

Faith Pulpit

United Families Dividing Churches: An Assessment of the Family Integrated Church Movement

The Family Integrated Church Movement (FICM) is having a growing impact within fundamental Baptist churches—and unfortunately it is not all good. Since the mid-1990s an increasing number of families within fundamental churches have gravitated toward the family-integrated approach. In addition, families entrenched in the movement have been drawn to fundamental churches because of their emphasis on Biblical preaching and conservatism. At first glance the influence of the FICM might seem innocent and even beneficial for traditional churches, but instead it is proving to be problematic for many pastors and churches. The FICM mindset is dividing churches.

Understanding the FICM

The FICM is comprised of evangelical churches, pastors, and laymen who share a distinct philosophical approach toward the family and church. Advocates of family-integrated churches (FIC) believe that families should worship and fellowship together in age-integrated (i.e., multigenerational) services and activities. Conversely they insist that virtually all age-segregated ministries and activities at church, such as Sunday School or youth ministries, are unequivocally unbiblical.

The FICM is not a denomination but rather a loose association of churches and organizations represented by a variety of denominational perspectives. Some key leaders are

- Scott Brown, director of the National Center for Family-Integrated Churches (NCFIC)¹
- Doug Phillips, president of Vision Forum Ministries²
- Voddie Baucham Jr., professor, author, and pastor of Grace Family Baptist Church near Houston, Texas³

- Eric Wallace, president of the Institute for Uniting Church and Home (IUCAH).⁴

The NCFIC, founded in 2001, is the flagship organization for the FICM and has a national network of more than 800 churches. It should be no surprise that the FICM has close ties to the homeschooling movement and in many respects is its natural outgrowth. While home schooling is not essential to the FICM, the vast majority of families in FIC homeschool their children.⁵

The Central Concern of the FICM

God has established three institutions to bring order to creation and fulfill His purposes: the family, the state, and the church. Scripture delineates specific responsibilities for each institution, and ideally the relationship between the family, state, and church should be harmonious and complementary, each institution fulfilling their God-given roles within their distinct jurisdictions. According to those in the FICM, the fundamental problem within evangelical churches is the skewed relationship of the family and church.⁶ Leaders of the FICM argue that churches have usurped the responsibility and role of families and consequently enabled families (and especially fathers) to abdicate and abandon their God-given responsibility to train their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

According to the FICM, this distortion and blurring of jurisdictions have led to an alarming crisis within the American church. Youth are abandoning the church and Christianity at incredible rates. Studies suggest that as much as 40% and up to 88% of today's young people are leaving evangelical churches once they leave the home.⁷ In addition, only about 10% of churched teens have a Biblical worldview.⁸ These statistics are shocking and prove that something is clearly wrong. Those within the FICM believe the root of the problem is in fact the very way in which evangelical churches operate today.

Adherents of family integration identify the culture of age segregation within church ministry as the key culprit. They consider ministries that separate families by age (or for any other reason) as unbiblical and a form of "practical apostasy."⁹ These ministries include Sunday School; youth ministry; children's church; children's clubs (like Awana and Kids4Truth); VBS; youth camps; college, singles, and senior ministries; and even nurseries (for many family-integrated churches).

Scott Brown contends that age segregation is wrong for several reasons.¹⁰ First, using the Regulative Principle and historical-grammatical hermeneutics, he argues that age segregation is unfounded in Scripture and is therefore unwarranted and indefensible. At the same time, he points to examples in Scripture where families worshipped together as the normal pattern. Second, he asserts that the very concept of age-segregated training is the product of humanistic philosophers, educators, and sociologists and is therefore corrupt. Consequently, the church has inadvertently replaced Biblical truth and methodology with pagan, non-Christian philosophies and practices. Third, Brown suggests that age-segregated ministries are wrong because they have failed to produce lasting fruit and are not

working.

Distinctives of the FICM

The leaders of the FICM see themselves as part of a reformation movement within the church similar to the Protestant Reformation. As Voddie Baucham states, “This is a reformation, a paradigm shift. . . . We are not talking about a new program; we are talking about a complete overhaul of the philosophy that is accepted in our churches, colleges, seminaries, and homes as the only way to do it.”¹¹ They describe the church as the “family of families” to explain the complementary relationship between the church and family, that is, the church should acknowledge the authority and jurisdiction of families within the church.

