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Understanding the Gift, Being the Gift

By Rev. Elisha Satvinder, Hon. Secretary, NECF

Christmas is celebrated by millions of people around the world. This is the time of the year where we make the effort to love and appreciate others. A spirit of generosity fills the air and many people are more responsive to emotional appeals.

Christmas can also be a time of over-consumption of food and drink, and unnecessary stress and expenses in buying gifts. But nice presents and lavish dinners, beautiful music and liturgies, good feelings and gatherings do not make Christmas.

The contrast between luxurious festivities of the season and the ongoing harsh realities of life can make Christmas a difficult time for those who have lost loved ones, individuals who are struggling with unfulfilled dreams, lost jobs, financial desperation and more. Many others are experiencing fear, loneliness and depression.

How then do we celebrate Christmas?

The message of Christmas speaks to and touches everyone, no matter the journey. Christmas is God's greatest gift to mankind in the person of Jesus Christ. Into our broken world a child is born who is called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. In Jesus, we have God with us, Immanuel.

God's gift, Jesus, came to us because He so desires to be with us at all times and in all places, in all of life's ups and downs. He came to be with us, to listen to us, to love us and heal us. He came to deal with our problem of sin so that we can receive His forgiveness, restoration and experience the freeing power of His truth and mercy. Christmas is God's gift of salvation to all who will receive Jesus. Through Jesus, we can be comforted and assured in life's journey without having to feel lost or lonely in our struggles.

“Do I have room in my heart for Jesus? Who is the king of my heart – me or Jesus? Will I order my life in such a way as to pursue what Jesus really wants: acting justly and rightly toward others, showing others kindness, and being humble and obedient to Him?”



Christmas offers us a firm, unshakeable hope amidst the uncertainties of life. It is a hope that also transcends our emotions and feelings because it is based entirely on God's initiative. Indeed, salvation is the greatest of God's gifts. It is all His work, not ours, and it is for everyone.

As overwhelming is God's gift, so too should be our response. What can we give Jesus on His birthday in order to show our gratitude to Him? What would He appreciate? In fact, what do we give someone who not only has everything, but who made everything?

God has expressed His desired gift in Micah 6:8:

**“He has told you, O man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?” (NASB)**

The prophet Micah was speaking to a nation whose circumstances are eerily similar to ours today. Materialism was rife. Religious leaders were corrupt. The rich ruthlessly crushed the poor. The government was focused on self-interest. Moral chaos and exploitation were widespread. Israel had neglected justice and kindness toward the poor and oppressed; they were driven by pride and selfish desires.

