Randy Frazee:

You're listening to the Bible Roots Podcast with Pastor Randy Frazee. If you're a church leader looking for creative ideas to help your church engage more deeply with the Bible, this podcast is for you. And now for today's episode.

Randy Frazee:

Well, welcome everybody to episode eight of the Bible Roots Podcast. I am Randy Frazee, and I'm the host of this wonderful new show. This is a podcast devoted to the topic of Bible engagement. Why? Because Bible engagement is the number one catalyst for spiritual growth with no close second. I encourage you to check out episode one where we lay out this discovery, and I want to encourage you if you are a pastor responsible for leading people spiritually or a small group leader, or you're just a mom or a dad leading your kids in discipleship or one-on-one coaching, this podcast is for you. Now, today my guest, I'm so excited, is Matt Markins, and we're going to dive into the topic of engaging children in the Bible. And I think you'll agree with me, this may be the most important conversation of all, particularly in light of what's going on in our culture. Man, way different from when I was a pastor in the younger years of the challenge that parents have, the challenge that pastors have and small group leaders in really winning our children over for Jesus.

Randy Frazee:

Matt is uniquely qualified to speak to this important topic. And let me tell you why, because Matt is the president and CEO of Awana. Now, if you have been around ministry for any length of time, you probably know what Awana is mostly all about. I certainly do in my experience, and I'll tell that a little bit later. But if you're newer to the scene, you may not. And Matt is going to tell you that story, and it is totally legit and they have had massive impact all over the world. Mark is married to Katie. They have two sons, Warren and Hudson, and they reside in Nashville, Tennessee. Matt says he enjoys family time, traveling, carpentry, yard work, biking and the NFL. I got that right from the website, Matt, so I hope that's still true. Matt, welcome to the podcast.

Matt Markins:

It's so good to be with you.

Randy Frazee:

Let's start off with completely off topic to engaging children with the Bible to some of the things you're into. First of all, if you're into the NFL then you have a team, so I'm going to take a big guess on who your team is, but let me just let you reveal it to everybody.

Matt Markins:

Well, I'm a Tennessee Titans fan. By the way, they were the winners of the AFC South this past year, and I think it's going to be another great year. We started following the Titans right when they moved to Nashville, and of course they went to the Super Bowl that first year they were in Nashville, and that's all it took.

Randy Frazee:

It's pretty exciting. Well, I grew up a Cowboys fan, even though I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, but I spent 32 years of my life in Texas, but it has been very easy to shift to the Kansas City Chiefs.

Matt Markins:

Oh, I bet it has.

Randy Frazee:

Okay. Hey, let's talk about carpentry. What's that all about?

Matt Markins:

Well, I grew up in the cornfields of Indiana, and the culture in Indiana, it's sports driven. It's a little more of a bland, plain culture, certainly not what I would call an artistic culture. And I played sports as a child and as a student, but I didn't discover that I was an artist until I was in my 30s. And one of the ways that I applied that is through carpentry. So I married into a building family. My wife's grandfather was in construction and her father was a contractor and a builder, and he taught me how to build and do carpentry.

Matt Markins:

And so when we were in our upper 20s, we did something crazy and we actually general contracted the building of our own home here in Nashville, back when you could do those sorts of things, and I just fell in love with building. And it's such a way to express what you see in your vision inside of you. And we went to college in a beautiful neighborhood with lots of beautiful architecture. And so as a builder, you get to express maybe what you've seen or what you would like to would to see, so it's a lot of fun.

Randy Frazee:

I bring it out because I can't make two 45 degree ankles come together. And I watch HGTV with Ben from Home Town, and I'm just absolutely amazed at the level of carpentry. So that is awesome, man and your even more like Jesus than me because you took up his occupation.

Matt Markins:

Well, love covers a multitude of sins according to the scriptures, and in carpentry, sandpaper and chalk can cover a multitude of sins.

Randy Frazee:

I bet you you've used that analogy occasionally.

Matt Markins:

Oh, quite a few times. Yeah.

Randy Frazee:

Hey, listen, let's shift to your personal faith journey, your faith journey, and then you can go ahead and tell us how it led you to where you're at today.

Matt Markins:

Well, one of the most powerful days of my life was the day that my dad walked out of the house. So I would've been probably three or four, my brother, five years older than me. And so for whatever reason, my parents left the door open while they're having an argument, and my dad's marching back and forth out of the hall from the master bedroom, carrying out boxes and clothes draped over his arms. And while there's all the disruption of this day happening, my brother, I don't know if you remember the Disney Golden Books that have the golden spine, he put one of those in front of my face and he's trying to distract me from what's happening just outside the room. And so that's really the beginning of my story. And so not long after that, as you can imagine, my mom finds her way to the local church. Her heart was really open and ready for something better.