So what do family-integrated churches look like?¹² First and foremost, they worship together. Virtually all services and activities are intergenerational. Second, there is conversely an absence of age-segregated ministries. Baucham summarizes, “The family-integrated church movement is easily distinguishable in its insistence on integration as an ecclesiological principle. . . . There is no systematic age segregation in the family-integrated church!”¹³ Third, “the family is the evangelism and discipleship arm of the family-integrated church.”¹⁴ Advocates in the FICM lay the responsibility of making disciples on the shoulders of parents, and primarily fathers, based upon the Bible’s clear teaching on childrearing (Deut. 6:1–9; Eph. 6:1–4). Fathers are expected to lead their families in worship and catechism.¹⁵ As a result, church takes a secondary role in the discipleship process, primarily training and equipping fathers and mothers to do the work of the ministry. Intergenerational teaching (when the older teach the younger, e.g., Titus 2:3, 4) takes place not through church programs but rather through informal relationships. Families are expected to reach their own children with the gospel and reach the lost outside the church through simple obedience to the Great Commission and hospitality.¹⁶ Fourth, family-integrated churches place an emphasis on education as a key component of discipleship. This involves not only family catechism but also homeschooling for most.

Other common characteristics in family-integrated churches include an emphasis on strong marriages, male headship and Biblical patriarchy, elder rule ecclesiology, courting, and the “quiverfull” approach to family planning. While it would be wrong to see the FICM as monolithic, the majority of leaders fall into either the Presbyterian/Reformed or Baptist wings of the Reformed tradition. Most see themselves as carrying the baton of the Puritans in matters related to the family and church.

Evaluating the FICM

How should we evaluate the FICM? We find several areas of agreement. First, those in the FICM have a high view of Scripture and correctly see it as the sole authority for doctrine and practice in the church. Second, they place a high value on expository preaching. Third, proponents should also be commended for staying in the church. Their ecclesiology reflects the New Testament more closely than

other family movements such as cell churches and home churches who have virtually abandoned any semblance of ecclesiology. Fourth, those concerned with worldliness in the church will find an affinity with FIC authors.

Finally, I also believe they are essentially correct in identifying the breakdown of the family as the fundamental problem in why youth are deserting the church. Those who work with youth need to acknowledge that parents have the greatest spiritual impact.¹⁷ So the FICM's emphasis on parental responsibility in the spiritual training of their own children is welcome and needed. I have personally benefited from some of their writings on family worship.¹⁸

We find, however, several areas of disagreement with the FICM.¹⁹ The seminal problem with the FICM is the point upon which they are most insistent: absolutely no age-segregated ministries. This conviction is wrong for a number of reasons. First, it is wrong hermeneutically. FIC advocates protest vigorously that since there are no explicit Biblical directives or examples for age-segregated programs, they are unbiblical. But this kind of hermeneutical approach is flawed. Using this reasoning, things like church buildings, pews, musical instruments, and technological advancements, along with church officers such as clerks and treasurers, would have to be deemed unbiblical as well. FIC adherents press the Regulative Principle too far. This Reformation principle is intended to regulate corporate worship at Sunday services, not the outworking of the Great Commission in other activities.²⁰

Second, it is wrong theologically. The mandate to "make disciples" is given to the church (Matt. 28:19, 20). This mandate is to reach all people, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, age, or family status. The church is not required to reach individuals through their families. Although this normally may be the case, it certainly is not mandated. In fact, Jesus announced that He came to bring division to families, which is often the practical effect of the gospel (Matt. 10:34-36; Luke 12:51-53). Technically, churches are not comprised of families; they are comprised of believing individuals (at least in Baptist polity). In this sense, the church's authority to disciple individuals both includes families and transcends families.²¹

Further, in Ephesians 4:7-16, we see a Biblical rationale for teaching ministries in the church. Paul wrote that God gifted the church with leaders, such as pastors and teachers, to equip the saints to accomplish the work of the ministry (4:11, 12). This work is essentially discipleship, and the heart of discipleship is teaching. So pastors are to train and equip the saints to teach.

This is a principled, Biblical argument for qualified men and women to teach the body of Christ. Christian education programs are simply venues to accomplish Biblical discipleship.