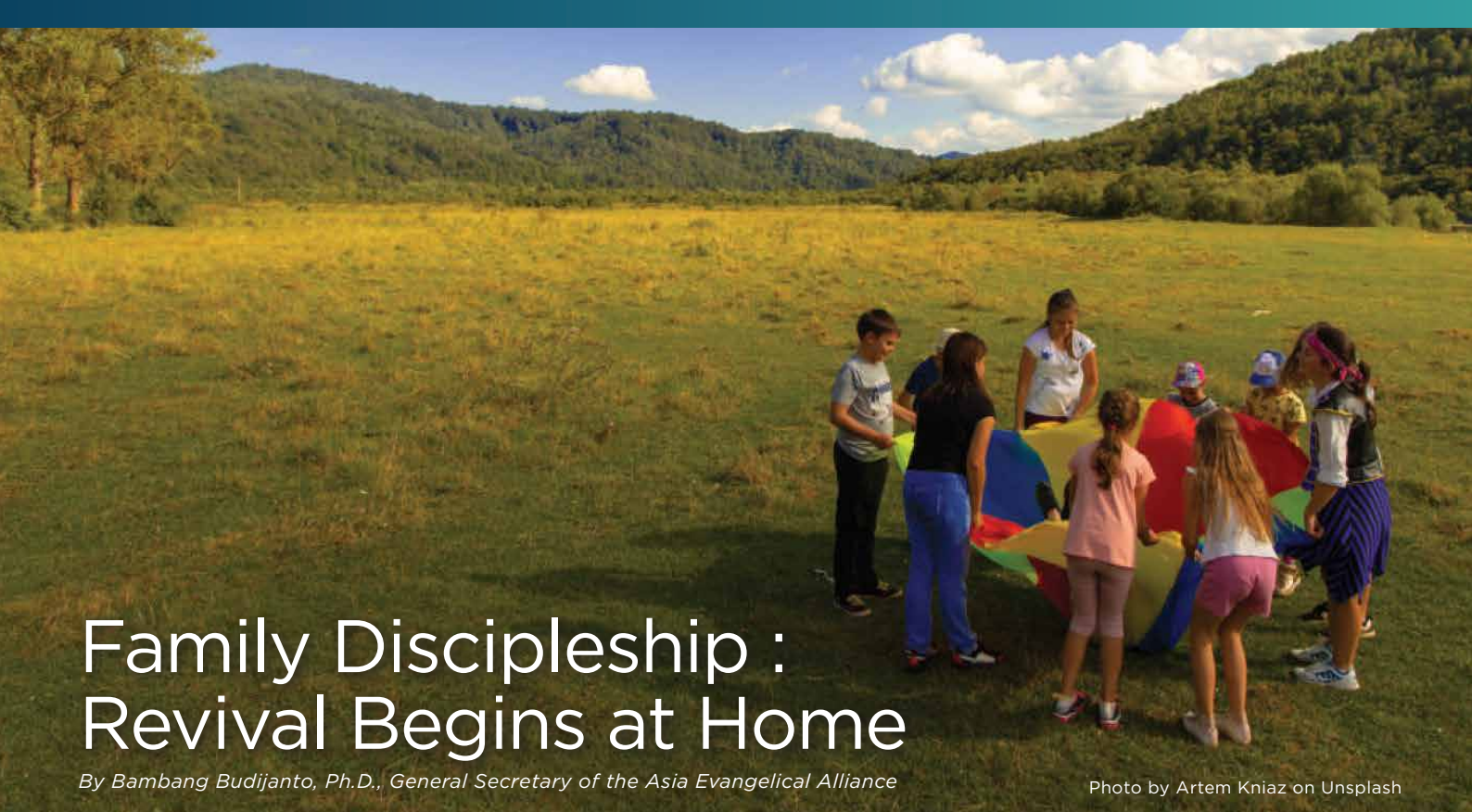
In God's gift to us at Christmas we find a remarkable truth – What God requires of His people, He first gives to us: Jesus came to establish justice; He came to show us mercy; He came to lift up the humble! Jesus gave us an example that we should follow in His steps. In Jesus, God has shown us what He wants: Justice – doing what is right and just to others. Mercy – showing unmerited kindness to others. Humility – living humbly before Him in obedience.

Rightly understood, the three words Justice, Mercy and Humility give us the sum total of our Christian duty. Nothing else makes much difference. Too often we are focused on being right rather than doing right. Too often we are focused on external Christian culture and behaviour instead of the more important matters of God's law: justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23).

Outward religion is useless unless the heart belongs to God. God wants the real you – the person on the inside. You can fake religious activity. You can go through the motions of celebrating Christmas at church, give presents to people and donate to charities. But the heart doesn't lie. The heart knows its true master and its coveted desires.

In Luke 2:7, we see a vivid scene. Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there is no room for Him, Mary and Joseph in the inn. A manger is no place fit for a King. We are thus confronted with the questions: Do I have room in my heart for Jesus? Who is the king of my heart – me or Jesus? Will I order my life in such a way as to pursue what Jesus really wants: acting justly and rightly toward others, showing others kindness, and being humble and obedient to Him?

This Christmas, what will you give Jesus? Jesus is knocking at the door of your heart and asking if you will give Him the greatest gift you can give – the gift of all your heart.



Family Discipleship : Revival Begins at Home

By Bambang Budijanto, Ph.D., General Secretary of the Asia Evangelical Alliance

Photo by Artem Kniaz on Unsplash

1. Introduction

The Bible teaches that disciple making begins at home, but how many Christian families are actually doing it? How many churches have emphasized this function? And how well are we doing it? The quality of family discipleship became a crucial issue during the COVID-19 pandemic. People couldn't attend church, so there was no Sunday school for children. Thus, the spiritual nurture of young people depended solely on their parents. COVID-19 has opened the eyes of many pastors to their church members' often inadequate efforts to disciple their own children in the faith. Recent data collected by Indonesia's Bilangan Research Center are sobering, exposing a need for the church to become more intentional in equipping parents to make disciple at home. Let's look at some Bible passages that reveal to us what God expects of Christian parents.