Matt Markins:

And so I was introduced to Jesus at a very young age. I still remember the moment I heard the gospel for the first time, there were only two children in the room and two adults, so if you've ever volunteered in children's ministry and only a couple of kids show up, don't look down on that, you never know what the Holy Spirit's doing. And so I grew up going to church back in the 80s when flannelgraph was how kids learned the Bible, and then went to youth group in the 90s and the church discipled me. There was a pastor and the pastor's wife and a deacon, and where I thought my name was divorced child support and custody, the local church taught me my name was mercy, encouragement and leadership, and the church mentored me and discipled me. So by the time I was a student graduating high school, my eyes were looking down the field and I was asking, "God, what these people did for me, how can I do for other kids?" And that's really how God launched me out from this early trauma into discipleship and out into the world.

Randy Frazee:

That is a fascinating story. I didn't fully know your story, Matt. And just now knowing how God's using you, that real encouragement to that Sunday morning volunteer, like you said, who has one kid, and you never know, Matt Markins might be in your class, who's going to lead a global organization discipling kids and families, which is pretty amazing. How did you get from that space to Awana?

Matt Markins:

Well, so I went to a small bible college in Nashville, and after school, my wife and I were really trying to discover what God had for us, and ultimately I found myself in the publishing space. You know, Randy, that Nashville's a publishing town, lots of Christian publishers here. So I found myself into that creative space, but specifically within the children's ministry lane and helping churches get curriculum and training to do children's ministry. So early on, my wife and I, as volunteers and professionally doing this, we were asking the question, well, what exactly is it the local church does that leads to lasting faith in children?

Matt Markins:

And really that one question has been our life pursuit, what is it the church does that leads to lasting faith in kids? And in that journey, ultimately we discovered Awana, our local church brought Awana in and somewhere along that journey you can't be involved in this space professionally without running into the organization Awana, so we had both this personal experience with Awana and we were partnering with the organization through other events and trainings and stuff we were doing in conferences. And so ultimately that led us to a place of maybe God's leading us to this ministry to be a part of what he's doing around the world with kids.

Randy Frazee:

Wow, that is amazing. Why don't we shift gears? Well, not shift gears, but let's talk about what Awana is. I'm going to read it off of the website what it says it is and then you can add some stuff to it because it's just so fascinating. Awana is a worldwide non-profit ministry focused on providing Bible based evangelism and discipleship solution for ages two to 18. As a global leader in child and youth discipleship, Awana gives children the opportunity to know, love and serve Jesus no matter their background. That's right off your website, so is that accurate and what would you add to what Awana is to you?

Matt Markins:

In the most simplistic form, Awana is about child discipleship. And we do that through two primary ways, we equip leaders and we resource churches and parents. And so if there's a church or a parent anywhere around the world, no matter the culture, so if you are in, let's say, the Middle East, an area that's known for more Islam, or if you're in the West and you're in this post-Christian environment, no matter where you are around the world, if you lift up your eyes and you say, "Boy, I really want to reach kids with the gospel and I want to disciple them, who can help me?" That's where Awana comes into the picture. We've discipled children with the local church and parents, and we do that through resourcing and through equipping.

Randy Frazee:

Wow, that is phenomenal. What is the name Awana, what does it actually mean?

Matt Markins:

Well, back in the day, it was founded as an acronym. We no longer use that acronym because it's a good story, but it's not necessarily the most succinct story, Approved Workman Are Not Ashamed. Of course, that's coming from the scriptures and so that obviously in the culture at that part of 1950s history, that was super important to frame the organization that way. We certainly still believe in that, we stand on that, but leading with the message of child discipleship is a little more clear and distinct, especially in this day and age.

Randy Frazee:

I became a believer in 1974 and the church was using the King James, and so I memorized the scripture and you approved workman, so that makes complete sense. Let's talk about the impact of Awana since 1950. I was born in 61, I'm assuming you weren't alive in 1950, and so you've got to be coming into the stream of this thing. Let's talk about this, and don't be afraid to just share some of the most amazing things that God has done through Awana over the years.

Matt Markins:

Sure. Well, up through 2007, by the time you hit 2007, Awana was reaching about 1.5 million children in somewhere south of 100 countries I believe at that point in time. Mostly our growth from our beginnings of the 1950s through that point, the early 2000s, we were mostly exporting our Western US methodologies of doing ministry, and that was built on products and resources and curriculum and t-shirts. As you can imagine, that only scales so far in so many countries around the world because of the economics. But in 2007, our organization was asking, "How could we reach kids differently in environments that don't have the resources that we have?" So that's when we shifted our international model to what's called LBS or leader based strategy, where we lead with the vision of four, 14, the vision that most people come to Christ between the ages of four and 14.

Matt Markins:

And then we follow that up with a training cycle where we train a church on how to do large group engagement, small group discipleship, and interactive ways to engage children. So we started that model in 2007, and it's just grown exponentially. Matter of fact, in about two months, we will pass the five million child mark. When we say five million children, we don't mean a literature distribution engagement, we mean a child who's a member of an active ministry where they have loving, caring adults investing in them. It's been pretty phenomenal to see it grow from where it was to five million children. Now, 66,000 churches, 133 countries around the world.