Third, insistence on family integration is wrong practically. In my opinion, the leaders of the FICM have failed to prove that age-segregated ministries are the cause of the problem. Instead, the family integration philosophy has actually generated divisions in traditional (nonintegrated) churches rather

than unity. Families involved in the FICM tend to make their convictions a test of fellowship, choosing to disassociate with believers in their own church who do not share FIC values. Both Scott and Baucham acknowledge this unfortunate phenomenon in their writings and sermons. In addition, the emphasis on family discipleship with the FIC has the potential for alienating or neglecting those outside of nuclear families (e.g., singles and broken families).²²

In conclusion, the emphasis in the FICM on parental responsibility is welcome and needed. However, instead of uniting the church and home, the FIC philosophy often leads to division in the church.

Works Cited

1. The NCFIC website (ncfic.org) has numerous articles and resources that articulate the vision for family-integrated churches. Particularly noteworthy is the NCFIC Confession and the documentary *Divided, The Movie*.
2. Vision Forum Ministries (visionforumministries.org) provides resources on many issues related to the family, such as home education, civil and legal issues, as well as a family integration. Especially informative for the FICM is its statement on Biblical Patriarchy.
3. Baucham is probably the most mainstream spokesman for the FICM. In addition to his books, his church website and blog have a wealth of information about the FICM (gracefamilybaptist.net).
4. Wallace promotes more of a mediating position between what he calls the Traditional Ministry (with multiple programs) and the Over-Corrective Designs (where the church focuses on nuclear families alone). He calls it the Household Relationship Design.
5. J. Mark Fox, *Family-Integrated Church: Healthy Families, Healthy Church* (USA: Xulon Press, 2006), 43, 44.
6. The majority within the FICM would also advocate that the relationship between the family and state is askew as well. Most are strong advocates for home schooling and believe the state has no right to educate youth.
7. Ken Ham and Britt Beemer, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009), 19–36; Scott T. Brown, *A Weed in the Church: How a Culture of Age Segregation is Destroying the Younger Generation, Fragmenting the Family, and Dividing the Church* (Wake Forest: National Center for Family Integrated Churches, 2010), 37, 38.
8. Voddie Baucham Jr., *Family Driven Faith: Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 176, 184.
9. Brown, *A Weed in the Church*, 37.
10. Brown, *A Weed in the Church*, 71–130. See also Baucham, *Family Driven Faith*, 176–85.
11. Baucham, *Family Driven Faith*, 197, 204.
12. Baucham, *Family Driven Faith*, 195–203; Brown, *A Weed in the Church*, 141–94.
13. Baucham, *Family Driven Faith*, 196, 97.
14. Baucham, *Family Driven Faith*, 197.
15. This is developed in Baucham’s newest book, *Family Shepherds: Calling and Equipping Men to Lead Their Homes* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).
16. See Paul Renfro’s contributions int. P. Jones, ed., *Perspectives on Family Ministry: Three Views* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2009).
17. Brown, *A Weed in the Church*, 215–19.
18. I made this same argument in my January 2000 Faith Pulpit article, “Family-Based Youth Ministry” (faith.edu/resources/publications/faith-pulpit).
19. Their views on patriarchy, however, are a distortion of Biblical complementarianism.
20. For critical reviews of the FICM see A. J. Köstenberger and D. W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*. 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 260–67; J. Webb, “The Family-Integrated Church Movement: An Exploration in Ecclesiology” (MAR Thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2009).
21. See Terry Johnson, “What Does the Regulative Principle Require of Church Members” 9Marks eJournal 8, no. 3 (May/June 2011)” 32–34, <http://www.9marks.org/files/ejournal201183mayjun/pdf> (accessed February 21, 2010). Ironically, Scott Brown quotes Mark Dever’s definition of the Regulative Principle in making his point about age-segregated programs (*A Weed in the Church*, 83), yet Dever’s 9Marks E-Journal for Jan/Feb 2012 is dedicated to the subject of the Sunday School (9marks.org/ejournal/dont-be-too-cool-sunday-school, accessed February 13, 2012). Here’s the point: not everyone who subscribes to the Regulative Principle would agree with Brown’s application of it to age-segregation.
22. See also Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 259.

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