2. The Birth of the New Nation

After some 400 years in Egypt, where the people of Israel grew from 70 people to around 2 million, and after witnessing God's hand in bringing the ten plagues upon Egypt, the Israelites were ready to declare themselves a new and independent nation. Once the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea, they were free (Exodus 14). Soon after that, in Exodus 18, Moses set up the judicial system, and starting in chapter 20 God declared the law for this new nation.

As Moses was preparing for the Israelites' departure from Egypt, just after the tenth and final plague, he delivered a very important speech. His key message was that the way to sustain their freedom and God's blessings upon them was through family education. The perpetuation and fullness of God's blessings depended on instruction at home, where parents were to educate their children on God's acts in history (Ex. 13:8, 14; see also Ex. 12:26-27). Forty years later, in his farewell speech, Moses reminded his people that in contrast to other nations around them, the design of the nation of Israel was structured around family education (Deut.

6:7-9). A short time later, as Joshua led the people to claim the promised land, he reemphasized this unique design of family education (Josh. 4:6, 21-22).

3. The Birth of the New Season

Toward the end of Old Testament times, as people waited desperately for a national restoration, a spiritual and political revival, and the coming of the Messiah, they looked to the temple and the priests with huge expectations. In response, God told them that revival would begin from home, as "He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents" (Mal. 4:6)

On the day of Pentecost, when the church was born, Peter declared the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28) about the coming of the Day of the Lord, the day of restoration. This prophecy seems to have been addressed to every household head in Israel, so that they could see and recognize the coming spiritual revival by observing how different members of the household contributed to the Kingdom of God—their younger children, teenagers, parents, and even slaves. Revival would begin when "your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).



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4. The Birth of the Church's New Landscape

An inaccurate reading of the Great Commission has placed significantly greater emphasis on discipleship in the mission field, marketplace and public sphere at the expense of family discipleship. The emphasis on the phrase “therefore go,” instead of “as you are going” or “wherever you are going” (present participle), has unintentionally reduced the church’s focus on disciple making at home.

Additionally, family discipleship has been further weakened by the tendency to view Sunday School (or children’s church) as the primary venue for the spiritual nourishment of children. Although it’s certainly true that in many parts of the world, Sunday School or children’s church has contributed significantly toward bringing children to Christ, it cannot and must not replace the disciple-making process that should occur at home.

COVID-19 has introduced a new landscape for the church. One of the most important church assets during lockdowns is family discipleship. Due to the spread of the virus, during the past 18 months churches in many parts of the world have not been able to worship together in their church building or elsewhere. They could conduct worship only online. Those churches who had a strong emphasis on family discipleship before the pandemic have grown stronger during the pandemic. On the other hand, those churches that did not focus on equipping family units to worship together and implement disciple making at home have grown weaker.