Randy Frazee:

That is just spellbounding. And what a great pivot, we're going to talk about COVID a little bit, but a great pivot to say how do we change our model to reach people side of the scope of who we have been reaching? And I just think of everybody listening or watching, how important it is to be mentored by an organization like yours that goes, "Hey, we're doing pretty good, 100 countries." But to see this pivot, and it added a lot of complexity, I'm sure, to the organization, but in some ways it simplified everything, right?

Matt Markins:

Yeah. What happened in that time period, so if you could fast forward from 2007 to the last few years, Awana, about five years ago, began asking, hey, what we discovered internationally in developing nations, what can we learn from that here in the West? So international ministry has actually really shaped our [inaudible 00:13:57]

Randy Frazee:

It came full circle.

Matt Markins:

It really did. We've gone through significant innovation. So if you're familiar with the Awana ministry in the US, that program that you can imagine or you can remember, Awana Clubs, it's still happening in the US but we've built a whole ecosystem of innovation around that and it's all been releasing over the last 24 months and there's a lot we could talk about there.

Randy Frazee:

Give us a couple of the things that have shifted from when I was first introduced to Awana. When I was a kid, I came to Christ, went to church at the age of 14, grew up in an unchurched home. The church that I was at in Cleveland, Ohio did Christian Service brigade. That's where I started memorizing scripture and all of that. But when I became a pastor of the first church in Arlington, Texas, it has a thriving Awana program, amazing. And a matter of fact, the church I came into was in decline, but the Awana program was the only thing growing, because it was reaching kids in the community. And I went to our Awana volunteer and basically said, "All right, what are you guys doing that we can bring to Sunday morning to help the overall church grow?" And we dissected some of the secrets then. What you're saying is from that 1989 encounter with Awana for me, you guys have made some substantial shifts and changes.

Matt Markins:

I'm sure pastors today are asking themselves what is it that we actually do that leads to lasting faith in our congregation, what actually builds disciples? And so when I had my first encounter with Awana around 2010, and then joined the organization in 2013, I was asking what makes Awana successful? Where we have fruit, where we see fruit, why is that? And so one thing that I respect about Awana is we do self-reflection, we do impact studies. Is it working? So if your church is doing children's ministry and the materials you're using do not have research to back it up, I would ask questions about that. I've been with Awana for almost a decade and we're now doing our eighth research project on children's ministry and on the value of what we do and bring. So I think what we started doing about a decade ago when we started the next innovation curve, we were asking what is it that Awana does that is fruitful and effective?

Matt Markins:

And it really came down to three areas, we call the three areas belong, believe, become. Belong is highly relational, believe is deeply scriptural, and become is truly experiential. Christian Smith's research says that there are three areas that when they're all three present in a child and a student are far more likely to lead to lasting faith, if they're all three present. He calls those three areas relationships, scripture engagement slash prayer, and experiences. We call those same three areas belong, believe, become. We've seen that in our research, we've seen it in Lifeways in Barna's, Christian Smith, Fuller Youth Institute, and we've packaged all of that in our book, Resilient. It's the leading selling children's book, it's called Resilient: Child Discipleship and the Fearless Future of the Church. So objectively, if you want to build a children's ministry that tends to lead to lasting faith, build your children's ministry around those three areas.

Randy Frazee:

So those three things need to be integrated to find a... Because I was going to ask you the question of what's the secret sauce of Awana? And I think you just described it, that is the secret sauce.

Matt Markins:

I think I may have got ahead of you.

Randy Frazee:

That's okay. No, no. You know what it reminds me as you were sharing that? It reminds me of the secret sauce of the first church. It sounds like an Acts two, there was a sense of belonging that they had, fellowship and the breaking of bread. There was the believing the apostles teaching and prayer. And then out of that, they began to meet the needs of each other and the people around them and the Lord added to their number daily. And the Holy Spirit was just arriving on the scene and energizing that whole process.

Matt Markins:

Well, you just named one of the whole categories, the layers of research. So how we arrived at those three B's, we studied the organization's history. We have a lot of letters. We get newsletters every week from all around the world, so we compiled those qualitative stories, we looked at the scriptures, how did Jesus make disciples in the Gospels and what do we see happening in the New Testament? And then thirdly, we did our own research. Like I said, we're in our eighth research project, plus we pulled in the research from Barna and all the others. So we put all of that together. Awana, I'm very proud of our organization for the amount of work we did just to distill it down to those three B's. So I think when we speak of this where it's not just a really slick marketing campaign, it's language that represents reality of what leads to lasting faith in children and adults.

Randy Frazee:

I really appreciate the tenacity and the courage to do genuine research to see what you're doing is having impact. One of the things that I saw that you guys are doing, and I don't know if it's related to the same type of research, is called a deeper faith study on adults who were in Awana as kids. I don't know if you've already been speaking to that, because I think the beauty of being around since 1950, I'm 61 years old and I was born in 1961, so 1950 you've got people there in their 60s and 70s who you can look and say, "Okay, what impact did Awana have or not have on them?" Can you speak a little bit to that specifically?

