behave in ways which elicit them.”[[27]](#footnote-27)[27] The best thing that can happen for a child’s healthy interaction with society is to have nourishing attachment and bonding experiences within the earliest dyad of mother and child. Finally, Melissa Lieberman, Anna-Beth Doyle, and Dorothy Markiewicz suggest that healthy attachment relationships with parents give children opportunities to learn how to handle intimacy and closeness, which may be more important for the formation of close friendships, rather than peer acceptance.[[28]](#footnote-28)[28]

Children who have experienced insecure attachments in their early life have

difficulty achieving identity formation. This is due to the fact that children develop their

identity within their family, community, and cultural contexts. When families, communities, and cultural contexts are ever changing, children, youth, and adults have difficulty developing their own identities, because they have no emotional anchor. In the American Journal of Family Therapy Anthony J. Faber et al. write: “The identity achieved status describes adolescents who have successfully achieved an identity through experiencing a crisis, exploring, and committing to a set of values.”[[29]](#footnote-29)[29] Young people experience successful identity achievement not as a result of the crisis, but because the young person had caring adults that help guide them through the crisis. Successful navigation of crisis occurs, because a young person has had secure relationships to explore solutions to the crisis. Caring adults serve as a safety net for the adolescent throughout many dilemmas. This ability to explore problem solving starts at a young age.

Young people in a punitive juvenile prison system are rarely, if ever, involved

with caring and nurturing adult relationships that further help healthy development. What

is worse is the practice of solitary confinement of young people. The intent of solitary

confinement is to “destroy the mind and break the spirit.”[[30]](#footnote-30)[30] This is a practice that directly conflicts with what young people need in their holistic development. In 2012, the

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry issued a statement strongly

opposing the practice of solitary confinement on youth and children: The potential psychiatric consequences of prolonged solitary confinement are well recognized and include depression, anxiety and psychosis. Due to their developmental vulnerability, juvenile offenders are at particular risk of such adverse reactions. Furthermore, the majority of suicides in juvenile correctional facilities occur when the individual is isolated or in solitary confinement.[[31]](#footnote-31)[31]

*The Spiritual Need*

The previous statement alone should wreak havoc on the minds and spirits of any youth workers concerned with the spiritual development of youth. Spiritual development is a construct that involves dimensions such as beliefs and attitudes, behaviors and rituals, personal experiences, emotional phenomena, and varying levels of consciousness and awareness, and personality.[[32]](#footnote-32)[32] This spiritual development for youth can help determine how young people view their relationship between self and God as well as how that they see their individual role in the larger context of life. Life circumstances often shape a young person’s spiritual development. In a recent interview Christian Smith, researcher for the National Study of Youth and Religion and a co-author of Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults,[[33]](#footnote-33)[33] states that childhood spiritual development has a significant impact on the religious attitudes of emerging adults.[[34]](#footnote-34)[34] Issues ranging from abuse, divorce, removal from the home, broken and multiple homes as well as other family dysfunctions are frequently hidden from most

church leaders. These issues have been given the name of “millennial morbidity.”[[35]](#footnote-35)[35]

In light of all that has been presented thus far, the criminalization of the young,

often over petty circumstances, takes its toll on the overall development of the individual

youth and society. It has been shown that minimal positive correction occurs within the

walls of a juvenile facility. Constructive education is sparse and inadequate. Juveniles

face fear of harassment from their peers as well as the adult guards. With few caring adults and minimal provisions toward healthy physical and emotional maturation, it is safe to say that spiritual development is near non-existent as well. Even if the State sought to consider a young person’s spiritual needs, a youth who is simply surviving physically and emotionally could find it difficult to thrive spiritually. There is hope in the way of ministry to incarcerated juveniles, as explained in the words of Raymond J. Council: “The chaplain stands as the one who is free to approach him as a person, not as a thing to be dissected nor as an object of investigation. The chaplain is freed from his own wants and needs to nourish the resident. He is free to touch the resident as one concerned about and valuing him for the person he is.”[[36]](#footnote-36)[36] As Council points out, chaplains and other juvenile jail ministries have great opportunity to provide healing and spiritual development in the life of an incarcerated juvenile.

