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Research Brief and Editorial: The Infamous Evangelical Dropout Statistic: Where It Came From and Why It’s a Problem¹

TIMOTHY PAUL JONES

“So tell me,” I ask, “why do you want to move your church toward a family ministry model?”

These two ministry leaders that I’m meeting at the coffee shop are good people. Both are passionate about the gospel, and they long to be faithful to Scripture. Their church has asked me to partner with the staff to help them to minister more effectively to families.

“Well,” the pastor begins, “nine out of ten kids are dropping out of church after they graduate, aren’t they? Evidently, what we’re doing isn’t working.”

“Mm-hmm,” the children’s director nods. “Eighty-eight percent is what they said at the conference. We just want to do so much better than that.”

“Well, the pastor begins, “nine out of ten kids are dropping out of church after they graduate, aren’t they? Evidently, what we’re doing isn’t working.”

“I—I don’t really know,” the pastor replies. “Most of the youth, we don’t see after they graduate. Sometimes that’s because they’re involved in another church, I guess. We’ve never done a survey.”

The children’s director nods and continues, “What we thought is that, if we had some programs to teach parents how to grow their kids spiritually, we could stop the dropouts.”

“I want to help your church, and I will do everything in my power to help,” I say. “But first, I’m going to ask you to rethink your reasons for considering these changes—because the problem you think is the problem is probably not the problem at all.”

Here’s why these two ministry leaders and many others like them need to rethink their motivations: The nine-out-of-ten dropout number isn’t true. It never was true, and it still isn’t—yet many church leaders still believe it. That’s why I’m inviting you to take a trip with me to the origins of this number and to look together at why it’s long past time to lay this misunderstanding to rest.

GUT FEELINGS AND WILD GUESSES RARELY RESULT IN GOOD STATISTICS

In all fairness, the lie didn’t start as a lie. It was a
well-intended but poorly-considered guess that metamorphosed far beyond what anyone intended.

A few years ago, a doctoral student named Brandon Shields did some digging and discovered the earliest sources of the supposed statistic. Apparently, it began in the 1990s when a popular conference speaker invited a roomful of youth ministers to share their gut feelings about how many youth dropped out of church after high school. When this speaker summed up the responses, he came up with a ninety percent dropout rate.

The conference speaker later reported that he never meant anyone to take his estimate as a statistically-reliable representation of reality. Yet, once he repeated his numbers a few times, other leaders began to reiterate a ninety-percent dropout rate as gospel truth.

Another popular dropout percentage—88 percent—has been similarly traced back to the personal estimates of two youth ministry veterans. These estimates became part of a report that was provided to a gathering of the Southern Baptist Convention. In the years that followed, this number was repeated in sermons and at denominational gatherings until it became woven into Southern Baptist thinking.

Notice that none of these “surveys” actually tracked how many students remained connected to church once the pomp and circumstance of their high school graduations faded! Instead, the perpetrators of these statistics relied on guesses, gut feelings, and personal recollections. Nevertheless, reports of a nine-out-of-ten dropout rate spread quicker than a stomach virus in a cabin full of middle schoolers halfway through a week of camp—and the results have been almost that messy.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with asking a few people how they feel about an issue, and it’s perfectly acceptable to partner with a colleague to make an estimate. But such surveys don’t result in reliable statistics! In this instance, the collective estimates of a few ministers resulted in exaggerated percentages that received tremendous publicity. Dozens of books seized on these shoddy statistics and called for wholesale changes in youth and children’s ministries.

Later claims escalated the hysteria. A popular book published in 1997 claimed that only four percent of young people surveyed at that time were born-again Christians. As a result, the author claimed, “According to present trends, we are about to lose eternally the second largest generation in America’s history.” Never mind that the survey spanned only three states and included information from a mere 211 youth (to be fair, at least this author did admit his methodology); later leaders trumpeted this supposed trend as a harbinger of impending doom unless churches changed their ministry methods.

Throughout the early twenty-first century, news of dismal retention and evangelism rates among young adults continued to spread until nearly every youth and children’s minister heard how his or her ministry was destined to fail. Only a few of these claims were true. The handful of claims that were true were often misconstrued by the time they reached the pews.

HOW BAD NEWS BECAME BIG NEWS

It’s easy to point accusing fingers at the sources behind these statistics—but the problem isn’t really the numbers themselves. These numbers arose from well-intended attempts to assess the effectiveness of church ministries. In some cases, even though the statistics were misapplied, the people who first promoted the numbers honestly reported their sources and methods.

The more problematic question is, “Why were we so willing to wallow in the worst possibilities, even when those possibilities were not well-founded?”

It’s partly because bad news becomes big news. There’s something in our fallen nature that relishes the discovery of a hidden crisis—and, once we’ve discovered that crisis, we rarely keep the news to ourselves. Bad news gets repeated and, with each retelling, it tends to get stretched a bit as well. That’s why God warned his people in the Old Testament, “Do not go about spreading slander” (Lev. 19:16). God knows our human tendency to turn bad news into big news and then to exaggerate that news so it seems even bigger.

In a recent Wall Street Journal article, Rodney Stark and Byron Johnson provided a clear example of this phenomenon:

“The national news media yawned over the Baylor Survey’s findings that the number of American atheists
has remained steady at 4% since 1944, and that church membership has reached an all-time high. But when a study by the Barna Research Group claimed that young people under 30 are deserting the church in droves, it made headlines and newscasts across the nation.”

Well-researched good news was ignored while the bad news quickly became a feature in major newspapers throughout North America.

The tendency to turn bad news into big news does not, however, completely explain how rapidly these numbers spread through evangelical churches. I suggest there was another reason as well: Ever since the 1950s, a fun-and-games approach had dominated many youth ministries. In the 1990s, a new generation of youth ministers was emerging. For these ministers, youth ministry was not a stepping-stone to something greater. These men and women were theologically-educated church leaders who had responded to a divine calling to disciple youth. This rising tide of leaders found themselves frustrated with the assumption that still persisted in many churches—an assumption that a youth minister’s role was primarily to retain adolescents by entertaining them. The news that youth ministry had failed to keep students connected to the church resonated with these young leaders’ existing feelings of frustration. And so, news of a nine-out-of-ten dropout rate became a fixture in nearly every discussion of youth ministry.

In the end, this widespread frustration in the field of youth ministry did yield a few positive results. Among many youth ministers, frustration fueled the development of ministry strategies that were healthier than the fun-and-games approaches they had inherited. The results included family ministry models and approaches to youth ministry that emphasized discipleship, community, and the cultivation of intergenerational relationships.

Still, constructive outcomes can’t justify the spread of rumors and guesses as facts! A twisted statistic is still twisted, regardless of the rationale or the results.

**IS THE SKY REALLY FALLING?**
All of this still leaves us with a serious question, however:

What *are* the real numbers? How many names on your children’s ministry roll are likely to remain on a church roll two decades from today?

Answers to these questions vary, partly because there have been so many different definitions of what it means to be involved in church. Here are just a handful of the ways that researchers have separated the churched from the unchurched:

- Since 1978, a yearly Gallup Poll has identified respondents as “unchurched” if they answered either of these questions negatively: “Do you happen to be a member of a church or synagogue?” and “Apart from weddings, funerals, or special holidays, ... have you attended the church or synagogue of your choice in the past six months, or not?” In recent years, “mosque” has been added alongside “church” and “synagogue.” (Why a person is identified as “unchurched” because he or she does not attend synagogue or mosque, I am not quite certain. Then again, “unchurched” is quite a bit easier to say and spell than “unsynagogued” or “unmosqued.”)
- Another survey from Gallup, released in 2002, asked teenagers and young adults whether they had attended “church or synagogue in the past seven days.”
- In 2006, the Barna Group defined young adults as having been “churched” if they had attended church regularly for at least two months at any time during their teenage years.
- In 2007, LifeWay Research identified young adults as having been regular church attenders if they had attended church twice-a-month or more for at least a year during high school.

With such disparate definitions of what it means to be involved in church, even the best research designs are bound to produce a variety of results! Nevertheless, it is possible to draw a few valid inferences from the data.

1. **Young adults do drop out of church—and they have been for a long time.**

Young adult dropouts do not represent a recent trend. At least since the 1930s, involvement in religious
worship services has followed a similar pattern: frequency of attendance declines among young adults in their late teens and early twenties and then rebounds by the time they turn thirty.

Truth be told, the percentage of Protestants that attend church weekly has remained remarkably stable over the past few decades. Forty-two percent of all Protestants attended church weekly in the 1950s; 45% of Protestants make it to church every week in the early twenty-first century. In 1955, thirty-eight percent of Protestant twenty-somethings showed up at church weekly; today, 40% of Protestant young adults are weekly attenders.

So how many students do drop out on the heels of their high school years? The LifeWay Research Teenage Dropout Study provided one of the best available snapshots into this subject. I have issues with their choice to define regular church attendance as showing up at least twice-a-month for one year. (When I was a youth and children's minister, data from twice-a-month students went into my "strong prospect" file—not in my "regular attender" file!) Nevertheless, the numbers from LifeWay Research are reliable. According to this study, 70% of young adults who had attended church twice-a-month or more for at least a year during high school dropped out after high school.

So what does that mean for the claims of 88% and 90% attrition rates? It means that those numbers were a far shot from reality. Even with LifeWay’s overly generous definition of church involvement, the dropout rate is twenty percent lower than the claim of nine-out-of-ten. Among young adults who attended church three or more times per month as teenagers, the dropout rate is even lower.

(2) Many young adults come back.

Sometime between their mid-twenties and their early thirties, a significant number of dropouts return. According to LifeWay Research, 35% percent of young adult dropouts return to attendance at least twice-a-month by the time they turn thirty.

What is it that causes these thirty-somethings to come back to church? Influence from parents or other family members was a deciding factor in 39% of returns; friends at church were influential 21% of the time. One out of five dropouts came back after they married; one-fourth returned because they had children. Other factors in these comebacks included a personal desire to attend church again or an inner sense that God was calling them to return.

(3) Young adults aren’t just dropping out; they’re also dropping in.

Here’s one aspect of the larger picture that rarely shows up in anyone’s headlines: According to the biannual General Social Survey, the percentage of young adults attending weekly worship services has risen steadily since 2000. In 2008, church attendance among evangelical twenty-somethings returned to the same level where it had stood in 1972. What’s more, a 2008 study from the Pew Forum found that 39% of adults who had been raised disconnected with any church have ended up as Protestants; most of these formerly unaffiliated individuals have now affiliated with evangelical congregations.

So what can we conclude about the infamous evangelical dropout numbers? The rates of dropout and return are far less bleak and more complex than most of us have been led to believe, and the claim that 90% of students drop out after high school clearly needs to be left behind.

THE BIGGER LIE

A 90% dropout rate is not the only mistruth that well-meaning ministers have accepted about retention. Behind the nine-out-of-ten lie, there is an even bigger lie. This mistruth is far more insidious than any false statistical claim. The bigger lie is that the value and effectiveness of your ministry depends on how many people you attract and retain.

I am not suggesting, of course, that church involvement and retention don’t matter! Whenever anyone drops out of involvement in Christian community, we are correct to be concerned. Jesus loves the church, and he gave his life to “present the church to himself in splendor” (Eph. 5:25–27). Yet numeric retention alone can never constitute a sufficient standard for assessing the value of your ministry.

Sometimes, when a ministry makes much of Jesus and the gospel, the results include numeric gains and
stellar retention rates. Other times, it’s possible to make much of Jesus with negligible results as far as any human eye can see. The proclamation of God’s Word does result in growth and in the fulfillment of God’s purposes (Isa. 55:10–11). Yet godly growth often unfolds less like a series of figures on a ledger sheet and more like seeds sprouting inside the earth or like yeast seeping through a lump of dough (Luke 13:18–21). The same Word of God that yields manifold fruit in one heart may be rejected as repulsive in another (Luke 8:4–18). That’s why the standard for ministry effectiveness is not, “How many participants have we retained?” but “Who has glimpsed the truth of Jesus and the gospel in what we are doing?”

So don’t stop at turning your back on the big lie that 90% of teenagers will drop out of church! Walk away from the bigger lie that the value of your ministry depends on how many people you retain.

If retention rates decided ministry effectiveness, Jesus of Nazareth was an abysmal failure. At one point, a crowd of well over five thousand was so wild about Jesus that they pursued him all around the Sea of Galilee (John 6). Then, after one particular teaching session, the paparazzi took a nosedive from several thousand to a single dozen—an attrition rate of well over ninety-nine percent! A couple of years later, on a Passover eve amid the olive trees, even the dodgy dozen deserted their Lord (Mark 14:50–52; John 16:32). Yet, in all of this, Jesus remained the beloved one in whom his Father delighted (Mark 1:11; John 10:17)—and, inasmuch as you trust Jesus, so do you. So be faithful in proclaiming the good news. Seek out the lost. Create a context where those that stray can freely repent and return. Most of all, rest in the goodness of God, not in the strength of your retention rates.

Specifically focused on that theme, we have two articles from Holly Allen on how churches became segmented over the past century, a feature from Josh Mulvihill on the role of grandparents, as well as two practical articles on cultivating intergenerational relationships in their local churches. Articles on portrayals of fathers in the popular media, practices of Christian parenting, and the poison of pornography specifically examine relationships within families. Rounding out and supplementing the central theme, there are features on fatherhood, youth ministry, and evangelizing your child.

As always, we invite you to send your articles and article requests to familyministry@sbts.edu! In the upcoming year, you will see issues celebrating the twentieth anniversary Mark De Vries’ Family-Based Youth Ministry and examining the Jewish backgrounds of Christian discipleship. On another note, The Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry is now published in partnership with the new Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Ministry. Congratulations to Dr. Adam Greenway on taking the helm as dean of this new school!

Grace and peace,
Timothy Paul Jones, Ph.D.
Editor, The Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry
Associate Vice President for Online Learning

ENDNOTES

1 A shortened version of this article was published in Group Magazine (March-April 2013). Used by permission.
I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

1 Corinthians 1:10

"The easiest thing to do in the local church is to divide up the various ages and do separate ministry. It is not as messy [as cross-age ministry]. It takes more time, energy and effort to do intergenerational ministry." Research participant, in Brenda Snailum, "Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry Within Existing Evangelical Church Congregations"

House Churches of the First Century were places in which all generations were present. The generations remained integrated throughout much of Christian history until fairly recently. Several diverse factors have contributed to the age segregation that characterizes many Christian faith communities in the twenty-first century. When believers today gather for worship, service, ministry or simply for fellowship, they tend to gather in age- or stage-segregated silos. The question this article addresses is, “Why?” That is, “Why has the body of Christ (at least in North America) embraced an age-segregated approach to community in the last several decades?”

Harkness traces the decline of cross-generational Christian practices to the Protestant Reformation, particularly in its role in the development of modern public schooling. Prior to the Reformation only the elite were schooled; the masses were taught their fathers’ trade and learned of life and faith through home, church and community. The Reformers’ focus on everyone being able to read Scripture for themselves ultimately ushered in mandated schooling for all. Brian Hill also points out that universal age-segregated schooling as we know it began with the biblical reading focus of the Reformation. Harkness notes that “the development of the highly age-graded approach to educational activities within congregations arose out of this milieu, concurrent with the development of a widespread assumption of the schooling model as the appropriate one for Christian faith communities.”

Harkness does acknowledge, however, that other factors besides age-graded Sunday schools have contributed to the decline of intergenerationality in Christian faith...
communities. Among those factors are modern and postmodern tendencies toward individualism and dependence on psychological, therapeutic or secular educational models rather than theological models.

Martinson and Shallue attribute the movement toward age segregation to shifting core values, fast-paced lifestyles and the high value of individualism. Vanderwell indicates that one factor has been the pressure to tailor Christian activities and practices to meet expectations of particular generational cohorts, for example, Boomers or Millennials. Kara Powell suggests that the trend toward age segregation among churches began in the 1940s and post–World War II when parachurch organizations such as Young Life, InterVarsity and Youth for Christ focused so successfully on teenagers and young adults; because of the success of these specialized ministries aimed at a specific age group, church leaders came to believe that churches should adopt similar specialized ministry approaches, especially with youth.