Matt Markins:

In recent decades, Awana's done two impact studies. We did one prior to my involvement in leadership at Awana in 2007. The second one was in 2020. And with this impact study there were 1100, you could call them alumni, they are people who had experience with Awana for one year or more, so it was a minimum of one year. Of those 1100 people who took the survey, they ranged from ages 18 to I think early 70s. So these were people from multi-generations we wanted to know from different generations. I think the biggest finding, if we're looking at outcomes, we talk a lot about the student dropout rate of church after high school.

Randy Frazee:

Yes. I want to talk about that.

Matt Markins:

I think the biggest distinction is that Awana alumni, 90 plus percent of them remain active in their faith as a result of being involved in the Awana ministry in addition to other things they're doing in their journey. So what it tells us is, as a pastor or a leader, if you want the congregation, a community of people who are remaining in their faith, Awana tends to help shape that and we feel pretty confident about that.

Randy Frazee:

Matt, this, in my estimation, in any pastor or children's pastor, family ministry leader, volunteer that works at... This is the most significant stat that we have and that is the vast majority of the kids coming up through our program and our youth program, they're just not sticking with their faith. And that's not something that just started happening. It's been happening for a very, very long time. And so everybody listening has to say, "Okay, I've got to bring resolution. I've got to bring something that improves that statistic."

Randy Frazee:

I've got a granddaughter right now, she's 13, she's in San Antonio, she just went to a youth camp and she's super excited, she's posting things on Instagram about her love for God, but I have this little bit of cynicism in me that says, "Oh, okay, you're excited about it now, but you're going to go off to college or wherever you're supposed to go." And I was even thinking about it this morning as we were thinking about this conversation and saying, "Why is it that these kids that seem to be so fired up about youth camps and things like that, why is it that they walk away?"

Matt Markins:

I would love to drill into that. Let's think of a metaphor here. We've heard of this metaphor, which was a real thing, the canary in the coal mine. Back in the day, our great grandfathers who worked doing a lot of manual labor and things like coal mining, the canary was in a cage and the canary was in this cage because if the fumes from the gases got so bad, that canary falls over and dies. So the canary in the coal mine for the church is the student dropout rate after high school. But the power in the canary in the coal mine metaphor is not the canary falling over, it's what led to the canary following over, which we would describe that as some toxic gases. If we could compare that to the church and say, "The canary falling over is the equivalent of students leaving the church," you have to ask what led to that. Let's point to a Barna stat that gets far too little conversation and it's the Barna stat that says 90 plus percent of all human beings have a worldview that's established by age 13.

Matt Markins:

Think about that. So if the toxic gases are what lead to the canary following over, what leads to the students leaving the church? So if we know that worldviews largely established in most human beings by age 13, we have to ask, "Well, what leads to forming them by the age 13?" So today's 13 year old is starting the youth group. Two years prior to that, they were finishing the children's ministry. Three years prior to that, they're eight years old. An eight year old's the heart of your children's ministry. So the church should be asking, a pastor should be asking what's going on in our children's ministry, what are we doing to form that eight year old that in five years is going to have a worldview that's largely established by age 13? So we think the church is putting far too little energy into what's actually leading up to age 13, that by the time they're graduating high school, that canary is not falling over, that canary is thriving. Going back to those three B's I think is really where the church should be putting that energy into.

Randy Frazee:

I think that what I would say with my granddaughter now at the age of 13, which is this critical age, and an, oh, my gosh, does she have that worldview established is she does have a sense of belonging right now, but what you're saying is if you don't have the other two components, particularly believing, which might speak to the worldview, that there's a good chance that all this excitement is going to really be very dangerous.

Matt Markins:

Well, let me encourage you, I don't see the three B's as being equally weighted. Now, please listen carefully. I'm probably not saying what maybe someone may think I'm saying, but I don't think they're equally weighted. Meaning, I do think the belonging is the most powerful in terms of time and investment. Meaning, if the believing portion is scripture engagement, it's not as if we're engaging the scriptures 18 hours a day. We know that's not true. But that belonging portion is the highly relational. That's the one that if we put a lot of weight and energy into that, it's through relationships ultimately that a person's heart is open to being mentored, to being shaped, to reading the Bible and studying the Bible. So the good news for the church is the more highly engaging we are, the more that we can lead people to being willing to open up the Bible, to hear from Jesus, and to spend time with God.

Randy Frazee:

So a lot of churches that are listening to this, they really spend a lot of energy, particularly in the student ministries, junior high, of just trying to create a sense of wanting them to comb a little bit of honey, to get attracted to the event, but when you have a vibrant sense of belonging, you've got to inject into this a real strong belief component. My son, at one of the churches I served at, a very, very successful church and you know which one I'm talking about, he came to me and said, "Dad, we got a lot of cool stuff going on, but when are we going to ever start talking about what we believe? And we just keep talking about sex and dating. And I think they think we want to keep talking about these topics that we're interested in, but the reality is we don't have a foundation by which to think it through." And here I am, I'm helping lead a church that really doesn't have that going on. Does that make sense?