There are many incarcerated young people who have been deprived of this compassion and healing touch. It is as if they are lepers in today’s society. It is reminiscent of Matthew 8:1-4, when a man with leprosy comes to be healed by Jesus. The leper was an outcast with a contagious and incurable disease, who likely had not felt human touch for many years. Isolated, lonely, and hopeless, the leper takes a chance on Jesus. However, this is not the crux of the story. The amazing thing about this occurrence is the chance that Jesus took on the leper. The leper comes to Jesus and says, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean” (Matthew 8:2).90 Before Jesus speaks words of healing, something He could have done from a distance, Jesus reaches out and touches the man and says, “I am willing. Be clean” (Matthew 8:3).[[37]](#footnote-37)[37] Immediately the leper is healed. In a similar vein, the Church must ask what it is willing to do to minister to young people and keep them from feeling the stigma of being criminalized. Engaging in this mission can help youth reclaim their dignity, while being healed emotionally and spiritually.

*The Solution Is To Be The Church As Family*

We as adults, and we as the Church, need to take much more seriously our theological covenants that espouse adoption – both spiritual and literal - in order to curb and combat the criminalization of our young. Adopting children has great theological significance in the areas of love and redemption. There is no greater love than the love God shows us through His adoption of us (2 Corinthians 6:18). The love of God is reflected when parents, of either biological or adopted children, live beyond their own selfish desires by being willing to lay down their lives for their children (John 15:13). This is why there will be no greater solution to the systemic abandonment and criminalization of young people than a love expressed by a body of believers, who can adopt these young people and families into the family of God.

Family relationships are the first environments where children are nurtured and

cared for. When cycles of dysfunction are pervasive and unbroken, children and youth

are at a higher risk of developmental trauma or Adverse Childhood Experiences, as discussed in Part One of this discussion. The results of ACEs are significant contributors to the process of criminalization. However, life and protection in a spiritual family can interrupt the cycle of ACEs. Healing can begin, and criminalization can be curbed. Where a biological family might fail in nurturing their children due to ACEs, the local church can become an agency of healing by intentionally reaching out to these children and families by becoming a second, or spiritual, family.

*Genesis 4:8-10*

Genesis 4:8-10 paints a clear picture of what can happen when an individual feels

rejected and unloved. This was the underlying dynamic between Cain and Abel. Genesis

4:8-10 reads:

“Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in

the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to

Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my

brother’s keeper?” The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s

blood cries out to me from the ground.”

Preceding this particular text, the reason Cain killed Abel was due to Cain’s jealousy over

God’s favor with Cain’s sacrifice but not his own. The rejection Cain experienced led to

him having feelings of envy and a loss of love, which eventually turned to rage and

murder. Like Cain, many children and youth in dysfunctional families suffer the

consequences of feeling rejection, loss and anger. In order to overcome the dysfunction

and ACEs experienced by many young people within their family context, another

“family” that has healthy boundaries, structure, flexibility, and nurturing must be created

in order for children to heal and thrive.

While reflecting on the early Church and how it provided healthy environments,

Wayne A. Meeks observes the following about churches today: “In order to persist, a social organization must have boundaries, must maintain structural stability as well as flexibility, and must create a unique culture. The second factor, the social structure of the organization, is concerned largely with leadership, the allocation of power, the differentiation of roles and management of conflict.”[[38]](#footnote-38) [38] The church should provide the best leadership, conflict resolution, and empowerment to those who are vulnerable and disenfranchised to include women, youth, and children. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” has often been spoken with the tongue of sarcasm in modern times, but biblically the answer to the question is a resounding “Yes.”

When vulnerable children do not receive the affirmation, comfort, nurturing, and care that they need, their unmet needs and desires can spring into regrettable actions, like the jealousy and potential murderous rage Cain had toward Abel. Roger Burggraeve explains:

“Rage took such a hold on Cain, or rather Cain let rage take such a hold on him,

that he did not succeed in keeping it under control, resulting in the murder of his

brother. It is apparent from all this how evil does not flow forth from a lucid,

abstract, intelligible act but finds its starting point in the affronted desire of Cafe,

of every human person. In our desire—in the flesh of our spirit—we are most

vulnerable and assailable.”[[39]](#footnote-39)[39]

In the case of Cain and Abel, with Cain being the firstborn, there was a cultural assumption that Cain was to care for his brother Abel. Cain’s rage overcame his responsibility, even as God warned Cain of that potential (Genesis 4:6-7).