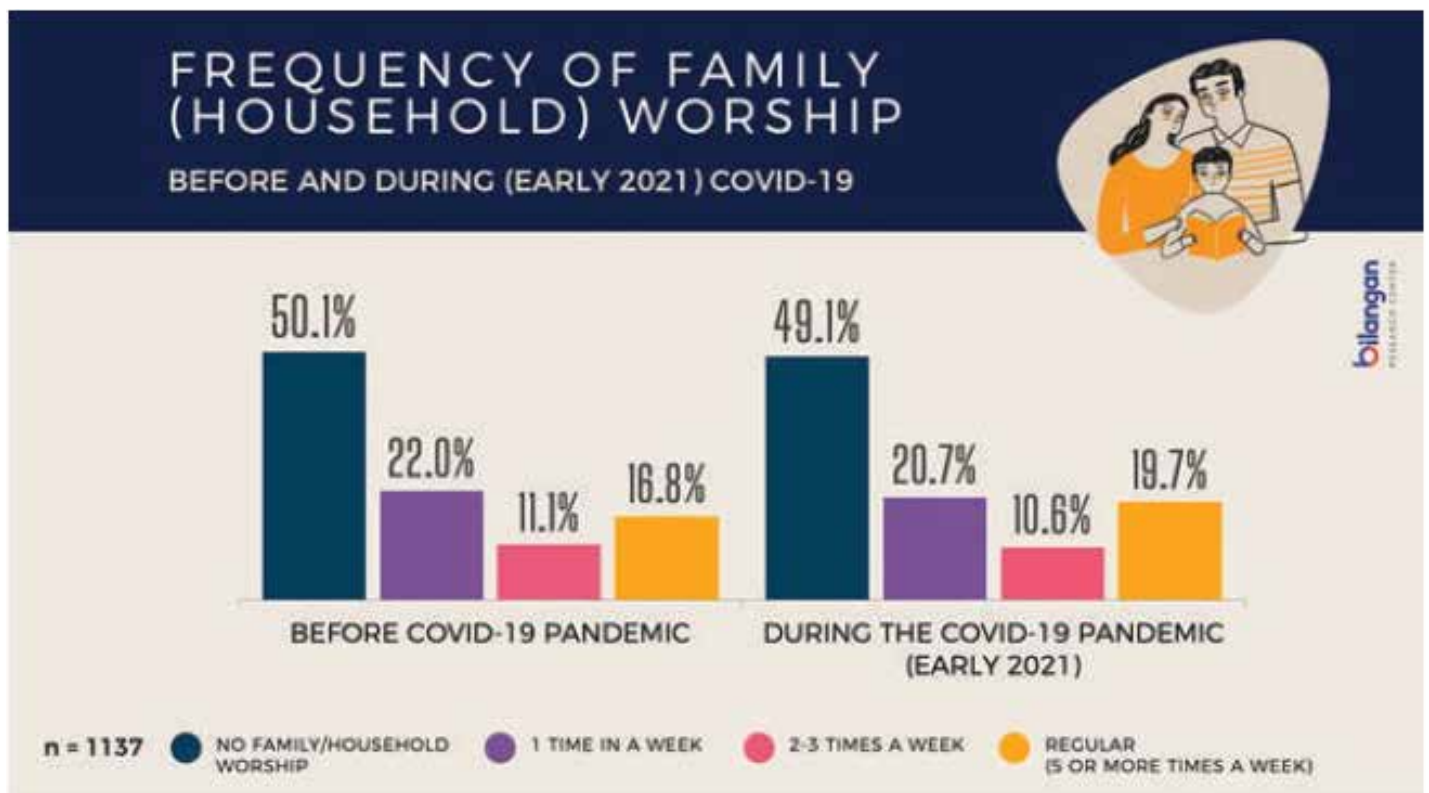
A recent (March 2021) national survey conducted by the Bilangan Research Center found that fewer than 20 percent of Christians were maintaining regular family or household worship. This figure marked only a slight increase relative to the period before the pandemic. We can deduce that the percentage of Indonesian Christians conducting family discipleship (i.e., disciple making at home, not just worshipping together at home) is even lower.



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After 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which in-person church gatherings have been replaced by online services, many pastors have been concerned about the spiritual well-being of their congregations. How many of their church members would continue in their faith, let alone grow spiritually, without regular on-site services and Sunday schools? The COVID-19 experience, though painful, has opened the eyes of many pastors as to where we are in terms of family discipleship.

Many churches have been focusing their energy either on preparing for a return to on-site worship post-COVID or on strengthening their online (digital) services. The data from Indonesia suggest that too few have committed themselves to equipping and strengthening the capacity of parents to disciple their children at home and to lead family (household) worship effectively.



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One of the highlights organized by NECF Tamil Commission for year 2021 was **WOMEN OF DESTINY**. Despite the lockdown, the 7 days Conference was held via zoom from Sept. 20-26, 2021 with the theme **"You are God's Masterpiece."**

They had 7 women speakers for the conference who shared each night on the topic assigned.

SPEAKER	TOPIC
Ps Santana Arnold	Unique
Rev. Monica Patrick	Be Strong
Ps Grace Mary	Prayer
Pr Tina Velangani	Wisdom
Rev. Geetha Rajagopal	Don't Give Up
Rev. Subashini Achari	Peace
Ps Pramila Jeyaraj	Builder

Women across the country watched pre-recorded worship, sermons, and prayers on YouTube. Many women who were blessed expressed their gratitude with a flood of pleasant comments. The number of viewers in YouTube was beyond our expectation and a surprise even to the organizers.

In summary, these were the feedback comments.

1. The flow of the messages in relation to the theme was remarkable and a blessing to the Tamil Church
2. There was a deep appreciation for every God's Masterpiece, the women who worked tirelessly behind the scene and who supported to build the church.
3. It was a revelation of the Lord's gifting upon these women who shared the word and the dedicated lives they led.

The efforts of the Tamil Churches also brought encouragement to the other language groups, that women do have an important role to serve and bless the church through nation building. We pray and hope that others will also emulate a similar program.



MERRY CHRISTMAS

NECF Coucil & Staff
Wish All Readers
A Blessed Christmas &
A Fruitful New Year