Matt Markins:

Yeah, you're pointing out what we call the old map.

Randy Frazee:

Hi, this is Randy Frazee, host of the Bible Roots Podcast, which is brought to you by my friends at HarperChristian Resources. HarperChristian Resources equips you to understand the scriptures, cultivate spiritual growth and disciple your people with bible study resources from today's most trusted voices.

Matt Markins:

We call that the old map of children's ministry or the old map of youth ministry. We really built the old map around three cities and it's based on 1970s, 80s, and 90s assumptions. The three cities are entertainment, an outsized emphasis on relevance and moralism. Moralism meaning we're teaching perhaps a good value or a virtue or a behavior, but we're not necessarily teaching them a foundation of the gospel, the narrative from creation all the way through restoration, the robust framework that a child needs to compare here's what I'm being taught by the secular world, here's what the church is telling me reality of the gospel is and how I could live like Jesus. We have so much emphasis on entertainment, so much on moralism that the substance isn't there. And if that's what our children are getting in children's ministry and worldviews set by age 13, it's no wonder we're experiencing the outcomes that we are.

Randy Frazee:

I hope everyone writes those three things down because I'm telling you, you just nailed it. Those three things have been my experience of what we... And we're trying to attract students, we're trying to attract the kids, but the idea is you start with relevance and moralism and entertainment and you try to back into scripture as opposed to your conviction based on your research is start with the Bible engagement and then let the relevance and moralism flow out of that naturally.

Matt Markins:

I would say it slightly different, I would say start with the relationship in Bible engagement.

Randy Frazee:

There you go.

Matt Markins:

I think it's that relationship that so many people are starving for, especially young people how often do they have a loving, caring, adult looking eye to eye consistently with them where that student or that child knows that, let's say it's Nancy or Trevor, they genuinely love me. No matter what I tell them, I know they love me and care about me. And I think that's that safe foundation that every human needs.

Randy Frazee:

I just think this was worth the whole podcast all and of itself because if a small group leader or a church, any organization, even if you're another nonprofit like a Young Life or whatever, you've got to be asking yourself these questions and what specifically are you doing and how you're going to measure it. This is going to be the most pertinent thing for us to see a revitalization of Christianity, at least in the United States. Now, let's talk a little bit about the difference between kids in 1950 and kids today, children today and students in 2022. There's been a huge shift that's going on and do you have a way to talk about that? What's the shift and do anything differently or you just keep going at it?

Matt Markins:

Well, 100 years from now, they're going to look back and say 2007 was a significant year. That's the year the iPhone was put into the marketplace. And this is a little bit of a silly image, if you will, but imagine every one of us having a six inch pipe sticking out of our heart from our chest and we're looking to express our loves and to receive love, so we're looking for a place to connect that conduits too. And so every one of us has those loves and what's happening is if I'm not getting that pipeline filled with the love from loving, caring adults, from the church or from God, I'm going to go somewhere with that. And so the iPhone created a conduit or a interstate system that's supercharged with all kinds of stuff, including everything from super evil stuff to just an over overabundance of secularism and all kinds of noise, so the gospel and hearing from loving, caring adults is having to compete with all of that volume.

Matt Markins:

So I think the difference it's not that human beings have fundamentally changed, it's that the environment is so dramatically different. I think human beings have three primary needs, community, meaning and freedom. Meaning community, that's that belonging piece. Meaning, that would be that believing piece, we're looking for purpose, it's that idea of epistemology. And then that freedom piece meaning we all have free will that we want to express and we want to live it out. So I think it's looking at those areas of human need and development and saying, "How can the church today reverse engineer our ministries backwards from where are people at and how can we step into their lives?" That's why I think we keep going back to those three B's because that really answers those needs that we do have belonging and the church should be the most highly relational community and entity in any city, that's our distinct advantage, and so if we can step into that relationally and bring the good news of the gospel and discipleship.

Randy Frazee:

What's so really cool about that is if you try to react to everything the culture is throwing at our children and our families, you're just going to be in reaction mode until the days... But the alternative is no, develop a proactive strategy around these three B's and then that will offensively take care of all the things that are coming at, which is what I think you're saying. What about in COVID, you talked about this before we started the podcast, how one organization has been able to decentralize a little bit and COVID expedited that. The same thing is true I think with education.

Randy Frazee:

So, again, going back to my grandson who's seven and my granddaughter who is 13, this iPhone, mine's right by me, it could be sticking out of my heart just like you said, and when you used to go to Awana in the 1950s and 1960s, you'd come on a Wednesday night, you did that, and then COVID hit and you can't even go to a church and the reality is one hour a week isn't going to overcome the stuff that's coming at our kids this way. What has Awana done to respond to the iPhone, the season where COVID you couldn't get together and experience that belonging? What are some things that you've done to work with that?