This chapter explores the age-segregating influence of developmental concerns and rampant individualism as well as other factors, noting along the way how these factors have become barriers that tend to undermine intergenerational faith practices.

THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

As mentioned in chapter one, the move toward age segregation in society in general is one factor that has contributed to age segregation in American churches. Mary Pipher offers this insight regarding the issues surrounding this age-separating phenomenon:

“A great deal of America’s social sickness comes from age segregation. If ten fourteen-year-olds are grouped together, they will form a Lord of the Flies culture with its competitiveness and meanness. But if ten people ages 2 to 80 are grouped together, they will fall into a natural age hierarchy that nurtures and teaches them all. For our own mental and societal health, we need to reconnect the age groups.”

Hagestad and Uhlenberg argue that children/youth, working adults and older adults have been systematically separated institutionally, socially and spatially. They call this age-based separation the “tripartition of the life course,” which “emerged as the state adopted rules using chronological age to require children’s school attendance, while excluding them from the workplace, and entitling older persons to pensions. Children and youth are channeled into daycare and schools where they spend most of the day with a narrow band of age peers. For adults, days are anchored in work settings that exclude the young and the old. And older people, who have limited access to school and work sites, are expected to live retired lives of leisure.”

Throughout the ages Christians have tended to emulate—often unintentionally or unthinkingly—the culture around them, and as American culture has become more and more generationally fragmented over the last hundred years, churches have followed that same trend. Beyond this general trend to reflect the surrounding culture, churches have embraced other pieces of the cultural outlook that have ultimately contributed to the pervasive age segregation that characterizes American Christianity.

One such influence on the onset of age segregation in church life is the dominant cultural ideology of individualism (as noted above by Harkness as well as Martinson and Shallue), evidence of which is seen in worship wars between generations, but is also revealed in an individualistic soteriological stance that diminishes the communal aspect of salvation.

Another cultural influence since the mid-twentieth century is evident in church leaders’ recognition of the importance of cognitive developmental differences as well as differing life-stage needs, prompting the use of age-graded curriculum and the formation of small groups based on age or stage. The enormous Boomer generation with its particular outlook and its members’ demands for doing things their way has enormously influenced decisions in faith communities. In their seminal work regarding generations, Strauss and Howe describe Boomers as a generation with very strong opinions regarding the inner life (spiritual) and outer life (moral, political) and with little care for the opinions of the other generations.
DEVELOPMENTAL AND LIFE STAGE CONCERNS
Twenty-first century developmental theorists have outlined ways that children, teens, younger adults and older adults typically progress cognitively (Piaget\textsuperscript{13}), psychosocially (Erikson\textsuperscript{14}), morally (Kohlberg\textsuperscript{15} and Gilligan\textsuperscript{16}) and in faith development (Fowler\textsuperscript{17}), and life-span specialists such as Levinson\textsuperscript{18} have highlighted the differences among adults of various ages regarding the life issues they encounter and tasks that they must undertake. Informed and diligent ministry leaders have become more aware of the developmental differences from infants to octogenarians in the faith communities they oversee, and have desired to create learning, worship and service opportunities that meet a wide range of cognitive, psycho-social, spiritual and life-stage needs.

Piaget’s work in cognitive development—the way persons of various ages think—revolutionized preschool and elementary education in public schools in the 1960s and 1970s, and eventually Sunday schools as well. Christian educators began to implement teaching-learning approaches that were more age appropriate for children, such as the use of the five senses, body movement, visual aids, active involvement—all excellent ideas. Eventually developmentalist concerns were applied to the worship hour, especially since churches at this time were moving toward the understanding of the worship gathering as a primary teaching service for adults, according to Glassford,\textsuperscript{19} and some faith communities began to offer “children’s church” options in the late 1960s and early 1970s.\textsuperscript{20}

In children’s church settings, sometimes an entire alternative worship service was offered, following the general format or liturgy of the adult worship service; in these cases, children’s church was seen as a training ground for children to participate at their own developmental levels in the basic forms of adult worship. In other settings, children were released from the worship hour only during the sermon time, and children’s songs, puppets and games were employed to make this time engaging and enjoyable—also in keeping with developmental concerns. With both types of children’s church, it was simply deemed age inappropriate for children to sit through “boring” hymns, prayers and/or sermons when they could be more actively involved in teaching and activities that accommodated shorter attention spans and more body movement. Thus, churches moving toward a more educational model of worship (and away from a spiritual model) viewed separating children from the adults during the worship service as a benefit for the children. The practice seemed to be based on a pedagogically sound rationale.

Strictly age-graded Sunday school classes in recent decades have been formulated around established cognitive (and, to some degree, social) developmental concerns of children.\textsuperscript{21} Youth ministry was (and is), in part, a response to the unique psychological/emotional/social needs of teens, such as differentiation issues, identity development and distinctive doubt/faith concerns. And with adults, ministry leaders have become keenly aware that single twentysomethings adjusting to the adult work world, coping with financial responsibility and navigating a sexually charged environment face vastly different concerns than Boomers who are adjusting to retirement, coping with health worries, and navigating a world in which they are marginalized and far less powerful than in their prime. A sensitive leadership deeply aware of the broad spectrum of these cognitive, social and life-stage needs would understandably perceive dividing by age or generational cohort as a sensible, even laudable, means of meeting those needs.

CHURCH-GROWTH STRATEGIES
Church growth experts have been offering “how to build a bigger church” advice for several decades. The unintended consequence of some of these recommendations has been the systematic separation of congregations into generational cohorts. For example, building on Donald McGavran’s Homogeneous Units Principle (HUP),\textsuperscript{22} some church growth specialists in the 1970s and 1980s began to promote homogeneity (around ages or stages of life) at the small group level and even at the macrochurch level.\textsuperscript{23} Though age- or stage-defined small groups can provide empathy and social comfort, ultimately they have had the effect of sorting faith communities by generation.\textsuperscript{24,25}

In church growth literature, numerical growth is
typically seen to be tied directly to attracting families with children. Offering an exciting, entertaining hour of children’s church can be a big draw for those who are church shopping. One children’s minister says he wants children to leave church thinking, “That was the funnest hour I had all week.” And if the children enjoy children’s church (and if their parents do not need to tend to their children), more families will place membership. It is simply good church growth strategy. This strategy is also reinforced by the fact that some growing congregations may lack worship space for families to worship together. When determining whether to add another worship time or separate children and youth from adults, the fact that the latter corresponds more directly to some tenets of church growth theory resolves the problem.

In conference or seminar settings, when we ask participants why some churches do everything intergenerationally, a common response we both hear is, “Because they are too small for age-segmented grouping.” Although this perception may be true, we believe that all churches regardless of size are more faithful to the scriptural theme of unity and are more likely to foster faith maturity when they intentionally integrate various generations for 50 to 80 percent of congregational activities.  

INDIVIDUALISM

As churches have faced increasingly unpleasant generational conflict, one solution that seems to ameliorate the problem is to offer separate-but-equal opportunities. For example, in regard to the worship wars, churches might provide separate worship hours, encouraging each generation to shape its own worship hour to suit its tastes. Thus, the youth group can enjoy loud music, flashing lights and cool videos; the Millennials can pull into their intimate settings; Gen Xers can have their contemplative yet technologically savvy style; Boomers can choose old rock-style praise tunes using guitars and drums; the older generations can sing traditional hymns; and the children get to sing “Father Abraham” as often as they wish. All in all, a very amenable solution—except it is a perfect recipe for generational isolation. This solution arises from an individualistic outlook that emphasizes personal needs, rather than communal needs. And “when the needs of the individual are preeminent, generational fragmentation is inevitable.” Surprisingly, it isn’t always the youngest members of the community who most adamantly and vociferously claim their rights.

Soong-Chan Rah connects the dots regarding individualism, Western culture and religion. He states that “from the earliest stages of American history, individualism has been the defining attribute in understanding our nation’s ethos. . . . The American church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual.” William Dinges critiques the excessive individualism that pervades religion in America, saying that evangelical churches in particular “emphasize individual spiritual empowerment,” and are growing because of their attention to individual needs. And when individual needs are considered paramount, churches tend to offer special programs for children, teens, and young, middle, and older adults, so that these individual needs can be met more conveniently.

Hellerman frames this rampant individualism theologically. He makes a powerful (and controversial) point about evangelical Christianity’s “fixation upon Jesus as personal Savior.” This accusation may sound almost heretical to evangelicals, but Hellerman convincingly argues that this fixation has in essence “privatized” the Christian faith as an accommodation to “culture’s unbiblical obsession with individual determinism and personal subjective experience.” Hellerman argues that this individualization of the gospel message has severely diminished the crucial importance of the faith community in the spiritual formation of believers:

Framing conversion to Christ in solely individualistic terms has left us with little social capital to draw on in our churches as we try to encourage our people to stay in community and grow together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The excessive individualism of secular Western culture is fundamentally incompatible with the life of community as depicted in Scripture. The central events of the Old Testament—the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, crossing the Red Sea and the giving of the Law at Sinai—were community-creating events. Some
scholars argue that before these events, the Israelites, though acknowledging that they were descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, did not identify themselves as God’s people. When he delivered, rescued and formed them through the law and in the desert, they truly became his people and he became their God. {55}

In a similar fashion, Pentecost too was a community-creating event: “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41); “the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” (Acts 11:26). As Hellerman says,

In the New Testament era, a person was saved not solely to enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus. A person was saved to community. Our truncated evangelical conception of Jesus as personal Savior turns out to be an unfortunate distortion of radical American individualism, not a holistic reflection of biblical soteriology. {56}

WHY INTERGENERATIONALITY

Given the power of the factors described in this chapter—the general societal acceptance of age segregation in American culture, diverse developmental and life-stage needs, recommendations of church growth experts, and entrenched individualism—why should church leaders even consider moving toward a more interage approach to Christian spiritual formation? The response to that question is to be found in the following article.

ENDNOTES

8 Mark Senter’s book indicates that a number of earlier specialized youth organizations existed before World War II. Senter points to the advent of Robert Raikes’s Sunday school (1780s), the Young Men’s Christian Association (1851), Francis Clark’s Society of Christian Endeavor (1881) and the United Christian Youth Movement (1933). In When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).
11 For example, Carter and McGoldrick’s life stages are: leaving home, the new couple, families with young children, families with adolescents, launching children, and families in later life. Elizabeth Carter and Monica McGoldrick, The Changing Family Life Cycle: A Framework for Family Therapy (New York: Allyn & Bacon, 1989), p. 15. Life stages are sometimes called the family career or life phases. Because of the diverse forms of families, the typical life stages don’t fit the majority of families now; but churches still often form classes or ministry opportunities around these typical stages.
13 Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, The Psychology of the Child,


22Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). McGavran was a missionary in India and the founder of Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of World Missions. McGavran derived his Homogeneous Units Principle (HUP) from his experiences in India. Homogeneous units are people who share the same language, culture, or economic or other characteristic that makes them a unique group from others (easily illustrated in the Indian caste system). McGavran’s well-known statement is that people “like to become Christians with-out crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers” (p. 198). McGavran taught that the missionary evangelist should identify with a specific homogeneous unit and contextualize the gospel in such a way that it communicates to them. As a result, congregations that desire to reach out must be come sufficiently like their target homogeneous unit that this people group will not need to cross cultural boundaries to hear about Jesus, but rather will feel at home in the church setting. Of course, recent church growth specialists have modified HUP for use beyond Indian culture.


24We are not denouncing all age- or stage-defined small group gatherings; indeed they can be spiritually enriching and powerful life journey tools. However, perennially forming small groups around ages or stages promotes generational fragmentation.


26In Christine Ross’s research with fifteen leaders in intentionally intergenerational congregations, comments regarding how much of a congregation’s ministry should be intergenerational varied from 50 to 80 percent. Unpublished data from her dissertation research. See Christine M. Ross, “A Qualitative Study Exploring Churches Committed to Intergenerational Ministry” (doctoral dissertation, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, 2006).

27Generational music descriptions provided by Jen Edwards, instructor of worship ministries at John Brown University.


29In Christine Ross’s dissertation research, the only characteristic that all four churches agreed upon was that changing adult members’ mindset was a problem for the implementation of intergenerational ministry. In each congregation, there were adults who didn’t want to be around noisy children or didn’t want to alter the worship service to honor requests of other generations. See Ross, “A Qualitative Study Exploring Churches.”

30Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove,


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.


36 Ibid., p. 220.
The Benefits of Intergenerality

HOLLY CATTERTON ALLEN AND CHRISTINE LAWTON ROSS

“When generations collide, the ensuing conflict reminds everyone, Church is not just about me. Who knew that church could be the cure to narcissism?” Chad Hall, “All in the Family Is Now Grey’s Anatomy”

This article supports the basic premise that intergenerational faith experiences uniquely nurture spiritual growth and development in both adults and children. We must clarify here that we are not recommending that all activities of a faith community be conducted with all ages present. There are powerful, valid and important reasons to gather by age or stage or interest; spiritual growth and development can and indeed does happen when teens gather separately, when the seniors meet for mutual support and care, and when the preschoolers join together and learn. We are rather proposing that frequent and regular cross-generational opportunities for worship, learning, outreach, service and fellowship offer distinctive spiritual benefits and blessings.

When Christine asked her research interviewees why they believed intergenerational faith formation was a valid church ministry model, the most common response was that it is scriptural. Intergenerationality enables the whole church to benefit from each individual’s God-given gifts and enables believers to fully live out being the body of Christ and the family of faith. Among the many benefits for both adults and children are a sense of belonging, support for troubled families, better use of resources, character growth and sharing each other’s spiritual journeys. Additionally, this article will highlight special benefits for particular age cohorts—children, teens, emerging adults, young adults, middle adults and older adults.

**BELONGING**

“Belongingness” is the third in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. After physiological needs and safety needs are met, human beings seek—and need—places to belong. Sandage, Aubrey and Ohland identify five aspects that characterize healthy community. The
first one—belongingness—is particularly important in the realm of spiritual care and formation. Healthy belongingness offers support for people in difficult situations, release from shame through forgiving grace and opportunity for authenticity. Intergenerational faith communities provide experiences that foster this deep sense of belonging in children, teens and adults; all feel welcome and received.

Children especially need to feel a deep sense of belonging, and they know if they are welcome or not. One of Lawrence Richards’s five processes for guiding the spiritual development of children is that they must feel like they belong in the faith community.4 Ivy Beckwith agrees:

This belonging needs to be demonstrated through the policies and practices of the community. Forming relationships with children is the responsibility of all members of the community, not just those who work with them in educational programs.5

In her chapter on intergenerational ministry, coauthored with her mother (Carol Rask), Karen Rask Behling describes several poignant intergenerational memories (sharing stories, celebrating advent, delivering meals to the elderly, worship) from her childhood and youth.6 Rask concludes the chapter saying, “It was significant to be known. I knew I belonged in that community of believers; I knew that my life mattered to others.”7 To be received by a multigenerational body of believers is to belong at a deeply satisfying level.