The Body of Christ must ask some difficult questions when it comes to addressing

the needs of vulnerable and difficult children. Churches can turn a blind eye to children in

foster care at best and, at worse, join in the criminalization process of these children and

youth. To do so would be synonymous to joining Cain in his sin. Contrary to Cain’s

actions, churches must live out the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:5, which state, “And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Since Christians believe the words of Jesus to be truth, they are called to give children in today’s society a special place. Matthew 18:3 goes so far as to say believers never will enter the Kingdom of God unless they become as little children. Being as “little children” helps Christ-followers to empathize with the plight of children and their lack of power in the face of sovereign authority. Matthew 18:6 also cautions believers not to cause a little one to stumble, for it would be better to have a millstone hung around the neck and be cast into the sea. For this reason, churches must take a proactive role in offering the most vulnerable a family where they can be protected and cared for, because Christians are indeed their “keepers.”

*Ruth 3:7-9*

Another admonishment to care for the most vulnerable can be found in Ruth 3:7-9.

Acts of redemption stem from the lineage of King David, specifically in the story of Ruth

and Boaz, where Boaz is referred to as the “Family Redeemer” several different times in the Book of Ruth (Ruth 2:20; 3:9, 12; 4:1, 3, 6). Not only did Boaz redeem the family land and the name of the dead among his inheritance, Boaz also becomes a kinsman-redeemer to Ruth who was a foreigner among the Israelites.[[40]](#footnote-40) [40] Through legal contracts in Israelite culture, the Book of Ruth tells readers that God can redeem whom He chooses.

Redemption is not just for a select few, and God uses His people to redeem. Although

Ruth was a foreign, widowed, and impoverished woman among the Israelites, she became the great-grandmother of Israel’s greatest king, David.[[41]](#footnote-41)[41] As a young woman, Ruth is given another chance at life through the grace displayed by Boaz. Ruth shares a legacy of being an outcast just as an orphan does, yet God redeems the outcast through His people. There is another example of spiritual adoption in Ruth 1:16, where Ruth declares to her mother-in-law, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” With Ruth’s refusal to leave Naomi, the older woman agrees and takes the younger woman in as family. As a result, Ruth comes under the kinship-redeemer status of Boaz. In essence, this relationship becomes one of protection and provision as both Naomi and Ruth have been systemically abandoned by the deaths of Naomi’s sons (one of whom was Ruth’s husband) and a culture where women had little in the way of providing for themselves. This relationship is similar to the cultural systemic abandonment in which children lack provision and protection. Boaz offers protection to Ruth (Ruth 2:8), invites her to eat with the harvesters (Ruth 2:14), and intentionally instructs his workers to provide grain for Ruth to glean (Ruth 2:16) in order to provide for herself and Naomi.

This biblical example foreshadows the kinsman-redeemer relationship that believers receive in Christ, where they are called children of God (John 1:12-13; Romans 8:14) and co-heirs with Jesus Christ (Romans 8:17). These scriptural proclamations show that God has taken in humanity, through Jesus Christ, as His children. In this way, Jesus becomes their kinsman-redeemer, provider, and protector all the while ushering them into the family of God. Jesus even speaks to the loving provision of God toward His children in Luke 11:11-13, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Since the Church is called to be the imitation of Christ by conforming to the Spirit (Romans 8:9-14), believers are then called to become kinsman-redeemers of others through protection and provision. The local church is called not only to take the vulnerable in as family but to provide for them as well (James 2:14-17).

*Mark 3:31-35*

In extending the definition of family, Mark 3:31-35 offers the following:

“Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in

to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and

brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he

asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are

my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister

and mother.”

This key passage demonstrates that doing the will of God is what defines believers as the family of Christ. Jesus also redefines family in John 19:26 by developing a kinship redeemer relationship between His mother Mary and His disciple John. Connecting to Matthew 3:31-35, John and Mary accept a new definition of family as both seem to agree to become a new family for each other with the impending death of Jesus. By obeying the “will of God,” this is the first affirmation of becoming a new family. The second affirmation of new family is that John and Mary are obedient to the will of God. In a sense, this “double affirmation” shows the intention of God to show believers that all human beings are a part of His family in the Kingdom. In the Kingdom, followers of God are called to expand their definition of family. Upon seeing Jesus about to die, Mary and John likely experienced a new and profound sense of brokenness. Jesus addresses this brokenness by offering new hope through a new family. It seems that “new families” can offer new hope for redemption and restore order, just as in the lives of Mary and John.