Matt Markins:

If you could imagine an imaginary whiteboard in your brain and write three words starting from the top, the top word would be vision, the middle word would be skills, and the bottom were to be resources. Vision, skills, resources. The church spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to get resources into the hands of parents, but without the vision and the skills, the resources just simply don't get used. And so I talked about innovation earlier, we've spent the last five years building a new innovation ecosystem that helps bring vision and skills to the church and to parents. So what are we trying to do through that? We're trying to bring insight that leads to equipping, because with insight, the church and parents can go, "Aha, now I fully understand how the secular world is shaping my children, what post-Christian culture is doing to us and what we can do to minister and disciple children in today's world."

Matt Markins:

Then when we introduce resources, we've introduced those resources into a world where we understand how we would actually apply those. We have launched a gathering called the Child Discipleship Forum. And the Child Discipleship Forum, we're bringing together leaders like John Mark Comer, Rebecca McLaughlin, Andy Crouch, and a lot of others that are really helping us bring that message of disciple making to those who are most open to it and how the secular world is shaping our children and what we can do today to disciple. So at that top, vision, and that middle level of equipping and teaching skills, that's really one of the big innovations we brought is the Child Discipleship Forum.

Randy Frazee:

And we can link that in the show notes so people can access that. Well, a lot of things are sparking in my brain. I had the privilege of rewriting Renovation of the Heart for Dallas Willard and for students. So I had to take this very heavy book and it was really a wonderful assignment. I put my four kids, on my desk, pictures of them and rewrote it, and he talked about vision, intension and means, which sounds very similar to what you've just said. And what do we do in church leadership is we're always throwing resources at people or the means by which it... When they really don't have this vision to begin with and so this forum is helping parents really get the vision for what's going on so that they're not just... Because resources alone, we have vision as leaders and we have intention, so we just go ahead and throw them with the bottom self stuff and they don't have that.

Matt Markins:

You mentioned Willard, we really respect his work and he's really significantly impacted us. Of course, John Mark Comer being one of our lead speakers, a lot of his ministry is built around the work of Dallas Willard as well. So a lot of us share DNA in what you just shared there.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, that is really important. Let's talk a moment about what's happening with our kids today in that probably a lot of parents don't understand, I'm not even sure I fully understand it, but you think about the gender fluidity stuff and woke and altering history and just critical race theory and all of those kinds of things. I think most parents are just overwhelmed and don't really know what to do. Any thoughts on that that might encourage parents and church leaders?

Matt Markins:

Well, if you want me to speak to all those issues, you definitely have the wrong guests on the show. But I think what I would say is I think parents need a partner. And so we have introduced a new product that's called Talk About. Let me back up a half a step. Deuteronomy six is this epic, probably one of the most famous parenting passages in all of scripture where Moses shares the 10 commandments with the children of Israel and then he says, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And these words that I just gave you, I want them to be upon your hearts." And then he says, "Teach them to your children." And then he says these words, talk about. He says talk about them when you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down, when you get up. Now, I roughly paraphrased most of that, so please forgive me.

Matt Markins:

But that phrase talk about, so we built this whole product direct to parent called Talk About, because parents, going back to that belonging piece, if parents aren't talking to their children there's a sign that something's missing. So talk, you could use the term KPI or key performance indicator, talk or dialogue or conversation is a KPI that relationship is actually happening. So if parents are talking to their kids on a consistent regular basis and there's two way dialogue, that's probably a sign that there's a really healthy heart connection. And I think that's what that parent wants, because when your child is 25, 35, 40, you want to know I've got a long term relationship with my child and I can hopefully help influence them and shape them toward Jesus and His kingdom. We have this product called Talk About, you can go to talkaboutdiscipleship.com, and each week parents will get a two minute video that's coming right to their inbox, it's all digital software, or you can print it out as a PDF.

Matt Markins:

But the two minute video gives parents weekly coaching on how to be a disciple making parent. And the curriculum also comes with a weekly everything you need to have these faith conversations with your children to teach them how to engage the Bible. So that's what missing, let's go back to that vision, skills, and resources. Without that skill level in the middle, the resources are never going to be used. So Talk About is designed to give them the vision, the skills to actually implement week to week family discipleship.

Randy Frazee:

That's amazing. And we'll link that in the notes as well. What a great resource because the Deuteronomy passage that you quoted, six, talks about it has the first of all be on your heart so you can't pass on something you don't possess. And yet I find a lot of parents today weren't properly discipled, they didn't really have that and so they feel overwhelmed, or they came into it late in the game and they just feel like they're so far behind, they just to drop them off at church and just let them do the work, but what we're saying is it's really way more effective when this bond community that parents have with kids, there's just no... I always like to say, a B execution from parents is better than A execution from professionals because of the bond. Would you agree with that?

Matt Markins:

Absolutely.