SUPPORT FOR TROUBLED FAMILIES

All faith communities have families who are facing severe difficulties. How does bringing the generations together uniquely benefit these families? Sharon Koh, senior associate pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church–Los Angeles in Rosemead, California, says:

When our church is intentional about cross-generational interactions, it expands the concept of family beyond the nuclear family alone. . . . Because of this new concept of family, many inadequacies in the nuclear family can be made up for, in Christ’s name.8

David Fraze with Fuller Youth Institute notes that youth ministry in general has done a pretty good job with young people who come from “strong, intact and engaged” families, but the real question is how to nurture students whose families are scattered, unsupportive and disengaged.9 His answer is to implement intergenerational strategies, that is, “practices designed to create opportunities for spiritual growth across generational lines.”10 These strategies call the community of faith to offer hope not only to youth, but also single parents, divorced persons and others who have been hurt by family relationships, “by providing a family in which healing and acceptance are found.”11

Pentecostal Tabernacle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, began in 1927, but attendance was down in the 1980s to only forty—mostly older—people. Senior pastor Brian Greene says that at that point the church began to focus on its multicultural neighborhood, and now there are over three hundred attendees, half under the age of thirty. Though the church wanted to welcome this influx of young people, the older generations at first did not know how. By way of background, Greene notes that “only 0.5 out of every ten African-American children will be raised in a home with both parents, compared with four out of every ten Caucasian children.”12 According to Greene, Pentecostal Tabernacle has now become a fathering church—a parenting church. “Many in our church have not been properly parented. But now, by being in our church, they don’t have just one mother. They have eight or ten. That’s a fruit of being a cross-generational church.”13

BEFTER USE OF RESOURCES

Chad Hall decries the trend toward churches that appeal to or draw only a narrow age range. He has ministered in churches that are primarily young and others that are predominantly older. “While many established churches struggle to attract and retain young adult members, newer churches are attracting nothing but.”14 Hall offers several reasons to avoid age segregation in faith communities, one of which is the uneven distribution of resources: “Both young and old
have resources to share. Generational homogenization results in an overabundance of one type of resources in certain congregations. Many older generation churches have plenty of money and facilities, but lack the energy and fresh vision young congregations have aplenty.\textsuperscript{15} A growing Gen Xer church in Covina, California, struggles with one aspect of this imbalance: "Raising sufficient money to pay for the ministries, let alone a new building, is a special challenge facing a congregation of young Xers."\textsuperscript{16} One minister at this church notes that many in their twenties and thirties are in debt and give only five or ten dollars a week. On the other hand, this minister says that a great strength of this church is that the leaders as well as the members are always asking, "How can we be fresh? How can we do things differently? How can we adapt our approach?"\textsuperscript{17}

While thirty- and fortysomething leaders of younger churches may have a plethora of fresh ideas and plenty of energy, they lack the experience and deep spiritual resources of more seasoned leaders who have navigated repeatedly the multifarious, often troubled waters of a rapidly growing faith community. Young leaders sometimes flame out in the absence of older, wiser heads who can hold the course and traverse tricky terrain. Intergenerational faith communities bring together the young, fresh thinkers with the older, wiser veterans, creating an integrated profusion of resources.

**CHARACTER GROWTH**

Mike Breaux, teaching pastor at Heartland Community Church in Illinois, says that when he moved from youth ministry to senior ministry he “envisioned a church with young and old and in-between learning from one another, deferring, serving, praying, working, worshiping together—one heart, one mind, one church (Acts 4:32).”\textsuperscript{18} Breaux says that:

> While each generation maintains its uniqueness and offers different strengths, the heartbeat of God is for one church. So many forces drive generations apart, but moderns and postmoderns can coexist. It requires humility, mutual submission, and respect for different strengths and passions. Those virtues don’t happen easily. They emerge as we teach them and model them.\textsuperscript{19}

Chad Hall also believes that bringing all the generations together yields unique opportunities for character growth. He has experienced the particular type of conflict that intergenerational churches encounter, and says that negotiating contradictory generational priorities can breed godliness.

Churches who value their young and their old will have to deal with clashing perspectives, which may slow things down, make decisions harder to come by, force compromise on difficult matters, and automatically elevate the value of relationship over that of task.

But when generations collide, the ensuing conflict reminds everyone, Church is not just about me. Who knew that church could be the cure to narcissism?\textsuperscript{20}

**UNIQUE BENEFIT BY AGE AND STAGE**

**Children.** Over a period of years, Lance Armstrong, a Christian educator in Australia, asked participants in his workshops what led them to faith.\textsuperscript{21} Their answers included evangelistic rallies, life crises, family influence, significant persons, church camp and Sunday school. Armstrong notes that family influence always received the most votes, but that other relationships (e.g., a significant person or people at church camp) always came in next. Armstrong further notes that what appears to be most important in people’s growth to faith “is a loving, caring, close relationship with other Christians.”\textsuperscript{22} Given this truth, Armstrong concludes that “in the nurturing process of our children, we must allow them to develop deep personal relationships with as many of the people of God as possible.”\textsuperscript{23}

Ivy Beckwith, longtime children’s minister, agrees. She says that children need frequent, regular, ongoing opportunities to interact with people of faith “who struggle, who trust God, who make mistakes and are forgiven, who work for mercy and justice, who model kingdom values.”\textsuperscript{24} Beckwith says children will remember the stories and lives of people they have known in their faith communities more than Bible facts they may have learned.
Not long ago Holly reconnected with Paul, who as a middle schooler was part of a small cross-age VBS teaching team that she led in the 1980s. They chatted and caught up. Toward the end of the conversation, Paul said he had never forgotten the story she told about lying to her teacher when she was in the sixth grade, and how God had used that experience to enlighten her and teach her the importance of trust. He said her story had prompted him to ask God to use every experience of his life to teach him. Holly was surprised (and chagrined) that he remembered this particular incident. God uses unlikely tools, and by regularly interacting with adults of all ages, children will be nurtured in their faith journeys, even in unlikely ways.

Teens. Kara Powell with the Fuller Youth Institute led a recent study, the College Transition Project, that gathered data from five hundred youth group graduates regarding their faith journeys. The ultimate purpose of the study was to determine what elements of youth ministry were significantly related to higher faith maturity in teens transitioning to college. One important finding of the study was that “high school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity.” Several youth ministry leaders in recent years have argued that teens benefit spiritually from nonparental mentors as well as from parents. Jason Lanker’s recent work on natural mentoring offers strong support for the importance of intergenerational opportunities for teens because these opportunities yield multiple prospects for natural adult-teen mentorships to form. An interesting finding for our purposes is that, at the time of the research, participants in Lanker’s study had known their mentors for an average of 6.7 years. (Other studies have shown the average time to be as much as 10 years.) Since the average age of participants in Lanker’s study was 18.2 years, these participants were, on average, 11 years old when they met their mentors. In today’s highly segregated church environments, the benefits of the mentoring process are not available to teens unless they have had opportunities to come to know those who are further ahead of them on the journey. No better setting for those opportunities exists than in intergenerational small groups, mission trips, service projects, musical or dramatic productions, age-integrated Sunday schools, and worship.

Emerging adults. Joiner, Bomar and Smith acknowledge in their book, The Slow Fade, that eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds who are active, fervent Christians during their childhood and teen years often become disconnected from their communities of faith during their young adult years. The authors say these older teens fade out after high school [the “finish line”] and then fade back later, and “for a few years we just assume they are transforming into mature adults.” These authors castigate churches that are passively waiting for these young adults to return after they mature, marry and have children. Precisely because these are the critical years when emerging adults are choosing careers and a spouse, churches should move the “finish line” to early or mid-twenties rather than high school graduation. Of course, the question is, how? The suggestion Joiner, Bomar and Smith offer is that emerging adults need other, older adults to come alongside them to listen to their stories, validate their search for identity and join them “as they journey toward God and adulthood.”

The teens in Christian Smith’s 2005 national study reported that their parents were the primary influence on their spiritual lives. Smith has continued to follow these teens as they have entered what is now being called “emerging adulthood.” Smith found that for these twentysomethings, parents are still the primary influence, but also as with teens, it is not only parents who matter in forming the religion of emerging adults. Nonparental adults in their lives are also important—those in their faith communities who have reached out to them and built meaningful personal relationships with them.

The empirical evidence tells us that it does in fact matter for emerging adult religious outcomes whether or not [the participants] have had nonparental adults in their religious congregation to whom they could turn for help and support. It matters whether or not [they] have belonged to congregations offering youth groups that they
younger adults) often question givens and traditions that older adults may have accepted uncritically. The young are perhaps more willing to consider alternate ways of seeing things. Harkness does indicate that intergenerational experiences will also contribute to the faith maturity of the younger participants, but his focus in this article is on the importance of intergenerational experiences for adult faith development.

Young adults. As emerging adults settle into career paths, they often feel ill prepared to navigate the politics of the workplace, the responsibility for their financial futures, the weight of adult decisions. In strong intergenerational faith communities, there are others to whom a young adult can turn for encouragement, advice, insight or for simply a listening ear—someone who has perspective on career choices, ethical dilemmas or financial difficulties.

In addition to learning to carry their own weight, many men and women of Generation X (the cohort now in their thirties and forties) are currently buried in the arduous tasks of rearing young children. Married couples with small children are typically at a very stressful time in their lives as they learn to juggle their spouse’s needs, their children’s needs, work responsibilities and personal needs. This season of life can be exhausting; perhaps moms and dads should not be attempting to juggle all these responsibilities without the love and support from those who have faced these same struggles and survived.

In his discussion of first-century mores, Harkness describes a world of “extended family societies” where parenting was not such a lonely enterprise. Hellerman indicates that intergenerational faith communities can emulate this “extended family society” so that young parents will not feel such isolation in the crucial tasks of parenting.

For his recent book, After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion, Robert Wuthnow analyzed data collected from dozens of studies conducted both recently and over the past decades to assess how young adults are doing spiritually. Wuthnow found that “young adults are currently less involved at houses of worship than young adults were a generation ago.” Furthermore, Wuthnow found that all Americans (both young adults and older adults) have fewer social relationships than their parents and grand-parents did. He cites Putnam (of Bowling Alone fame) as saying...
that communities are breaking down. Wuthnow’s conclusion is that young adulthood lacks the institutional support it needs and deserves.

**Middle adults.** Common issues among forty- and fiftysomethings include grappling with the needs of aging parents, coping with unexpected career changes, accepting the loss or compromise of youthful dreams, and coming to terms with middle age. According to Robert Kegan, many adults do not regularly participate in a genuine relational community that could support them as they face these important developmental issues. Intergenerational faith communities can provide a plethora of people who have successfully negotiated some of these crises and could offer love and empathetic support to those coming along behind them. Middle adults may also be parenting adolescents, which can be stressful and demanding; parents in this season of life sometimes feel overwhelmed and overburdened. De Vries notes that “our culture has put an incredible emotional weight on the shoulders of the nuclear family, a weight [he believes] God never intended for families to bear alone.” De Vries recommends that parents need the “rich support of the extended Christian family of the church.” Hellerman agrees, saying that “there are some tremendously practical and relational benefits to having more than one adult male and one adult female participating in the family unit.”

Many Christian families have at least one child who spends a period of time wandering from their childhood beliefs. These wanderings may range from a few months of doubt, to a dabbling in Eastern religions, to complete rebellion with forays into drugs, promiscuity and/or atheism. During these difficult times, parents desperately need a loving community to hold up their hands. “The faith community provides a perspective on staying true to our children, no matter how wayward they become.” And as parents enter their late forties and fifties, they begin to experience the “empty nest.” The energies that these adults have been pouring into parenting can now be harnessed toward other forms of generativity (Erik Erikson’s term for pouring the self into rising generations); and if these middle adults are involved actively in intergenerational communities, both younger and older generations are readily available for their ministrations—the older population that is beginning to need help, younger adults swamped with parenting tasks, emerging adults navigating a new world, as well as teens and children.

**Older adults.** Mary Pipher said in 1999 that “the old often save the young and the young save the old,” but this mutual blessing is not possible if the young and old are never together. Older adults have much to offer the younger generations. “Like all people, they want to be needed and loved and often seek out opportunities to be in service to others.” However, older adults are often so marginalized in our society that they have little opportunity to bless those coming behind them. Pervasive segregation of the elderly has yielded negative stereotyping and discrimination against the older population, which is known as ageism. They can be perceived as inflexible, depressing, less competent, passive and senile. Grefe notes that “intergenerational . . . groups, in which members have equal status, work together toward common goals, and meet over an extended period of time can reduce stereotypes toward the elderly. Faith communities that intentionally and regularly draw older, middle and younger generations together provide opportunities for younger members to know the older and to move away from the negative perception that pervades American society toward seniors. These opportunities open the way for the older to pour their accumulated wisdom and insight into those coming along behind them, which, according to Gentzler, is a deep desire among those who are older.

The older generations also need the younger particularly because of the many losses associated with older adulthood: loss of significant loved ones, independence, purpose, external jobs, and time to accomplish dreams and goals. These losses are deep and abiding; the presence of the young and hopeful can be a salve, can provide new purpose for moving out of mourning and grief, and can refocus attention toward “the incredible calculus of old age—that as more is taken, there is more love for what remains.”

**CONCLUSION**

The Search Institute, which has been conducting global research on spiritual development for fifty years, notes
that one fundamental aspect of spiritual development is interconnecting, that is, "linking oneself to narratives, communities, mentors, beliefs, traditions, and/or practices that remain significant over time." The best way for the most people to link to the narratives, communities, mentors, traditions and practices of their faith communities is to participate actively in intentionally age-integrated experiences with others in those faith communities. Truly intergenerational communities welcome children, emerging adults, recovering addicts, single adults, widows, single parents, teens whose parents are not around, the elderly, those in crisis, empty nesters and struggling parents of young children into a safe but challenging place to be formed into the image of Christ.

**ENDNOTES**


7 Ibid., p. 75.


10 Ibid., p. 1.

11 Ibid., p. 3.

12 Lee, "Age-Old Divide," p. 44.

13 Ibid., p. 46.


15 Ibid., p. 33.


17 Ibid., p. 192.


19 Ibid., p. 45, emphasis ours.

20 Hall, “All in the Family,” p. 33.


22 Ibid., p. 15.

23 Ibid., p. 18.


26 Ibid., p. 75.


29 Jean Rhodes, *Stand by Me: The Risks and Rewards

30 Joiner, Bomar and Smith, Slow Fade.

31 Ibid., p. 21.

32 Ibid., p. 44.


39 Ibid., pp. 42-43.

40 Hellerman, When Church Was a Family, p. 158.


42 Ibid., p. 231.


45 DeVries, Family-Based Youth Ministry, p. 17.

46 Ibid.

47 Hellerman, When Church Was a Family, p. 158.


53 Dagmar Grefe, “Combating Ageism with Narrative and Intergroup Contact: Possibilities of Intergenerational Connections,” Pastoral Psychology 60 (February 2011): 105.

54 Gentzler, Designing an Older Adult Ministry.

55 Ibid., p. 25.


Historically, grandparents have held a meaningful and important place in the family. However, changes to American society around the mid-1800’s began to alter family structures and grandparental functions. A primary concern for Christian educators is that Christian grandparents have accepted societal changes to the role of grandparent as normative rather than adopt a biblical perspective of passing the gospel from one generation to the next.

Historians of the elderly believe “we cannot readily evaluate even more modern history of the subject without some sense of what the elderly are moving from.” What place did the elderly have in American society in past centuries? How did Americans view the elderly prior to the twenty-first century? What roles did grandparents have in the family? These questions will be explored in order to piece together a state of grandparenting in America prior to the twenty-first century.

Studies on the elderly in America show a steady deterioration of respect and responsibility from a once solid base. Some gerontologists hold to a nostalgic “golden age of age” in the preindustrial past and use this time period as a framework to determine how present day generations should interact. Peter Stearns, a historian, believes that preindustrial society should not be the basis for an evaluation of the elderly. Christians agree and look to the Bible for instruction regarding the role and responsibility of grandparents.

According to Scripture, grandparents have a vital role in the transfer of faith from one generation to another (Ps 71:17-18; 2 Tim 1:5; Deut 4:9; Gen 31:55). The grandparent’s primary responsibility is to teach the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord (Ps 78:1-8). A grandparent is to love the Lord and train children and grandchildren to fear God (Deut 6:1-2). The Bible speaks of grandparents transmitting godly values, beliefs, and traditions to future generations. Younger Christians can learn to number their days as they watch grandparents live for Christ in a sinful world (Ps 90:12). Just as the older generation has a responsibility to spiritually nurture younger generations, the younger generation has the responsibility to honor and care for the older generation (1 Tim 5:1-2, 8; Lev 19:32; Exod 20:12).