Thomas F. Torrance states it this way, “The whole movement of redemption

adumbrated from the start is a movement of God coming to man in order to restore man to God, of God taking man’s place in order to give man God’s place—the principle of substitution and the principle of incarnation.”[[42]](#footnote-42)[42] In other words, just as the church family would initiate a relationship with children and families in need, God initiates a relationship with humanity through His sacrifice. Just as Jesus’ agenda on the cross was to develop a new family of hope, God’s agenda is in the best interest of His children because it provides salvation and new life. Family is designed to meet the needs of children, not to meet the emotional needs of the parent. This provides a picture that is the antithesis of abandonment. God broke through human pain and suffering in order to bring hope and a future (cf. Jeremiah 29:11-12).

Bringing Mary and John together as a new family, Jesus paves a way for them to

offer provision, protection, and family identity. These elements of provision, protection,

family identity—as well as redemption, encouragement, and education—are all a part of

what it means to welcome the most vulnerable into family through spiritual adoption.

Along with a family to identify with, children and youth who are given stability and

support in a “family” setting can begin a healthier process of identity formation. Support

systems that go beyond an individual family and include the family of God contribute

much in the way of healthy family dynamics. The local church can become a key

component in the healing of wounded and hurting children and youth. It cannot be too

emphatically stated that healthy youth and children who come from healthy environments

are less likely to be criminalized. Had Mary or John been abandoned beyond the cross, one could only speculate the increased difficulty of their life challenges.

Healthy families and their support systems are essential to curbing criminalization. The opposite of healthy families and support systems leads to the criminalization process. Homes where children have little parental involvement or homes where parents are overbearing can have disastrous results. Unsafe, unstructured, under-resourced, and hostile homes have a negative impact on child development. As a Bronfenbrenner expert, Larry K. Brendtro says that “children reared in disrupted ecologies experience a host of emotional and behavioral problems. But Bronfenbrenner opposed diagnosing such problems as pathology or disease in youth. Instead, he diagnosed DIS-EASE in the ecology.”[[43]](#footnote-43)[43] In this case, “disease” is used in the sense of uneasiness within the child caused by negative influencing factors, such as poor parenting skills, unsafe environments or other factors that are deleterious toward a child’s healthy development.

Bronfenbrenner is not alone in these conclusions. More recent research suggests that conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are more of a sociological issue as opposed to a biological or chemical imbalance within children needing medication.[[44]](#footnote-44)[44] This reveals that the move toward delinquency can either be exacerbated or hindered, depending on healthy relationships and attachments that are formed within the family unit between parents and offspring. The Body of Christ can become a place where healthy family attachments can be formed, whether these attachments are biological or spiritual or both.

The admonishment of Mark 3:31-35 for current families is an admonishment for

churches to become a family that meets the needs of the most vulnerable in a society.

When a congregation meets the needs of struggling families, much can be accomplished

to provide for hope, encouragement, and healing—ultimately, curtailing the systemic

abandonment and criminalization of at-risk children, youth, and families. While it would

be completely speculative to ask the question, “What would have become of Mary or

John had not Jesus given them a new family,” it is not hard to imagine that the futures of

both Mary and John were more hopeful as they came to rely on and support each other in

a culture that had little value for female widows (Mary) and youth (John).

**Conclusion**

While there are many debates on the term “family ministry”, most American churches are still functioning under a nuclear family model. Whether family based ministry comes from an approach such as *Orange,* by Reggie Joiner,or *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, by Mark DeVries, these are still predominantly models that take a “Church AND Family” approach. The text that most expands the definition of “family” is Dr. Chap Clark’s *Adoptive Church.* In this model, there is a call to consider what I am calling a “Church AS Family” approach. To be fair, there are elements of Church and Family that are beneficial, however, The Church in American must understand the nature of a growing number of permeable families. Families who are foster or adoptive families face a unique set of challenges. The Church should become The Church as Family in order to minister to the needs of both traditional (nuclear) families as well as non-traditional (permeable) families.

Evidence has been presented on the unique needs that foster and adoptive children face. Suggestions on redefining family from a scriptural and theological perspective has been offered. Whatever past challenges have come such as civil rights, education, healthcare and more, The Church unified as family has had a significant and positive impact on these challenges. It is time for The Church to recognize the need to become, not just Church and Family, but Church as Family in order to face the new challenges facing hurting families.

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