Randy Frazee:

And I think also that for parents that are listening or for leaders who can talk to the parents, encourage them, you may feel delinquent in your own upbringing, you may be so far, but I find that what you've just offered is likely a just in time training. You go ahead and take a look at the resource and get trained just in time only minutes before you talk about it with your kids and let it be a dynamic. Would you agree?

Matt Markins:

I think so. I think if you're a parent and you're thinking to yourself, oh, I could never do that here. Here's what I would ask you to ask yourself a question, think of a time where your parent had a conversation with you that was meaningful and that meant so much to you or something your parents said to you and how powerful that was, if you can imagine how that has made you feel and how that has positively propelled you forward in your life, imagine not doing that with your child and the impact that that's going to have, so make an attempt, try your best and I think your kids over time, that's going to build a lifetime foundation for them.

Randy Frazee:

That is really, really incredible. I wrote down, because I went to the website and there's a digital home based thing called Brite. Is that a totally separate thing?

Matt Markins:

It's the same idea but for the church. Brite curriculum, Awana's known, as you mentioned earlier, more as a midweek experience for children. So Brite, B-R-I-T-E, so if you Google Brite Curriculum, Brite is our Sunday curriculum. Most churches don't realize Awana has a Sunday or a weekend digital curriculum. So if your church does large group, small group, or children's church and Sunday school, Brite is that digital curriculum for your church to help you make child disciples.

Randy Frazee:

Let's jump up to the 30,000 feet and, as we wrap up, talk about what are you most discouraged about, just about you've taken any direction you want to be and then what's the thing that's encouraging you the most?

Matt Markins:

I think what I'm most discouraged about is the rapid influence that this culture has in forming a child. You mentioned a lot of hot button topics just a moment ago, and when you and I were younger, those types of issues were more removed. Where now they're so close to the child, what's happening with the public school system, or you stop at a gas station to pump your gas and there's a screen 18 inches from your face pumping messages, screens are everywhere and kids cannot avoid them. And so today's pain points are right in the faces of our children and it's shaping them really rapidly. And that that's discouraging to all of us I think and we're all really frustrated on how to deal with that, but I think what encourages me the most are pastors like John Mark Comer, I mentioned his name earlier.

Matt Markins:

I think what encourages me is there's a group of pastors who are saying, "In our post-Christian age, the attractional model of church is not our future." They're saying the formation model of church is our future. And that might be a sensitive topic, but what I mean is we have to ask ourselves hard questions, in a highly secularized post-Christian world, is attractional going to produce the level of faith and resiliency that we need or is it a disciple making or a formation model? Is that our future? And I'm excited by the pastors who are moving in this direction, because I think it's what we see Jesus doing and I think it's what we see happening in the New Testament.

Randy Frazee:

And even though COVID has been devastating in so many regards, one of the things that's been beneficial is it's forced pastors to move away from the attractional because we couldn't get anybody to come. And so it's been so discouraging to look at your attendance numbers, when the market goes down, you have a tendency of not looking at your 401K statements or your bank statements because they went down, so you just don't even look at them. Well, a lot of pastors aren't looking at their attendance numbers because they're so discouraging, and there's a little bit of a climb that's going back up.

Randy Frazee:

So we were forced, rightfully so, to shift from attendance to engagement, or you're saying from attractional to formation, which I think is good. And what I'm hearing you say is that you are seeing a positive move. They're not resisting. They're like, "Okay, help me." So the vision is getting clear and so now the resources are now going to be much more pertinent to them. If they don't have the vision, the resources of Awana are just sitting there and you thinking you're kidding me, we've got these amazing resources, why aren't you guys running to this? And now the vision that's come out of crisis probably is really helping people to capture that.

Matt Markins:

I agree. If you're a pastor listening to this and you're thinking, I want a practical example, what's a church I could look at? I'm just picking a church that I am aware of. There's a church in Franklin, south of Nashville, called Church of the City pastored by Darren Whitehead. I'm just going to read a couple things off their website right now. Their vision says this, "Our vision is to see the fame and deeds of God renewed and known in our time." That's right from the scriptures. So notice how that vision had very little to do with me, me, me. That vision had to do with what we long to see God do in our midst in this world.

Matt Markins:

Because of that, their mission is practicing the way of Jesus. Meaning, we want to live like Jesus, we want to follow Him, we want to be His disciple. And then they have a list of ways that they do that. Practicing the presence of God, that sounds a lot like Dallas Willard, doesn't it?

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Matt Markins:

Practicing the ways of God, forming people as disciples, unity of the church, and flourishing in our city and living our mission. So that would be an example I think of moving toward a formation model. Meaning, the secular world is forming so rapidly, so what can we do as Christ advocates in this world? We can be formed by him as disciples.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, that's really good. Darren and I serve together at Willow Creek and so Darren, he's done such an amazing job and we are looking at some of similar kind of language. Language does matter, for sure. So that's encouraging, really encouraging. Discipleship has been a big passion of mine. I think you've known that. And I remember saying to somebody years ago, as I was in relationship with Dallas Willard and all, "I want to see in my lifetime the conversation change from attendance to formation." And it just didn't look like it was going to happen, but thank goodness from some of these external things like COVID, it's been really forced upon us in such a positive way.