In preindustrial societies the perception and treatment of the elderly was not a utopian experience...
for those of old age. One French theologian from the
fifteenth century remarked that eighty year olds are “fit
for nothing” and a frequently reprinted seventeenth-
century text describes old age as the “worst time of
life.” Francis Bacon provided a good description of
the physical changes that accompany old age such as
dry skin, hard flesh, poor digestion, dry bowels, weak
muscles, gray hair, and physical discomfort.

Despite mindsets such as these, the elderly were
given a level of respect and asked to serve an important
function that is not common in America today. Historians suggest that a great change has occurred
for elderly people in America as they once assumed
positions of authority, both in the home and in society,
but are now pushed to the fringes and expected to be a
companion or playmate to their grandchild.

A quick scan of book titles available for purchase
on the subject of grandparenting reveals much
about the role grandparents have today. A few
titles include Totally Cool Grandparenting, Creative
Grandparenting, 101 Ways to Spoil Your Grandchild,
Long-Distance Grandparenting: Connecting With Your
Grandchild from Afar, and The Modern Grandparent’s
Handbook: The Ultimate Guide to the New Rules of
Grandparenting. These are only a small sample, but
reveal much about grandparenting today. The titles
reveal the aims, priorities, and “new rules” for this
generation of grandparents: being cool, creative, and
spoiling grandchildren from afar. How did we arrive
at “cool, creative, and connecting” grandparenting?
Brian Gratton and Carole Haber suggest there have
been three distinct phases that mark the history of
American Grandparents: authority figures, burdens,
and companions.

THE ELDERLY IN PREINDUSTRIAL
AMERICA: A PLACE OF RESPECT AND
AUTHORITY

Historians argue the elderly received greater respect
and had a more important role in preindustrial Amer-
ica for two key reasons: scarcity value and educational
role. Elderly people formed a small percentage of the
total population of any preindustrial society. Shorter
life spans made old age more rare than it is today, and
this scarcity compared to contemporary levels increased
their value to society. What was considered old age? For
men, sixty was seen as the beginning of old age while
women were often viewed as elderly upon menopause.

The educational role of the elderly helped to
create a favorable attitude toward, and treatment of,
grandparents. Preindustrial societies were largely
illiterate and learning depended on word of mouth. The
elderly served as society’s mentors with an important
role of information control. In addition, experience
was a valuable attribute for most endeavors and one
commodity that elders possessed in greater abundance
than youthful contemporaries. In preindustrial
agricultural America the elderly were given an honored
place in society. Grandparents were respected for their
wisdom and revered for their old age.

Historically, grandparents functioned in a role of
authority as the head of a family unit and did so until
the early 1900’s. Two eighteenth century portraits,
“The Grandfather’s Advice” and “The Grandmother’s
Present” depict the ideal relationship between
grandparent and grandchild: an adoring grandchild
sitting on a grandparents knee listening attentively to
wisdom and experience.

The picture of grandparents as the center of the
home began to slowly change as the elderly began
to lose authority in the family. With the advance of
time the number of elderly people increased and their
value as educators decreased. “With modern literacy,
learning is stored in books—not old minds—and so
the elderly automatically lose status and function.”
With the advance of medicine, life spans began to
increase. Living to old age, which was once rare, was
becoming more common.

The government began to influence family life,
primarily through the court system, by enabling women
and children the right to challenge patriarchal authority
over property rights, life estates, and transmission
of wealth. The decline of patriarchal control and
respect for the elderly occurred at the same time as
what sociologists refer to as “domestic feminism,”
an increase in the wife’s ability to control household
affairs. One historian states that a changing domestic
ideology resulted in increased opportunities for women,
“reduced patriarchal control on the home and altered the structure of authority within the family.”16 By the early 1900’s the elderly were beginning to be viewed as a burden to be dealt with rather than a blessing to admire.

THE 1930’S: WHEN GRANDPARENTS BECAME A BURDEN

How American society viewed elderly parents morphed over a relatively short period of time. One document is particularly helpful as it provides a glimpse into a tectonic shift that occurred nearly a century ago. The article, *Age Old Intestate*, was written by an anonymous author in 1931 and describes the changing mindset adult children had toward their elderly parents.

Throughout history, as parents aged, they went to live in a child’s home. The anonymous author suggests this tradition wasn’t simply an American creation but “an ancient custom of taking the old into the homes of the young.”17 The author’s experience suggests tri-generational living was the norm, “When I was a child I took it for granted that a grandmother or grandfather should live in the house of nearly every one of my playmates.”18 In previous generations the only means of care for the elderly was to go into the homes of their children, “It has always been taken for granted that when men or women grow old and become lonely or helpless or sick, they should, of course, go to live with sons and daughters…This assumption implies, moreover, that it is necessarily the duty of the young to make home life possible for the old.”19

By the 1930’s, this mindset was beginning to change and the elderly were viewed as a burden to separate from rather than a blessing to incorporate into the family. According to the author, life was great when her parents were independent and isolated from her family, but that changed once her mother moved in. The author states,

> Before then my household of four lived in harmony. My husband and I had found our home restful. We had enjoyed a bit of leisure...there was nothing present that menaced the foundations of our happiness or the children’s welfare...Now harmony is gone. Rest has vanished. My husband and I have no longer any time together unless we leave the house. We have no leisure. We have no time for children...We have had to shut our door to hospitality.20

Elderly parents are portrayed as disruptions to life and the cause of dysfunction in the family. According to the author, the best alternative is to remove the oldest generation from the family picture altogether. The implied ideal for all of society, she believes, is captured in the words of her mother in reference to an old people’s home.

> It is the place for old people. I should be taken care of; I should have no responsibility and no worry; I should be with people whose business it is to take care of old ladies, so that I should feel myself a burden to no one. And I do not want to tie down my children as I have seen other mothers tie down theirs.21

The emerging view held that at a retirement home, the older generation will not be an intrusion to the family but will find satisfaction in being with individuals of the same age and stage of life.

The author believes three actions are necessary to ensure the independence of one generation from another: protection, prevention, and avoidance. First, families must be protected from the burden of the elderly through some form of financial provision for the old while educating society about the dangers of integrating the generations. Second, families need to learn to prevent the elderly from interfering; therefore, infringing on all family members happiness. And third, families need to avoid entanglements with the older generation as they will likely disrupt each others lives.22 According to this author, these goals require a social contract in order to enforce this new way of life for the old. The author states,

> As soon as we can find a few free hours together we are going to draw up a document. The purpose of it will be to make it clear to our children, and to all friends and relatives who are inclined to give advice or make objections, that we desire to live...
our lives physically and personally independent of our children.23

Is there any better way to summarize grandparenting in the twenty-first century than with the phrase, “we desire to live our lives physically and personally independent of our children?” Is it any coincidence that Social Security and age-segregated living for the elderly sprung up all over the country at about the same time in American history as the mindset represented in this anonymous article? In a relatively short period of time society moved from veneration to scorn for the elderly:

By the early twentieth century, their status had precipitously declined, especially in the middle class. Physicians viewed old age as an illness, critics denigrated the capacities of older workers, and family experts opposed extended and complex households. Demographic pressures made grandparents a burden and a threat rather than a valued resource.24

FACTORs THAT ALTERED THE FAMILY

The past century has seen the place and priority of grandparents in the American family radically altered. A number of factors led to a new way of life for the old: the industrial revolution, longer life, and economic factors such as mass education, affluence, inheritance patterns, and Social Security.

The Industrial Revolution

The consensus viewpoint held by social theorists is that the industrial revolution was the primary cause for many of the changes in family function and structure in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One sociologist summarizes this sentiment well,

Once upon a time, in traditional societies, people lived in extended families; now they live in nuclear families. In between came the industrial revolution. Old people enjoyed security, status, and power in traditional societies in part because their age made them dominant within their families. Industrialization involved proletarianization, urbanization, greater geographic and social mobility, and the rise of individualism. These developments destroyed the extended family and the advantaged position of the elderly.25

Industrialization and new technology reduced the authority achieved from agricultural experience. “New technology often made the talents of the old appear obsolete and the new economy offered an attractive alternative to young men and women who, in the past, might have chosen to stay on as dutiful workers in the family enterprise.”26 The culture of the industrial era indicated that the agricultural skills of the elderly were outdated and no longer essential to society.27 Historian Peter Stearn summarizes this viewpoint well,

The industrial revolution did have an impact. Most important was the fact that the old became relatively less significant economically, declining as a percentage of the work force, unable to offer the most up-to-date skills...Everywhere the elderly swelled the ranks of unskilled labor; everywhere they were disproportionately unemployed or degraded in pay and skill levels.28

Longer Life and Tri-generational Homes

A larger portion of the population not only survived to old age, but also experienced a dramatic increase in lifespan. In 1900, only four percent of the total population of America was over the age of sixty-five years old.29 The percentage of those over the age of sixty-five gradually increased until reaching the all-time high of thirteen percent of the American population in 2010.30 As life expectancy began to lengthen this had an impact on the economy; the elderly became a challenge for the younger population as they were forced to compete with one another for resources and jobs.31

As the mortality rate began to decline, there was a greater probability that three generations of family members would be alive simultaneously.32 However, this did not translate into an increase in the number of homes with three generations living together. By 1900, tri-generational households had reached its peak in American history.33 The early 1900’s saw a rising sentiment against multigenerational living arrangements. For example, Samuel Butler wrote in 1885,
I believe that more unhappiness comes from this source than from any other—I mean from the attempt to prolong the family connection unduly and to make people hang together artificially who would never naturally do so...And the old people do not really like it so much better than the young.  

The anonymous female writer from the 1930’s recalled her perceived problems with tri-generational living and believed that the homes in which grandparents lived, “should be full of friction; The association of grandparents with friction took such a hold in my mind that I called myself lucky because my own were dead!” Family experts argued that grandparents in the home limited the happiness and prosperity of young and old alike. Although they never directly attacked the idea of family obligation, they counseled that such duties were best fulfilled through separate households.  

The transition away from multigenerational dependence is “strongly rooted in the growing independence of adult children from their parents’ assets and resources.” The need for separate residences for grandparents became a cornerstone of the early twentieth century campaign for publically funded old age pensions. In 1928, Abraham Epstein, a pension advocate argued,  

It seems a pity to force any father or mother in this twentieth century to decide between supporting old parents and contenting themselves with a little less food, less room, less clothing, and the curtailment of their children’s education, or sending their parents to the poorhouse.  

There was an emerging view of the old as burdensome and nonproductive and this was directly impacted by the increase of life and the changing American economy.  

Economic Factors  
In order to understand the decline of the multigenerational home and the changing roles of grandparents, “we must understand the changing needs and resources of the younger generation as well as the older generation.”  

The multigenerational family system of the pre-industrial era in America provided benefits for the older and younger generations. In an agricultural society, elderly farmers needed adult children to do heavy work when they were no longer capable of doing it. The younger generation eventually inherited the farm or business and with it a lifelong occupation. The industrial revolution slowly eroded these benefits and altered the need for multigenerational homes. Historian Steven Ruggles summarizes the impact of industrialism and the changing economy on family systems. He states,  

This system was shattered between 1850 and 1950 by a fundamental transformation of the economy. Agriculture and self-employed crafts ceased to be the dominant occupations; they were eclipsed by the enormous growth of jobs in large-scale commerce, manufacturing and transportation. The new economy undermined the economic logic of the pre-industrial family. With the expansion of job opportunities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many young men left the farm in favor of high wages, independence, and excitement offered by town life.  

The family farm slowly declined in importance as the economy transitioned from production in the home to production in the city and greater numbers of men were needed to run factories. Without the economic benefit of the family farm to look forward to, young people had few reasons to stay at home.  

Mass Education  
Mass education reinforced the changes occurring in families. Schooling began to undermine the traditional family economy. Children spent their days in school, rather than at home working, and this reduced their economic contributions to the household. Thus, “schooling helped to restructure family relationships by transforming children from an economic asset into an economic burden.” Education was one of the factors that began to alter the authority structure in the family.  

Increasingly, obtaining a good job depended more on education than on family connections.
Those who graduated from high school had dramatically improved economic opportunities and expanded horizons. By the mid-twentieth century, when secondary education was expanding rapidly, sons typically had more education and greater earning power than did their fathers, and this transformed the economic relationship between generations.\(^43\)

Education empowered the younger generation, not the older generation. Those with education were less likely to work on the farm while being more likely to move to the city to seek their fortune.

For the first time in history, economic incentives did not give the elderly power over the young nor was there a compelling reason for adult children to stay at home. Living arrangements were altered, co-residence began to decline, and the younger generation began to leave the family farm for the city. One historian believes, “the evidence suggests that the decline of the multigenerational family occurred mainly because of increasing opportunities for the young and declining parental control over their children.”\(^44\)

According to nineteenth century family historian Charles de Ribbe, authority bred respect, and respect guaranteed support in old age.\(^45\) Remove patriarchal authority through economic incentive and it eliminated the support young showed to the old. Money, as much or more than anything else, has altered the family landscape in America.

**Inheritance Patterns and Affluence**

Over the past two centuries a “significant evolution” of inheritance patterns changed the way land was handed down from one generation to the next.\(^46\) The bulk of household wealth in America, perhaps as much as 80 percent, was handed down from one generation to another.\(^47\) During the colonial period, in one Pennsylvania city, 87 percent of all landholders passed their farms or business to their heirs; in the 1790’s, the proportion fell to 71 percent. By 1890, only about a third gave their property to their children.\(^48\) “The elderly no longer used inheritance provisions to maintain authority over their heirs. Instead they sold property and created their own ‘nest egg’ for retirement.”\(^49\)

Industrialization ushered in a new era shifting demographics, undermining an agricultural way of life, while providing alternative economic means other than the family farm.

In a prosperous economy, young and old were able to amass sufficient wealth to live independently.\(^50\) Gratton and Haber suggest, “Rising economic well-being brought the vision of permanently separate homes for all generations within reach.”\(^51\) Grandparents were encouraged to live on their own as “Experts advised that extended family arrangements symbolized impoverishment and failure. Only the poor, or those with foreign values—immigrants, for example—would live in this manner; all others would choose to reside independently.”\(^52\) The role of extended family no longer seemed necessary and its value for grandchildren had been seriously challenged. Gone was the economic need for multiple generations to live together and with it went the desire to live in a three-generational household.

A new value had arisen for the elderly: independence and security.

**Social Security**

Social security, as well as private pensions, emerged as a means to meet the widespread desire for financial and residential independence of older Americans.\(^53\) The popularity of Social Security reveals America’s desire not to be burdened by the need to support the elderly. Social Security greatly reduced the need for multigenerational living as is noticeable in the pattern of elderly establishing separate residences. In 1900, over 60 percent of older adults lived with children; by 1962, that dropped to 25 percent, and by 1975 it dropped to only 14 percent.\(^54\) For the first time in history, the majority of Americans had the financial resources to live in their own home. The expansion of the government’s role in assuring the welfare of its citizens—through programs such as Social Security—played a vital part in transforming family relations.\(^55\) As a result of Social Security, new ideas have emerged about the obligations between generations. Aging parents are less financially dependent upon their children while children are relying less on parents to start a family and begin a home.\(^56\)

In 1935, the United States Congress initiated Social Security. Prior to this point, older people and their families were responsible for their own welfare.
Numerous states even had laws requiring adult children to care for and support aged parents; although the enforcement of these laws was negligible. Historians Shammas, Salmon, and Dahlin note the impact of Social Security on the elderly in the job market.

In 1900 nearly two-thirds of all men sixty-five and older were still in the work force. Many of those not working were involuntarily retired, forced out by ill health, physical incapacity, or the growing prejudice against older employees in the industrial labor force. Nor was retirement widespread among the well-to-do. The wealthy did not have to work, but there was no ethic of retirement drawing them from employment... Compulsory retirement, which had been growing slowly but noticeably since the late nineteenth century, expanded enormously in the years after the passage of Social Security, until by 1971, only a quarter of the men over sixty-five were still in the labor force. Whether by intention or not, Social Security has served as a powerful tool in the manipulation of the size of the labor market.