Randy Frazee:

I like to ask all my guests this question. It's a fun question. If you could be king for the day, just whatever you said everyone had to do, they couldn't do anything, they couldn't talk back to you or anything at all, whatever you did today, what would you say to them in terms of what you would ask them to do? Maybe start with a pastor or family pastor or then go to parents, you know what? This is the one thing if you just would not talk back to me, you had to do it, you have to do it or you're going to be thrown into the dungeon, do you have any idea what you would say the number one thing would be?

Matt Markins:

I actually already said it, so which means I get two. The thing I would do is I would help the church move from attractional to formational. So because I've already covered that, now I'm going to go to number two. My second thing would be John 13:35 that Jesus said the church is going to be known by our love for one another. In this world of division... This morning in my personal Bible engagement time is John 17, which is Jesus' prayer for the disciples and the future church, boy, let's go back to that. So if I'm king for a day, I'm going to help the church to understand that what the world needs right now is for us to fulfill that John 13:35, we got to love each other. And if the world, which is so hungry for this, sees us loving each other, they're going to want to get closer to that. What is that? I want that. So I think that's what my day would be about.

Randy Frazee:

That would be awesome. I think you're absolutely right and I think that sometimes when we get to that believe, which is your number two, we sometimes think that's what we're going to try to get the world to... We confuse that with morality and we're going to try to get the world to get cleaned up before they come in, and the world sees us about all the things we're against. What they really should be seeing is the outcome of who we become and then let our beliefs and all that be a little bit more of an internal thing within our family, because I think people are seeing our dogma, which is really not these attractive sort of things, it's really more going back to that morality thing you were talking about and not this beauty of abiding in Christ and being one with the Father.

Matt Markins:

And how quickly we forget how Jesus covered some of these. Jesus' encounter with a woman at the well. Jesus' encounter with the lady who is about to be stoned for having an adulterous affair. Not to mention the fact that there's no male in that story who was on the other side of that affair.

Randy Frazee:

Oops.

Matt Markins:

And I would add to that, Jesus is rebuking of legalism coming from the religious leaders of his day. So I think about the woman at the well, and Jesus' encounter with her. He didn't say, "Go clean up your lifestyle." She was actively living an adulterous lifestyle, even while he's giving her eternal life. She didn't have time to go back and clean up her life. And so I think if we could remember that's who Jesus was, that's how he encountered the world around him, and then let the Holy Spirit do the work of leading us closer to God, which involves shedding our sin over time.

Randy Frazee:

I think that's a brilliant way to of wrap up our time together, Matt. This has been such an important conversation. I tell you, parents, Christian or non-Christian parents, their biggest burden when they wake up is for the outcome of their kids. You don't get moms mad or they will rise up and do all kinds of things, but they need to have the vision, the right vision, and the resources to be able to tackle these things. And this has been a very, very important conversation that I'm encouraging people to like and share with as many people as you can. How can people find you and how can people connect with Awana?

Matt Markins:

Well, a couple of those key reminders. Child Discipleship Forum, of course, you can always Google that or just go to childdiscipleshipforum.com to get access to that community. Obviously we mentioned talkaboutdiscipleship.com and then britecurriculum.com as well. Those are some of, I think, the most important pieces of the conversation. And then of course on our website, awana.org, that's the mothership website. You can go there and get all the information about me as well.

Randy Frazee:

Well, thank you so much, Matt, for joining this Bible Roots Podcast today, you have made a great contribution. And God bless you in all that you guys are doing in the United States and around the world. I think God has got you here for such a time as this and I'm so grateful for your leadership.

Matt Markins:

Thank you. It's great to be with you, Randy.

Randy Frazee:

Well, this wraps up episode eight of the Bible Roots Podcast. I think you would agree with me that this is extremely important. This is not just a fancy topic that you sit around and chat about when you have nothing else to talk about. The very future generations of our children and even our own lives are at stake and we need to really look to scriptures to find out what is the way forward. So I encourage you to like this podcast, leave a review and share it with as many people as you can. We have two more episodes in this first season.

Randy Frazee:

Next time we'll be talking to Morgan Jackson of Faith Comes By Hearing and this rise of the audio recordings to the languages that have yet to have the word of God in their own heart language. And then we will finish up with a wonderful conversation with Mark Hall, who is the lead singer of Casting Crowns, talking about students as well and the role of Bible engagement and music. It is going to be some really great episodes, so I encourage you to share these with others. And until next time, God bless you guys, we'll see you later.

Randy Frazee:

Thanks for listening to the Bible Roots Podcast. We hope you were encouraged and energized by our discussion today. If you enjoyed this episode, we'd love for you to leave a review. This small gesture will help more church leaders discover our conversations around Bible engagement. And don't forget, like and subscribe to our podcast so you'll never miss a new episode. Now, may your faith be strengthened through God's word today and every day.