Social Security strongly influenced the elderly to leave the work force and enter a season of retirement. Retirement has existed in previous eras, but it was gradual. Men worked less as they aged and handed over aspects of the farm or business to others. Never has retirement existed as it has now. With no compass for this new phase of life and few models to imitate, the elderly were left to discover meaning for the remaining years they had left.

**GRANDPARENTHOOD TODAY**

Family relationships have changed over the past century; there are new expectations regarding how the generations are to interact, when, and in what ways. The industrial revolution altered family structure with the primary function shifting from social-institutional to emotional-supportive. The modern family is nuclear not extended. A new sense of individualism and the desire for personal privacy has weakened ties between the generations. The decline of the patriarchal idea and a growing desire for economic independence displaced the elderly from a central place in the family and helped fuel age-segregation and a subsidiary role for grandparents.

Social security provided the means for independent living for the elderly. Separate residence for the generations become both desirable and possible in the twenty-first century. The desire to have enough money to remain independent appears to be the driving motive for the retired class. One of the clearest indications of the new way of life for the elderly is reflected in living situation. Today, grandparents desire a relationship that is "one of 'closeness at a distance', of basically independent existence." The desire for intimate independence shapes the older generations contact with younger generations.

Such views fit the newly predominant cultural view of grandparents as independent individuals whose most important responsibility was to maintain their autonomy. Stressing the advantages of retirement, experts warned their readers of the need to be financially secure. No aged person, they argued, should depend on relatives for support.

When the generations successfully achieved independence from one another, there was nothing to anchor them together and the elderly began to search for a purpose for their remaining years of life. As society fragments, seniors are encouraged to band together and take care of themselves because nobody else will. With no financial need to work, and limited involvement with family, the place that the elderly looked was to themselves. Independence from the generations led to indulgence for themselves. As a result, older adults started viewing autonomy and leisure as the goals of their "golden years."

Because the new role of grandparents was not clearly defined, it came to be viewed as a frill, a role not essential to the functioning of the family or the growth and development of grandchildren. Grandparents themselves feared meddling in their children’s and grandchildren’s lives. So, while the relationship, when it existed, could be very positive, its limited and tenuous
nature removed grandparents from the central hub of family life and placed them on the periphery with a minimal role.

Grandparents became companions to their grandchildren as independence meant they had no authoritative position or important economic role in the family.\textsuperscript{62} Experts counseled grandparents to "strive for love and friendship rather than demand respect and obedience. Grandparents coddled and cuddled rather than disciplined; they listened affectionately rather than spoke authoritatively."\textsuperscript{63}

Society changed their definition of family from institution to companionship and one manifestation of this change is found in children's literature about grandparenthood.\textsuperscript{64} A few notable titles of children's books include *Grandmas Are for Giving Tickles* and *Grandpas Are for Finding Worms*. The children's book *What Grandpas and Grandmas Do Best* suggest that grandparents are for playing hide-and-seek, singing a lullaby, building a sandcastle, and playing games. In *Grandma, Grandpa, and Me* grandparents are to play with, work along side, and have fun with. Children's literature speaks of a grandparent's role as one of playmate and companion.

Not only have the roles of grandparents changed, but the way in which Americans view the elderly has changed as well. A French doctor commented, early in the century, that the treatment of the elderly was a measure of the quality of society.\textsuperscript{65} As a group, "the aged have been taken up last and least by historians" which is "symptomatic of the shaky esteem the elderly command in contemporary society."\textsuperscript{66}

We live in an era with an emphasis on youth. Any hint of gerontocracy, the rule of the old, is rejected.\textsuperscript{67} Adolescence is venerated as the ideal developmental stage of life. Children are encouraged to get there as quickly as they can, teenagers are urged to stay there as long as they can, while adults are prompted to return to that way of living (freedom from responsibility dominated by leisure) as soon as they can.\textsuperscript{68} Old people are often associated with the discarded values of the past while the glorification of youth embodies rebellion against constricting morality.\textsuperscript{69}

Grandparents adjusted their value system based on the place and purpose society gave to the elderly. Values shifted from leaving a family legacy and financial inheritance to a pleasant retirement experience. A bumper sticker occasionally seen on the car of elderly people captures this well, "We’re spending our children’s inheritance." Instead of investing in future generations older couples are encouraged to "indulge themselves a little, in travel, little splurges, or whatever makes their last years more enjoyable."\textsuperscript{70}

**A CASE IN POINT**

Andrew Blechman, author of *Leisureville*, explores what life is like as a retired person living in the Villages, a gated community in Florida. The Villages is larger than Manhattan, boasts a population over 100,000, has a golf course for every day of the month, its own newspaper, radio, and TV station, the Villages is missing only one thing: children. The Villages not only encourages, but legalized the segregation of ages from one another. No one under the age of nineteen may live there. Children may visit, but their stay is strictly limited to a total of thirty days a year.\textsuperscript{71} When Dave, one of the residents, was asked if he was uncomfortable living in a community without children, he answered, "I’m not thirteen…I want to spend time with people who are my own age."\textsuperscript{72} Another resident says, "I raised my children and I didn’t want to raise anyone else’s."\textsuperscript{73} These residents have an appreciation for a new and growing phenomenon in American culture: age segregation.

The impact of age segregation on communities, families, and churches is significant. Blechman notes the negative impact the departure of his neighbors to the Villages will have on his community.

Were the Andersons really going to drop out of our community, move to Florida, and sequester themselves in a gated geritopia? Dave and Betsy had volunteered on the EMS squad, and Betsy also volunteered at the senior center and our local hospice. By all accounts, they were solid citizens with many more years of significant community involvement ahead of them. And frankly, our community needed the Andersons...Rather than lead, they had chosen to secede.\textsuperscript{74}
Individuals who retire to communities where they have no family or roots have abandoned their obligations to those they left behind. The residents of the Villages do not attempt to conceal this fact, “at the Villages we spend our dollars on ourselves” and don’t have to think about the “problems” of our former communities and distant families.75 One resident states, “The only thing I worry about these days is my daily golf game.” A carefree lifestyle dominated by leisure pursuits and warm weather is the driving priority for those who live in the Villages.

The self-indulgent values of those who live in the Villages are not isolated to this one group but reflect the societies views of retirement and role of the elderly in America.77 Retirement communities such as the Villages are so prevalent the AARC, American Association of Retirement Communities, was created to encourage the formation of more retirement communities, support those that exist, and equip management to oversee them.

This new phase of life created an identity crisis in which older Americans began to ask what retirement was supposed to look like and what they were supposed to do with the remaining years they had left to live. Del Webb, a wealthy Arizonan entrepreneur, helped to redefine the role and place of the elderly in American society. In 1962, Time Magazine put Webb on the cover with the title, “The Retirement City: A New Way of Life for the Old.”78 Webb’s research suggested that retirees would welcome the opportunity to distance themselves from their families and limit involvement; something once thought impossible. Webb built one of the first retirement communities, located in Arizona, promising sunshine, low cost living, and something to do. Webb sold this lifestyle as the new American dream suggesting retirees had worked hard, and now it was time to pursue hobbies, play golf, and socialize with their peers.

Retirement is a recent phenomenon and the effects of this sociological revolution are just beginning to be understood. Historians are beginning to question the wisdom of retirement stating, “We grow troubled about the predominant retirement experience for the contemporary elderly.”79 In addition, “Gerontologists have long worried about the impact of cessation of work on the orientation, the basic sense of worth, of retirees.”80 Gerontologists have called the forced inactivity of the aged a social death that precedes biological death.81 Retirement has resulted in the loss of function and authority for the elderly while providing an abundance of leisure.82

The impact of compulsory retirement, the emergence of mass affluence, and the development of the welfare state as an alternative to the family has existed long enough that we are now seeing the impact on the family. Researchers Kurt Luscher and Karl Pillemer argue that relationships in the family are structured so that they generate various types of ambivalence toward one another.83 One of the unique developments sociologically for American families is the isolation of the nuclear unit from extended family, which has resulted in the fragmentation, discontinuity, confusion, and uncertainty regarding how social relations should be conducted. In general, society has lost its compass regarding why the generations should interact, how they are to do so, and what responsibilities one has to the other. Due to dramatic accelerated change in a short period of time contemporary societal guidance about how relationships between the generations should be carried out has nearly disappeared.

It is likely that a percentage of Christian grandparents have embraced the Leisureville mentality and need a renewed biblical vision regarding their role in the family and purpose in society. The role of a grandparent in America in the twenty-first century is ambiguous, periphery, and is negotiated on a family-by-family, individual-by-individual basis. Grandparents life expectancy has increased from fifty years in 1900 to almost eighty years in the twenty-first century.84 The opportunity for grandparents to invest in their grandchildren’s lives has never been greater. Despite grandparents historically unparalleled opportunity to be involved in their grandchild’s life, the impact of their investments may have never been smaller than it is today.85

ENDNOTES
2 Donald Cowgill and Lowell D. Holmes, Aging and
5 Stearns, Old Age in Preindustrial Society, 4.
7 Antoine Yvan, La Trompette Du Ciel (Rouen: Gillies Gordon, 1719), 334.
8 Francis Bacon, The History of Life and Death (London, 1638), 275-282.
11 Stearns, Old Age in Preindustrial Society, 4.
13 Stearns, Old Age in Preindustrial Society, 7.
15 Ibid., 7.
16 Ibid., 7.
18 Ibid., 715.
19 Ibid., 715.
20 Ibid., 712-713.
21 Ibid., 713.
22 Ibid., 714.
23 Ibid., 717.
27 Ibid., 9.
28 Stearns, Old Age in Preindustrial Society, 12.
29 Shammas, Salmon, and Dahlin, Inheritance in America, 147.
37 Ibid., 10.
42 Ibid., 6.
43 Ibid., 6.
44 Ibid., 7.
45 Troyansky, “Old Age in Rural Enlightened Provence,” 214.

Shammas, Salmon, and Dahlin, Inheritance in America, 3.

Ibid., 3.


Ibid., 3.

Ibid., 3.

Smith, “Historical Change in the Household Structure of the Elderly,” 249.

Shammas, Salmon, and Dahlin, Inheritance in America, 5.

Ibid., 149.

Ibid., 151.

Ibid., 153.


Vern Bengston argues that family relationships across multiple generations are becoming increasingly important in American society (Vern L. Bengston, “Beyond the Nuclear Family: The Increasing Importance of Multigenerational Bonds,” Journal of Marriage and Family 63:1 (2001), 2). In 2012, over 40 percent of children were born out of wedlock and record numbers of couples are divorced every year. Due to the high number of single parent homes grandparents fulfill family functions such as childcare, financial assistance, even surrogate parenting. The USA Today reported that multigenerational living is on the rise again and has grown from 3.7 percent of all American homes in 2000 to 5.6 percent of all American homes in 2012 (Haya El Nasser, “Multigenerational Homes Increase,” USA Today, October 12, 2012 sec. A, pp. 3).

The economic needs of previous generations created a mutually symbiotic relationship between generations. The generations needed each other to provide for basic life needs such as food, clothes, and housing. As economic needs continue to increase, it is plausible that the elderly’s purpose and place in society will continue to grow in importance.


J. Grasset, La Fin de la vie, (La Chapelle-Montligeon: Lonquet, 1903), 20.

Stearns, Old Age in Preindustrial Society, 1.


From a lecture given by Timothy Paul Jones at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, October 29, 2012.

Smith, “Growing Old in an Age of Transition,” 197.

Shammas, Salmon, and Dahlin, Inheritance in America,” 160.

Blechman, Leisureville, 4.

Ibid., 4.

Ibid., 128.

Ibid., 7.

Ibid., 8; 11.

Ibid., 17.

Retirement communities and old age homes are a recent phenomenon. In 1929 there were 1,215 old age homes in America, predominately sponsored by churches and benevolent societies with nearly half requiring no fee for admission. Retirement communities were not begun until 1920 when religious and labor groups purchased land in Florida. Since then, private builders have capitalized on the potential market among this elderly population in America and build communities all over the United States with the
premier community being the Villages in Florida. For more see Steven R. Smith’s work in “Growing Old in an Age of Transition” in Old Age in Preindustrial Society.


79 Stearns, Old Age in Preindustrial Society, 3.

80 Ibid., 3.

81 Troyansky, “Old Age in Rural Enlightened Provence,” 212.

82 Stearns, Old Age in Preindustrial Society, 3.


85 Ibid., 2.
“Honey, what area am I in charge of in this house?” said the dad in *Good Luck Charlie*, a Disney Channel show we watch with my kids. Bob’s words were addressed to his television wife Amy, after she had corrected him in front of their daughter about not having the right to ground her because of her deception. Mom belittled Dad (albeit in a humorous way) and made sure he knew who the real boss of the family was: the mother. Sitcoms play out this scenario on screens all across America at an increasingly alarming rate. Buffoonish, ignorant, self-centered, and inept television dads must be shown their proper places in the home. At best, television dads are nominal or figurehead leaders of the home, but at worst, they are relegated to the intellectual level of the family pet.

This farcical portrayal of dads on television has deteriorated to the point that to not see the role of men belittled or ridiculed would seem ironic or nostalgic, harkening back to the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s where father figures were generally portrayed from positions of wisdom and authority.¹ Contrary to this ridiculous portrayal, another extreme is often represented in which men are depicted as being physically aggressive, violent, and power-hungry. In the past, however, men on television were generally depicted as leaders, problem solvers, confident, and athletic.²

Given these observations, this article seeks to answer two main questions: Was the prevalent view of the imbecilic dad common in the early days of television, and what is the impact of the present-day portrayal of inept fathers on culture and home life and in the church? We conclude with closing comments on how this trend can begin to be corrected. We will look through the lens of the social sciences – observations on how an individual is influenced by the larger group³ – and then highlight the particular role a father possesses based upon scriptural principles. We attempt to show that when society opposes the natural order that God created for the family, other aspects of life tend to fall out of order, as well.

**HISTORICAL GLANCE OF THE IMAGE OF DAD FROM THE 1950S THROUGH THE 1990S**

In the book *Fatherless America*, David Blakenhorn notes that from 1960 to the 1990s the percentage of children not living with their biological fathers increased from...
17.5% to 36.3%.

The U.S. Census of 2010 now states that this percentage has risen to 39.2%, and when this figure is adjusted for those families only living with married biological fathers, the number raises even higher to 41.7%. These figures indicate that our nation is replete with citizens raised quite differently than generations born prior to 1970, in which over 80% of children were raised by their biological fathers. Interestingly, a similar trend can be observed regarding the role of fathers on television during this same period.

The relationship of this contemporary social phenomenon and the deterioration of the portrayal of fathers on television is investigated more thoroughly in the following sections. However, before this article explores the social changes due to increasingly fatherless home situations in America, a historical survey of the portrayal of fathers on television is necessary.

**PORTRAYAL OF SITCOM FATHERS FROM THE 1950S TO THE 1990S**

Two influential studies were composed that looked at the portrayal of men and the portrayal of the family from the 1950s to the 1990s. The first study was compiled by Scharrer, and the second was amassed by Olson and Douglas. Both concluded that the portrayal of fathers in sitcoms had deteriorated from a father-knows-best to a father-is-unnecessary format.

*Scharrer Study*

Scharrer sampled long-running and top-rated domestic sitcoms from 1950 to 1990 and discovered that “the changing portrayal of father figures [went] from positions of wisdom and authority to roles in which their sensibility is called into question or mocked through foolish, humorous portrayals.” Show such as *I Love Lucy and Honeymooners* had a stereotype in which the fathers/husbands were the main bread winners and source of authority in the home, and although the male figure could be mocked (and at times ignored), the problem was resolved with an implied recognition that the man was the final authority. However, this stereotype began to change, with a clear demarcation coming in around the mid-1980s. During this time, research showed that “domestic comedies after 1984 depicted more dominance and less satisfaction and stability in the family than those [shows] prior.” There were two hypotheses that they set to investigate:

H1: The more recent the program, the more foolish the portrayal of the father character.

H2: Family-oriented sitcoms featuring working class families will be more likely to portray the father character foolishly than family-oriented sitcoms featuring middle to upper class families.

The results affirmed hypothesis one. There was a trend in domestic sitcoms in which fathers were portrayed as foolish. For example, the number of times a mother told a joke at the father’s expense increased from 1.80 times per episode in the 1950s to 4.29 times per episode in 1990.

Hypothesis two was also confirmed. Sitcoms of working-class families portrayed fathers as the “butt of the joke” more often than shows with fathers in middle- or upper-class families. According to a novel measurement tool, the Foolishness of Portrayal Scale, Sharrer found that working-class fathers were twice as likely as upper-class fathers to be regarded as the butt of the joke (38.58 points vs. 19.17 points, respectively). A numerical observation of all the sitcoms showed that in the ’50s, the father made fun of the mother 58 times while the mother made fun of the father 19 times. Over the course of the next fifty years, each decade saw a change in proportion for parents making fun of the other, ending with 1990, where fathers made fun of mothers 81 times and mothers made fun of fathers 176 times. This indirect relationship mirrors the trend observed in the ’50s in a derogatory manner toward fathers. Aside from the type of jesting taking place in these types of shows, this reversal in how fathers were portrayed on television is significant. Shows such as
Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver, Good Times, or The Cosby Show were replaced with Married with Children, Roseanne, The Simpsons, and That '70s Show. Wise fathers were exchanged for silly dads. Educated fathers were substituted with bumbling fools.

This shift in popular portrayals of the father in the media, has coincided with an increase in television media consumption. Currently, the average household consumes over 40 hours of media per week. Therefore, the current American generation of television consumers sees the role of dad as something to be mocked, leading to the implication (conscious or not) that traditionally authoritative, kind, loving, and wise fathers are no longer essential (or possibly even existent).

Olson and Douglas Study

Another research group to tackle this issue was that of Olson and Douglas, who investigated whether the gender roles within the family from the 1950s to the 1990s as portrayed on television had changed. Their results showed that family satisfaction in the portrayed gender roles peaked in the 1950s and then again in the mid-'80s.

The satisfaction scale Olsen and Douglas used to correlate the gender roles showed that when the roles were more equitable (The Cosby Show and Family Ties), the level of harmony displayed within the family increased; however, as the gender roles grew less equitable (in television shows such as Home Improvement and Roseanne), the level of harmony displayed within the family decreased.

Olson and Douglas also observed that even though television shows presented a negative portrayal of the family, particularly that of the father’s ineptness, aloofness, or chauvinism, the ratings for those particular programs were unusually high. This result indicated that television consumers were supportive of the continuation of shows whose familial portrayal was less than ideal, even if studies demonstrated that they believed it was not an accurate depiction of their family or of American families in general.

Since the American consumer continued to watch these shows, families were freely choosing to view programs that did not align with their family values while at the same time increasing the likelihood that they would adapt more negative portrayals into their own family structure at some point. Davidson punctuated the findings of Olsen and Douglas by showing that connections can be observed “between commercials and gender role attitudes.” Thus, as more people watch a television show, the more likely they are to imitate the values and actions in real life. With the increase of media consumption in the home, it is not surprising that gender categories in America are changing – the influence of television programs that seek to destroy the stereotyped role of father is in full force. As a result, a question may be raised as to whether there is any correlation between the portrayal of fathers on television and the behavior that is exhibited in the U.S. society.

David Hatch believes there is, citing that, with over 40% of American children not living with their dads and television shows not portraying a positive image of a father, television media should be partially to blame. A large proportion of these media are delivered through intentionally designed, consumer-focused commercials, and although they do not carry a long narrative story, the underlying message from commercials can be just as powerful.

**PORTRAYAL OF MEN IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS**

Two influential studies were composed on this topic: one examining the portrayal of men and women in television commercials in 1971 and the other examining the portrayal of men in television commercials in 1999. McArthur and Resko affirmed that commercials in 1971 portrayed men and women as fulfilling more traditional roles, while Kaufman, reviewing commercials in 1999, showed that men's roles were becoming progressively similar to those of women; however, male's achievement of female roles were limited.

**McArthur and Resko Study**

In 1971, McArthur and Resko looked at the portrayal of men and women in television commercials – a more manageable television segment since commercials fill approximately 20% of television air time. McArthur and Resko noted that by the age of 17, a viewer would have viewed some 350,000 commercials. According to Callahan, “television commercials are specifically aimed
at creating values and self-identity that are based on the purchasing of particular material goods” (emphasis mine). McArthur and Resko set out to discover what the characteristics were of adult male and female models in these 350,000 commercials that were “purchased” along with the product. Were these commercials establishing stereotyped roles or seeking to change the perception of how men (and women) should be viewed? What they ascertained was that “Males comprised 57% of the central figures” of the commercials and that “70% of the males were portrayed as authorities” compared to “14% of the females [who] were portrayed as authorities.” They also observed that the men behaved differently than the women in that their sex differences and were strikingly similar to the more traditional (not necessarily biblically accurate) roles of males possessing expertise while females made up more of the product users. The final remark was that “male product users […] were more likely than the female to be rewarded with social and career advancements,” while “female product users […] were rewarded with the approval of family and husband or boyfriend.” In general, it seemed that the commercials in 1971 were affirming traditional roles rather than seeking to change the portrayal of gender roles.

Kaufman Study

Kaufman affirms that “men have often been portrayed as incompetent husbands and fathers on [television]” and that very little has changed at least through the 1980s. In previous studies of commercials, women are viewed as nurturers – the central figure of care and support for the children – while men are “portrayed as dependent on women and childlike.” This particular study looked at television commercials and how men and women were portrayed.

Men were more often shown as teaching, reading, and talking with their child than women. Men were also less likely to be seen cooking and cleaning or caring for a child that is talking, eating and playing, which is consistent with a way a mother might be portrayed. Husbands who were seen with their child and with no spouse present were more likely to be seen outside the home. One commercial demonstrated a father and son bonding moment when the dad brought home a satellite system, and the prevalent portrayal was that the husband and children were waited on by the wife/mother.

Kaufman concluded both male and female roles were depicted differently in the selected commercials but that fathers were not generally pictured alone with their children but were pictured with their spouse present. One interpretation of these depictions is that mothers are able to function in the role of a stable parent but that fathers, unless their spouse was present, may be lacking with respect to their parenting capabilities.

CORRELATION BETWEEN PORTRAYAL AND REAL LIFE

Is there a correlation between what people watch and whether they imitate the behavior of the television commercials? Callahan cites two studies that found “compelling evidence that repeated exposure to media violence contributes to aggressive behavior, anxiety and desensitization to violence.” Kaufman cites a similar study from Blakeney, Barnes and McKeough that asserts the same conclusion as that of Callahan. Perhaps, then, this same principle applies with fathers. Perhaps watching television commercials or programs where the role of the father is minimized effects the way men are expected to behave as fathers, which subsequently affects the way men behave in a certain culture. McArthur and Resko certainly hint at this assertion. Based upon the findings a previous researcher, MacArthur and Resko state that “observational learning from the live and symbolic models (television) is the first step in the acquisition of sex-typed behavior.” Considering that the percentage of children raised by their biological father in 1960 was still 82.4%, as well as the fact that the portrayal of fathers in commercials until at least 1971 was more traditional, a strong correlation could be drawn between the characteristics of the sex-typed behaviors depicted in the media and the deterioration of the nuclear family in America.

CURRENT PORTRAYAL OF FATHERS

In a recent meta-analysis, Furnham and Paltzer reviewed thirty published studies from five continents on the portrayal of men and women in television since 2000.
They concluded that "men were more likely to be voice-overs while women were presented visually more than men," yet they noticed a trend in only Western countries in which gender-role stereotyping was in decline.41 In other words, traditional roles for men and women are more prevalent outside of the U.S. and Western Europe.

Within the U.S. media, the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) conducted a novel review of 102 prime-time shows on the 4 major networks and the Warner Brother’s channel from November 1998 to mid-December 1998.36 The NFI found that only 15 of the 102 shows had dads as central figures and that only 6 of those 15 shows portrayed dads as a positive role model. To state it another way, up to 64 million children under the age of 1837 watched 97 shows out of 103 during the prime-time slots in which the role of the father was depicted as being devalued. Hatch also states that during the Saturday night programming, there was not one program “with fathers of kids 18 or younger.”38

The NFI, in an essay by Jamin Warren, reports that “Dads were 8 times more likely to be shown in a negative light when compared to moms.”39 Concerning shows aimed at teens, where the role of parents is becoming obsolete, Weinman40 asserts that producers spend so much money on the kids that they can’t afford two parents. Thus, they end up going with a single mom, or they simply “create a boorish father.”

Classic American male role models such as Robert Young in Father Knows Best and Bill Cosby in The Cosby Show were educated, wise, and possessed authority, but these types have been subverted by the foppish Ray Romano in Everybody Loves Raymond and the aloof Kurtwood Smith in That 70’s Show. By and large, contemporary prime-time fathers are foolish, clueless, and buffoonish. With around 40% of children living in homes without dads, this means 25-26 million of children in the U.S. are being “raised” by television dads – dads who are each depicted as a “dunderhead[ed], lay[ing] bout, and clueless[ly] interlop[ing] in modern familial life.”41 This caricature should come as no surprise because a significant portion of our society struggles with what it means to be a dad. Through humor, our American culture has purported that being a father is, in effect, an unnecessary station. As Blakenhorn argues, “as our society abandons the fatherhood idea, we do not simply become more aware of children growing up without fathers, [sic] we also become accepting of that. In a culture of fatherlessness, fatherhood becomes irrelevant.”42

SEX AND VIOLENCE

Another study on the portrayal of fathers came in a report titled “Boys to Men.” Although the focus was not exclusively upon the role of fathers, this research studied the images that the media sends children regarding the role of manhood. The study demonstrated the following about boys ages 10-17:

- They are more likely than girls to watch television programs and movies.
- When asked to choose 3 television role models, 80% of boys choose male characters compared to 57% for girls.
- They cite humor as being their top reason for choosing a role model (56% to 38%).
- They view “acting dumb” as positive (71%).
- They affirm that sexual activity on television is more popular.43

The study went on to show that children believed men on television were usually portrayed as confident (91%), violent (72%) and angry (69%).44 Combined with the portrayal of the thick-headed working-class dad who lounges on the sofa (scratching his beer belly), or a middle-class dad who has to be consistently corrected by his ever-condescending wife, it is no wonder that modern children may not view the role of dad as being important in society.

Bayles and Warren identify “the core demographic known as the hip-hop generation” as those born from 1964 to 1984, and at the same time, they observed an increase of absent black fathers from the home.45 This same demographic could be consistent with a number of different types of artists – singers, musicians, and actors/actresses – who did not have a proper father figure and who sought to express themselves in a way that would be viewed as “counter-cultural.” All the while, the issues
in the lives of these cultural icons could conceivably be viewed as a manifestation of the larger cultural milieu of striving to bring a sense of purpose and meaning that was lacking in their fatherless home.

In the last several years, a focus upon programs that ignore the home life or stereotype it as dysfunctional seems to be growing. A close friend of mine, who teaches at a local Christian school, once remarked that she noticed that more television programs emphasize the work place environment (e.g., CSI Miami, Person of Interest and the Mentalist) rather than the home. It would seem that life at home might be viewed as too boring or too painful, and instead, programs have chosen to stress the place where an increasing number of people in the U.S. find life to be more interesting – their job.

Thus, from the 1950s through the early 2000s, the social sciences literature demonstrates a clear correlation between the decline of the portrayal of fathers on television and the decline in the belief that the father is an essential part of the home. As opposed to the biblical model of male leadership in the home purported in Ephesians 5 and Deuteronomy 6, modern media has increasingly depicted the head of the house as second in command (or more often third in command after the wife and kids). His role is less important, and his representation is one of a bumbling fool, the butt of his wife or kids’ jokes.

**CONSEQUENCES OF THE UNNECESSARY FATHER**

Blakenhorn summarizes the idea that our elite culture has now incorporated into its prevailing family narrative the idea that fatherhood is superfluous, a distinctive social role that is either unnecessary or undesirable.45 This thinking has initiated an epidemic of fatherlessness that has caused some ethnic groups to exceed the 60% mark of homes without a father.47 Problems such as this inevitably have far-reaching negative ramifications for the family, society, and the church.

**CONSEQUENCES IN THE FAMILY**

James Dobson, in his book Bringing Up Boys, has argued that dads are important to the nuclear family in ways that are different from a mom. The following are just a few factors that Dobson identifies through empirical social sciences studies that had been published prior to 2001:

- The fact that there is an undeniable linkage between father and babies at birth.
- Infants as young as six weeks can differentiate between their father’s and mother’s voices.
- Infants are born with a drive to find and connect with their fathers.
- Toddlers seek out their dad when he is not present at home.
- Teenagers express fatherneed in even more complex ways.49

Additionally, the NFI confirms Dobson’s research with benefits that children receive from active and present fathers in the home. The following are just a small sample of these benefits:

- Infant mortality rates are 1.8 times higher for infants of unmarried mothers than for married mothers.
- Expectant fathers can play a powerful role as advocates of breastfeeding to their wives.
- Children who live apart from their fathers are more likely to be diagnosed with asthma.
- Middle school children who do not have a dad have a four times greater probability of having an affective disorder.50

In her book, My Brother’s Keeper, Van Leeuwen found that for children who were exposed to the primary care taking influence of fathers, this influence became a “strong predictor of enhanced verbal and math performances and of independence and healthy assertiveness.”51 Van Leeuwen continues by affirming the importance of a supportive father: For daughters, she sees a father’s influence as promoting the mastery of science, an area of study that many consider nontraditional for women. In addition, she sees this influence as being significant for valuing life with regard to reproduction and for resisting sexual temptation, which often results in unwed pregnancy. For sons, an involved father counteracts aggressiveness, helps reduce crime rates, and
reassures his son of “enough masculinity.” Thus, fathers are extremely important for the emotional and spiritual health of their children. As Jenny Tyree found in a recent study, a father's involvement before birth could be the difference between a positive well-being. For instance, father's voice creates a bond with his baby in utero, his presence is noticed within weeks of the birth, his absence is noticed as well, and his engagement with his teenage children can ensure a stable home life and decrease the likelihood of his son or daughter suffering unnecessary emotional stress. 

My own life as a father and son concurs with this research. With two young daughters and a young son (and having lived in a home where both of my parents raised me and three other of my siblings), I have enjoyed the unique role of father. Within my nuclear family, my role as dad is decidedly different than my wife’s role. My kids recognize that I am the final decision-maker (from a complementarian perspective). They can trust my decisions to be generally beneficial for their lives, and when I have to be away from them on business for a few days, they greet me with great enthusiasm, but they never have expressed a fear that I would not return home. I felt these same feelings of security and love during my developmental years. For as long as I can remember, I loved and respected my dad and never once entertained the idea that he would leave. He was firm but loving and modeled for me what it meant to be a God-fearing man. Although Operation World has declared that approximately one third of the children in the U.S. will not have a Christian father, the media’s lack of an emphasis on the role of the father devalues this role on a mass scale. If this trend continues, it is likely that even more children in the U.S. will not have a dad who exemplifies biblical values, which has been shown to have a stabilizing force in the home and in society at large.

**CONSEQUENCES IN THE SOCIETY**

As has been demonstrated, the influence of dads in the home is paramount to its success and, if not corrected, has more far-reaching effects upon the culture as well. A brief overview of a number of different studies demonstrates how the decline in the role of fathers has negatively affected our culture.

**INCARCERATION OF MALES**

Pew Research affirms that 41% of all births in 2008 were to unmarried mothers, which is an increase of 55% since 1990. According to this research, 4 out of 10 children are potentially growing up without a father figure. Fatherless boys are generally not being taught what it means to be a man, how to interact with girls as boys, how to treat young ladies as a gentleman, or what it means to be a father. Instead, they may be learning to a certain degree that a father is not necessary for the proper training up of a child, and that adapting to society without a dad is without noticeable consequences. Bill Glass, a dedicated prison evangelist for over 40 years, has stated that 95% of all death row inmates whom he has encountered hate their dads and that not one of them had a genuine loving relationship with their dad. In 1998, there were over 1.2 million people in federal prison or state prisons, and of the 3,452 inmates on death row, only 48 were women. Imagine how the numbers would have decreased if there was an involved dad in the lives of those male prisoners.

**EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS**

The most significant factor for ensuring the success of a child is the involvement of parents, and in particular, educators recognize the unique contributions that dads make on students who do well in school. If dads are not involved, not only will the child’s grades decrease, but if they continue without a father-figure, society will also produce less-educated citizens and a general population that is prone to depression and anxiety. This cycle snowballs to the point where previous students – who eventually become fathers – have a low education level, further contributing to low educational success for generations to come; this process spirals downward to a functionally illiterate population (or at the very least to a more class-stratified society than what is currently the case for modern American society).

**VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ABUSE**

As demonstrated by Wilcox in a 2008 study, an intact, two-parent home is the safest place for a child to grow up. Mistreatment and abuse of children has been shown to significantly increase when a child is living in
a single-parent home, as he states that "The overall rate of child abuse and neglect in single-parent households is 27.3 children per 1,000 whereas the rate of overall maltreatment in two-parent households is 15.5 per 1,000." Within homes where there is economic security and protection from the father, a child is less likely to be abused. Wilcox further showed that homes with an income below $15,000 were 22 to 25 times more likely to be abused than those living under a household income of over $30,000.

Thus, the consequences to society when a dad is not present in the home are costly. More tax dollars are spent on prisons, drug addictions, child abuse prevention programs, and remedial educational training due to the absence of a father living with his children, compared to two-parent homes. Our society is seeing the fruits of these historical choices, and unfortunately, the consequences of this decline are not limited to those outside of the church.

CONSEQUENCES IN THE CHURCH

The church has begun to see the breakdown of the family and the lack of influence an absent father can have on family and the lack of influence an absent father can have on the church.

The Barna Group confirmed this finding in a 2007 study, stating the following:

In a typical week, mothers are more likely than fathers to attend church, pray, read the Bible, participate in a small group, attend Sunday school, and volunteer some of their time to help a non-profit organization. The only faith-related activity in which fathers are just as likely as mothers to engage is volunteering to help at a church.

Although the Bible discusses the importance of women serving in the local congregation and loving their husbands and children, it much more frequently addresses the importance of men leading, teaching, preaching, and encouraging and being positive role models in both the home family and the spiritual family.

Unfortunately, the American trend of poor male role models has snuck into our churches. In churches we have been a part of in various areas of the country, we have witnessed a shortage of men in Sunday school classrooms, coaches for evangelistic recreation leagues, and those who faithfully attend at least one church meeting per week. When writing to his young disciple Timothy, the apostle Paul emphasized the fact that qualified men were to assume the office of elder/pastor. One of the key qualifications was for the elder to be a father who managed his house well. Paul declares that if an elder was not able to manage his own house well, it would be unreasonable to assume that he would be able to manage the local assembly of believers. The implication in Paul’s assertion was that overseeing his home would communicate to the other believers that he had taken seriously his first call as father, and because of his commitment as a father, he would then be capable of overseeing a larger church, which was designed to work as a spiritual family.

Paul continues his emphasis upon the special role of men in the church when he writes his second letter to Timothy pleading that the key to a healthy assembly would be Timothy’s ability to train other men. Presumptively, fathers, not only single men, are included in this call to follow in the apostolic doctrine. Although there were influential women in Paul’s life, he focuses his energy on the role of men within the church to train others and to uphold the integrity of the Gospel.

The American church is suffering from delinquent dads who either do not attend, drop off their kids, send them with their wife, or worse, do not require their family to spend much time at all with believers in a corporate setting. These profligate men are implicitly (and most of the time, tacitly) teaching their sons and daughters that connecting to believers is not important, and if their children do not know Christ as their Savior, then they are also teaching their children that God is not a daily necessity for life as a believer.
Too often, wives and mothers are carrying the burden as spiritual leaders in their home, but this was never God’s intention, as evidenced through Scripture. In addition to these references, God initially established the role of Adam as the spiritual leader in the Garden of Eden. Revelation came from God to Adam only, and we can assume that Adam communicated this message subsequently to Eve after God formed her out of Adam’s rib. However, in contemporary American culture, just as Adam did in the beginning by shirking his role as leader of the home in the Garden, fathers are shirking their responsibilities within the home, which has manifested in contemporary society through the abovementioned media outlets and subsequently makes its way into the church. The Bible’s emphasis on male leadership seeks to break this pattern, as it was not the design from the beginning, and only through the power of the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of men will this goal ever be accomplished.

**SUMMARY AND CLOSING COMMENTS**

The portrayal of dads in the media has progressively devolved from a father-knows-best role to the dunder-headed dad who needs constant supervision from his wife (or even kids). In the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s (and partly in the mid-’80s), dads were depicted as a more traditional wise leader who was capable of guiding his family. This trend changed significantly after the close of The Cosby Show, at which point dads have been portrayed more along the lines of Homer Simpson than Ward Cleaver. This article cites the numerous reports that found that the American family has deteriorated over the course of this same time period. Divorce rates are higher, single parents are more prevalent, and generations are being raised without the positive influence of a father. These phenomena have left an indelible mark in our culture, and America is seeing a rise in sons who long for male attention.

As I (David) reflect upon my childhood, I am reminded that my dad modeled for me what it means to be a man of faith. Two times, my family moved from one coast to another coast with either a low salary or none at all. My dad believed both times that these moves were the will of God for our family. The first time, I was nine years old and simply traveled with my family, but the second time, I was fifteen. My dad included me in the discussion. He taught me that obedience to God was more important than financial gain and that God would always meet my needs. Later, as a man in my thirties with my own family, I believed God wanted us to relocate overseas to Costa Rica and then Spain as missionaries. My dad questioned me, as any loving father should, but in the end, gave us his blessing. I was able to relocate my family with relative emotional confidence because I had remembered that God provided for my dad’s family while we were growing up and I knew he would provide for mine.

It is our hope that our children may follow our examples in trusting God because they heard about how their grandfathers and great-grandfathers believed God. Furthermore, when they encounter life’s adversity, we hope they remember how Dad trusted God and persevered under difficult circumstances. May another generation be taught of God’s mighty deeds and continue to follow in the well-worn path of obedience.

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in 1 Tim 3:1-7; for father’s leading in the home, see 
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see the relationship between male elders and teaching 
in 1 Tim 3:1-7; for being a positive role model, see 
Titus 1:5-9.
67 1 Tim 2:8–15.
68 1 Tim 3:5.
69 2 Tim 2:2.
70 For instance, his specific greeting of Priscilla in 2 Tim 
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Training Children for Their Good

ANDY DAVID NASELLI

We tend to hold very strong views about parental discipline, and those views are often rooted in our experience. Perhaps we experienced physical abuse or something that we think is close to it, or perhaps we never experienced physical discipline at all. (I’m the second of seven children, reared for most of my life by loving Christian parents, and my parents did not abuse me. That certainly influences how I approach the issue.) Perhaps we grew up in a church environment that was extremely strict about enforcing guidelines but very weak on applying the gospel to every aspect of parenting.

In any case, it seems like we tend to react strongly to our experience. And since one person’s experiences never completely match another’s, there is simply no way to approach this subject in a way that seems completely “balanced” to everyone because we have such a wide range of perspectives. Because of those different perspectives, people may disagree on what aspects of parental discipline we should emphasize. Our life-experiences strongly influence how we approach the issue and what we emphasize to correct what we perceive as prevalent errors in our various contexts.

To further complicate things: (1) I’m only thirty-two years old. (2) Jenni and I have been married for only eight years (almost). (3) We have only three children, and they’re all young: one turns four this week; one is fourteen months old; and we have a C-section scheduled for the third child in four weeks. One of my children hasn’t even breathed oxygen yet.

This novice position puts me at some disadvantage. It’s like asking a young soldier on active duty to address a group about how to excel in the military when that group includes fellow soldiers and some military veterans. My friend Mike Wittmer joked with me, “It’s probably important to preach this now, before you have teenagers, because I hear that then we’ll be too embarrassed to give parenting counsel.”

Those who are older generally have a more mature and wise perspective. So I want to acknowledge upfront that I have a lot of maturing to do and a lot of wisdom to gain. So I don’t plan to draw primarily on my relatively limited reserve of knowledge and wisdom from life-experiences. I’m not sprinkling this article with illustrations about my own children!

Instead I’m going to draw on the wisdom of other...
mature Christians (some of whom I’ll quote) and focus
on explaining some writings that some very wise people
wrote two or three thousand years ago. But these writ-
ings don’t have authority from their antiquity or because
the human authors were so wise; they have authority
because God himself breathed the words. So by God’s
grace I herald and proclaim these words, and that’s
where my authority primarily lies—in the text, not my
experience. What then does God’s Word teach about
parental discipline?

1. SEVEN PROPOSITIONS ABOUT
DISCIPLINE FROM HEBREWS 12:4–11

Let’s begin by looking at one of the foundational pas-
sages related to parental discipline in the NT: Hebrews
12:4–11. The context is that the author is addressing
Christians who are su-
ff
ering. Note the repetition of the
word “discipline”; it occurs at least once in every verse
except the first one:

4 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet
resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And
have you completely forgotten this word of encour-
gagement that addresses you as a father addresses
his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the
Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he
rebukes you, 6 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” (Prov 3:11–12)
7 Endure hardship as
discipline; God is treating
you as his children. . . . 10 God disciplines us . . . .

The text explicitly asserts that God disciplines
his children.

But what does discipline mean? According to the
standard Greek dictionary of the NT and other early
Christian literature (BDAG), the noun translated “dis-
cipline” (παιδε/uni1F77α, paideia: vv. 5, 7, 8, 11) means “the act
of providing guidance for responsible living, upbringing,
training, instruction . . . chiefly as it is attained by
discipline, correction.” The verb “discipline” (παιδεύω, paideu-
ō: vv. 6, 7, 10) means “to assist in the development of a person’s ability
to make appropriate choices, practice discipline.” It has
two subsets: (a) “correct, give guidance” and (b) “disci-
pline w. punishment” (BDAG). This passage focuses on “discipline with punishment”—the kind that is initially
unpleasant and painful (v. 11).

Sometimes people use the term “punishment” syn-
onymously with “discipline.” What is important is to
distinguish these two concepts since the words can over-
lap based on how people use them:

Discipline is corrective; it seeks to accomplish a
change in the one being disciplined. Punishment
is meted out in the simple interests of justice. In
bringing up children, parents should be disciplin-
ing them. In hanging a murderer, the civil magistrate is not disciplining—he is punishing. 

So God disciplines his children. But which ones?

Proposition 2. God disciplines all his children (Heb 12:6, 8).

“… he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.

So God disciplines all his children. But does he discipline others?

Proposition 3. God disciplines only his children (Heb 12:6–8).

“because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.

God’s discipline demonstrates that he loves you and that you are his child. It’s evidence that you are his child. Discipline is not bad. It’s good. It’s actually a very bad sign if discipline is absent because it means that love is absent. God disciplines his children because he loves them.

Humans are made in God’s image, and he treats his human children with dignity, compassion, and tenderness. And he disciplines them. That is not a contradiction. His discipline displays his love.

So God disciplines only his children. But what’s the point of his discipline?

Proposition 4. Discipline is training: God disciplines his children for their good (Heb 12:10–11).

They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it [i.e., discipline].

Discipline trains us to be righteous. Discipline is not an end in itself. It trains us for a specific end: “for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness” (v. 10). God’s discipline is not sadistic, nor is he lashing out in unrighteous anger, frustration, or revenge. He disciplines with a long-term view for our well-being. His discipline is a means for us to become holy, righteous, and peaceful.

So discipline is training. It’s important to remember this because it’s easy to forget when we are experiencing it. How does discipline feel?

Proposition 5. Discipline seems unpleasant and painful (Heb 12:11).

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful…

If it doesn’t seem unpleasant, then it’s not discipline. If it doesn’t seem painful, then it’s not discipline.

I should probably say, “If it doesn’t seem unpleasant and painful, then it’s not this kind of discipline.” The Hebrew and Greek words for discipline have a range of meaning. Sometimes they refer merely to teaching, exhorting, or warning and not necessarily to physical discipline or chastening. Teaching, exhorting, and warning are not always unpleasant (though they can be), nor are they always painful (though they can be). But since v. 11 says that discipline always seems unpleasant and painful, it must be referring specifically to corrective discipline—the kind that is unpleasant and painful. Try using the other common renderings for this Greek word for discipline (παιδεία, paideia) here, and they don’t work. For example: “No instruction seems pleasant at the time, but painful.” That doesn’t work because some instruction isn’t unpleasant or painful. In the context
of human parents and their children, what kind of discipline always seems unpleasant and painful? Physical discipline stands out most obviously.

The text compares how God disciplines his children to how parents physically discipline their children (cf. proposition 7 below). The second half of v. 6 says that God “chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” The verb “chastens” (μαστιγω, mastigoō) has two basic meanings: (1) “to beat with a whip or lash, whip, flog, scourge” and (2) “to punish with discipline in mind, punish, chastise” (BDAG). It’s the same word that the four Gospels use to describe the Romans’s flogging Jesus prior to his crucifixion (the first of the two meanings). And this text says that God chastens his children! God chastises his children with discipline that always seems unpleasant and painful. In context, the manner of discipline that the Hebrews have experienced includes physical suffering such as persecution and imprisonment (Heb 10:32–34).

So discipline seems unpleasant and painful. Experiencing it is not like opening birthday presents or eating ice cream; you don’t have to endure that:

**Proposition 6. God’s children should endure God’s discipline (Heb 12:5, 7, 9).**

This is the burden of the passage in context.¹

My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, . . . . ⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.

This passage assumes that parents who love their children discipline their children. God himself disciplines his children, so disciplining your children is godly. It is good and right.

These seven propositions (especially the last one) raise an important question: What exactly does it look like when parents discipline their children? Verses 5–6 quote Proverbs 3:11–12, so this passage directly connects us to the book of Proverbs. The author of Hebrews assumes that the principles of Proverbs still apply to Christians. The Proverbs are good wisdom for God’s people today. So let’s trace that thread back to Proverbs to see what it teaches about training our children for their good.

**2. LEVELS OF DISCIPLINE IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS**

I’m borrowing in this section from Paul Wegner, professor of Old Testament at Phoenix Seminary.¹⁰ Wegner memorably systematizes what the book of Proverbs teaches about parental discipline. He argues that there are four levels of discipline in the Book of Proverbs: three levels for parents and one for government.¹¹

We should spend most of our time in level 1 (teach),
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**BEYOND A PARENT’S RESPONSIBILITY**

| Level 4: Government’s Role in Discipline | Proverbs 10:31; 20:30 |

[You will notice that Level 4 discipline falls outside the parent’s responsibility, and we will look at this level later in the book. Even in Israel certain forms of punishment were not administered by parents (see Deuteronomy 21:18-21).]
less time in level 2 (warn), and as little as possible in level 3 (enforce). The severity increases from teaching to warning to enforcing.

For example, here’s how this might play out if you are in the grocery store parking lot with your three-year-old:

1. You may teach your child by saying, “Please hold Mommy’s hand while we walk into the store. This is a parking lot with lots of moving cars, and I want you to stay safe.”

2. If you feel their little hand tugging out of yours, you may warn your child by saying, “Do you see that car? You could get very hurt if you do not hold onto my hand. Please hold my hand, or if you choose to disobey, [fill in the blank].”

3. If your child pulls their hand out of yours and darts through the parking lot, you may enforce your guideline by saying, “You did not obey Mommy. You pulled your hand out of mine and ran in the parking lot. So since you chose to disobey, [fill in the blank].”

As time goes by there should be more teaching and less enforcing. The early years require a shorter distance from levels 1 to 3 (i.e., from teaching to enforcing), often getting to level 3 regularly. Parents may tend to warn, warn, warn, and rarely enforce. They may repeatedly say, “If you do that again, then [fill in the blank].” But these often become vain threats with no real sting.

**Level 1. Teach**

Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. They are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. (Prov 1:8–9)

Parents must clearly explain to their children what they expect from their children. This takes so many forms, and it happens in every venue of life as parents spend time with their children (cf. Deut 6:6–9). Parents should . . .

- Talk about the gospel and how it applies to all areas of life
- Teach values by modeling for their children what they expect from their children
- State rules to their children
- Explain those rules
- Encourage and affirm their children
- Explain improper behavior in neutral contexts
- Connect sin with its consequences so that children see sin’s long-term effects

**Level 2. Warn**

Warning can save a person from danger:

Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men . . . .
Wisdom will save you also from the adulterous woman . . . . (Prov 2:12a, 16a)

God is patient and kind with us, and we should be patient and kind with our children. We need God’s wisdom to know when to warn instead of enforce. When we warn, we clearly tell our children what will happen if they do not heed our warning. We warn about both short-term and long-term consequences. Short-term consequences include how we will enforce our guidelines if they break them.

**Level 3. Enforce**

Wise parents are concerned primarily about their children’s heart, not their external obedience:

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. (Prov 4:23)

We don’t want children who are merely externally compliant like good Pharisees or like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. But external disobedience evidences heart problems. They are an opportunity to deal with heart issues. And when children disobey their parents, parents need God’s wisdom regarding how to enforce their guidelines.

This may involve verbally rebuking our children, revoking privileges, and sometimes physical discipline (e.g., “spanking”). The main idea here in Proverbs (especially in four passages that mention “the rod”) is “that temporary punishment is better than allowing wickedness or evil to
An increasing number of Christians reject physical discipline (or “spanking”) as one of the means of disciplining children. Some argue very passionately that it is wrong for a parent ever to spank their child. This view is growing in popularity and influence. Prominent books and blogs that argue against spanking raise at least five questions:

**Question 1. Does “the rod” represent discipline but exclude physical discipline (Prov 13:24; 22:15; 23:13–14; 29:15)?**

Some Christians answer yes: Some argue that there’s a difference between “a rod” and “the rod.” For example, Proverbs 13:24 says, “Whoever spares the rod hates their children.” “A rod,” some argue, refers to physical discipline, but “the rod” is a metaphor for discipline that excludes physical discipline.

Response: Distinguishing between “a rod” and “the rod” like that demonstrates a really poor grasp of how Hebrew grammar works. It’s a grammatical fallacy.

Some argue that rod means in Proverbs what it does in Psalm 23: “your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Ps 23:4b). So if the rod is comforting, they argue, how can it be a tool for uncomfortable physical discipline?

In reply, I’ll quote an anti-spanking proponent named William Webb, who recently wrote an entire book against spanking. Here’s what he says about that argument:

I have to chuckle at some anti-spanking rhetoric by Christians who think that the “child and rod” proverbs in the Bible do not involve physical beatings at all. This popular notion among many lay Christians connects the “rod” of the child-discipline texts in Proverbs not with an instrument for beating children but with an instrument for shepherding a flock of sheep. As the argument goes, a shepherd does not hit the sheep with his rod but rather guides them gently along on the path that they should take. Such shepherding rod interpretations of the discipline texts of Proverbs amount to a lexical fallacy known as illegitimate totality transfer.

These anti-spankers wrongly drag material from one context [i.e., Ps 23] into another [i.e., “the rod” passages in Proverbs] just because they share the same word. Furthermore, this shepherd’s rod interpretation conveniently forgets that the Hebrew word beat or hit (nakah) often goes along with the word rod in the discipline proverbs—an example of this combination is found in Proverbs 23:13–14. So the hitting or striking function of the rod within the corporal discipline passages is explicit and is different from the shepherding passages. Pro-spanking scholars rightly argue that the rod is an instrument used in bodily discipline to hit the child.

I disapprove of the rhetoric “beat” and “hit.” But my point in quoting Webb is that he rightly acknowledges that the rod is a means of physical discipline. Webb concedes that point, but he goes on to argue that we should follow the Bible’s trajectory and move beyond the Bible to a better ethic that excludes physical discipline. So Webb agrees with pro-spanking scholars that the rod is “probably a wooden stick of some sort” that parents use to strike a child.

OT scholars whose works I’ve studied unanimously agree that the four passages in Proverbs that mention “the rod” at least include physical discipline. Wegner, for example, says that the rod “undoubtedly suggests some type of corporal punishment.” The rod may be able to refer to multiple levels of discipline, but it certainly includes physical discipline (the kind that Heb 12:11 says seems unpleasant and painful). So it’s wrong to argue that the rod excludes physical discipline.

Let’s look briefly at the four passages in Proverbs that mention “the rod”:

**Proverbs 13:24**

Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.

So parents who love their children discipline them using “the rod.” Bruce Waltke, an OT scholar who has authored perhaps the finest commentary available on Proverbs, notes that this proverb makes some assumptions: “[1] that folly is bound up in the heart of the child...
(22:15; cf. Gen. 8:21). . . . [2] ‘that it will take more than just words to dislodge it’ [Kidner].”

One pastor shrewdly observes,

In order to have a garden full of weeds, it is not necessary to do anything. One must just let it go. And in order to have a home full of grief, it is not necessary to do anything either. Just let it go. . . . A man who does not spank his son hates his son. This does not mean that he is filled with emotional revulsion for his son. It means that the lack of discipline has a destructive impact on the future course of that son’s life. A parental refusal to discipline is therefore an act of hatred.27

That may overstate the case a bit, but it’s generally true. Perhaps we should say, “Parents who do not discipline their child hate their child.” Most children need physical discipline at some point, but that doesn’t mean that all do. Parents who have an unusually gentle and conscientious child who responds well to non-physical discipline shouldn’t feel guilty for not spanking them. It’s feasible that some children never or extremely rarely require any physical discipline because they are so externally compliant.28 But the point is that properly administering physical discipline demonstrates love.

**Proverbs 22:15**

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far away.

So “the rod” is a means to remove folly from your children. Our children are depraved, so we shouldn’t be surprised when they are bent on having their own way. Painful methods of discipline are a God-ordained means to train children for their good.

In 1984, when D. A. Carson was thirty-eight years old, he wrote an article called “Growing up a ‘PK’” (PK = pastor’s kid). He reflected on twelve features in his upbringing that shaped him, and one of those features was physical discipline:

Certain things evoked sure and certain punishment. One was willful disobedience; another was sass. No surer way of bringing down the doom of Dad on our heads could be found than by sassing Mom. One of the spankings I received, however, and certainly one of those I remember most vividly, was for neither disobedience nor cheek, but for a whining, complaining attitude that had soured a two-hour journey for the entire family. I was perhaps eight or nine at the time, and it did me a great deal of good. I learned that endless complaining and whining were not only offensive to others but were likely to prove painful to me, and that my parents would not tolerate such behavior in their children. Yet their regime, though firm, was certainly not harsh or nasty. And sometimes my parents, especially my mother, would take some pains to explain exactly why I was being punished, inevitably working in something about her love for me.29

“The rod” is a means to remove folly from your children.

**Proverbs 23:13–14**

Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die. Punish them with the rod and save them from death.

So “the rod” is a means for saving children from death. Bruce Waltke explains and then cautions,

Severe discipline is not cruel, but to withhold it from callous youth is. . . . However, the cleansing rod must be applied with the warmth, affection and respect for the youth. Warmth and affection, not steely discipline, characterize the father’s lectures (cf. 4:1–9). Parents who brutalize their children cannot hide behind the rod-doctrine of Proverbs.30

**Proverbs 29:15**

A rod and a reprimand impart wisdom, but a child left undisciplined disgraces its mother.

“The rod” is a means for parents to impart wisdom
to their children and avoid disgrace.

So “the rod” includes physical discipline. But . . .

**Question 2. Is spanking a form of physical and psychological child abuse?**

Some Christians answer yes: Spanking physically and psychologically damages children. Beating or hitting your children is cruel, unloving, and undignified. It’s abusive.

Response: First, note the rhetoric: sometimes people who oppose physical discipline refer to it as “beating” or “hitting” or “hurting” rather than “physical discipline” or “spanking” or “painful methods of discipline.” That is a common rhetorical move that slants the discussion. It’s known as “spin” or “bias” in news stories.

The English word “hit” is a broad term that can include a civil magistrate striking a criminal, two people fighting each other, or a parent disciplining a child. But the actions are very different because of who is striking whom, how they are striking, and what is motivating the striking. The civil magistrate may be satisfying justice; two men fighting may be motivated by hatred, jealousy, or self-defense (to give just a few examples); and a parent properly disciplining a child is motivated by love. To call parental physical discipline “hitting” is a rhetorical move because the word “hit” has an overwhelmingly negative connotation.

Of course, we oppose beating or hitting our children. Unfortunately, some people equate physical discipline with abusive tactics like punching, backhanding, striking on the face, kicking, pushing, and public shaming. That is not what we mean by physical discipline. That is abusive. That is sin. That is heinous sin. And the last thing I want is for an abusive parent to think that this article justifies their abuse. This is a really difficult path to tread because many abusive parents do not think of themselves as abusive and think that they are giving appropriate physical discipline.

So yes, spanking is sometimes a form of child abuse, but it is not always a form of child abuse. Because we are depraved, we can abuse any form of discipline. Non-physical discipline can be abusive, and physical discipline can be abusive. But that doesn’t mean that non-physical discipline or physical discipline are always abusive.

Wegner clarifies,

There is never any reason or justification for causing physical harm or danger to a child, even when spanking. . . . The [ultimate] goal of spanking is not to induce pain, but to teach the child that his or her behavior has crossed a boundary line. It is used only when the child has not responded appropriately to lower levels of discipline.31

Our own government recognizes this difference between “child abuse” and “corporal punishment or physical discipline.”32

A friend of mine adopted two sons from Ethiopia. One was physically abused—beaten—before my friend adopted him. This five-year-old child recently told his new daddy about how he used to be beaten, and my friend responded with great concern: “So when I spank you,” he began—but the child cut him off as his eyes got big with equally great concern: “Oh, no, daddy! That’s different. You do that because you love me.”

When parents administer physical discipline properly (e.g., not in unrighteous anger), it shows that they love their children; it’s a means of removing folly from them, and it imparts wisdom. At times it is spiritually abusive not to physically discipline your children.

So, yes, some parents who use physical discipline practice it sinfully. But is that a reason for rejecting it altogether? That would be like arguing that we shouldn’t have preachers because some preachers sinfully abuse listeners by mishandling the text and manipulating the audience. That would be like arguing that we shouldn’t distinguish between the complementary roles of husbands and wives (where husbands lovingly lead and wives submit) because some husbands sinfully abuse their wives with authoritarianism rather than sacrificially serving. Often people who strongly oppose spanking are reacting to abusive situations. Abuse is terrible, but we shouldn’t reject physical discipline merely because some parents use it abusively.

Pastor-theologian John Piper asks,

What worldview inclines a person to think that you shouldn’t spank a child? Where does that
come from? Well it comes straight out of this culture, I think. . . . I could give a whole theology of spanking here, but maybe I’ll just boil it down. Why does this person feel squeamish about spanking? My guess is that it is a wrong view of God.33

Understandably, all sorts of questions arise regarding mechanics, for example:

- How old should the child be?
- Should we use our hand or an object like a wooden spoon?
- How many “swats” should we administer to the bottom and for what offenses?
- How frequently should this occur?

The Bible doesn’t answer those questions, so we must ask God for wisdom that we can apply to our individual contexts. There’s not one right method. The statements in Proverbs don’t fully explain exactly how parents should discipline their children. The proverbs are pithy statements making a general point.34

So while spanking may be abusive, it is not abusive when parents spank rightly. But are parents spanking rightly when they spank children?

**Question 3. Do the proverbs about using the rod refer to young men rather than children?**

Some Christians answer yes: The word translated “child” means “young man.” So even if the rod does refer to physical discipline, it refers to physically disciplining only young men, not children—especially not little children.

Response: The only people I’m aware of who argue this way are almost exclusively those who oppose spanking.35 I’m not aware of a single English Bible translation that supports this view.

I asked Jack Collins36 about this, and he replied,

The evidence that Proverbs as a whole is addressed to “young men” rather than children is unlikely to withstand examination. It touches on people in a whole range of ages and life situations. Besides, na‘ar [the Hebrew word translated “child” in Prov 22:15; 23:13; 29:15] isn’t the only word used. (And see 4:1–9 for an address aimed at the very young.) There are those who insist on spanking a child for everything. Then there are those who think any such thing is abuse. But those aren’t the only two options. In my classes on Proverbs, I use the mnemonic moderate, moral, and memorable. I also point out that spanking is disciplinary and not retributive. If it injures the child, it is wrong, but making their bum sting isn’t an injury! I prefer to think of spanking as one element in the parental toolbox for training up our children,37 and I take the rod in Proverbs as a sort of metonymy for the whole range of negative reinforcements. To say that we can do without spanking is, IMHO, seriously to underestimate the challenge of shaping the character of a child.38

So the proverbs about “the rod” refer to children. But those passages occur in the OT, not the NT.

**Question 4. Is spanking an obsolete part of the Mosaic law-covenant in the Old Testament?**

Some Christians answer yes: There is a discontinuity between the OT and the NT regarding how parents should discipline their children, and physical discipline is now obsolete. It does not appear anywhere in the NT.

Response: The proverbs are not part of the Mosaic law-covenant. They are general, timeless truths. Andreas Köstenberger argues,

Heb. 12:5–11 does in fact suggest a continuity between the OT and NT concepts of discipline. Although Hebrews 12 does not specifically mention using the “rod,” its direct reference to Prov. 3:12 warrants this conclusion.39

Bruce Waltke similarly asserts,

The New Testament teaching does not abrogate or supersede it [Prov 13:24] and should not be abandoned in the church as unfashionable (cf. Eph. 6:4; Heb. 12:5–11) or explained away as culturally conditioned.40
So the proverbs present general, timeless truths. But can a proverb contradict the gospel itself?

**Question 5. Is spanking antithetical to the gospel?**

Some Christians answer yes: *Christ has already atoned for sins, so we shouldn’t make our children atone for them again.*

Response: When we discipline our children, we are not making them atone for their sins. As I mentioned earlier under “proposition 1,” there is a difference between punishment and discipline. Civil magistrates punish lawbreakers; parents discipline their children. There’s a difference: punishment satisfies justice, and discipline trains. Sometimes people use the terms “punishment” and “discipline” synonymously, but what is important is to distinguish these two concepts. God disciplines his children, so disciplining your children is not antithetical to the gospel.

You can and should apply the gospel when you physically discipline your children. For example, your words and tone may convey that you hate sin, that sin causes pain, that Jesus never sinned (an amazing concept to little children!), and that Jesus died for sinners like us. William Farley argues in *Gospel-Powered Parenting,*

[‘T]hose clear on the gospel practice corporal discipline—appropriate spanking at an appropriate age. . . . In summary, the gospel convinces both parent and child that sin—deep, systemic heart disfigurement—is our child’s fundamental problem. For this Jesus died. He also died for the sins that these hearts produce. The cross gives us a window into God’s hatred of evil, and what awaits the child not led into saving faith through the loving discipline and instruction of his or her parents. The gospel solution is corporal punishment applied by loving, committed parents. The cross motivates consistent, godly discipline.*

So those are five questions some people raise regarding enforcing guidelines. Let’s conclude briefly with ten specific applications regarding discipline:

### 3. CONCLUDING APPLICATION

§§1–2 explain texts from Hebrews and Proverbs. This section is not tethered to a text. Here I’m stepping back and offering what I think are wise suggestions:

**Application 1. Pray for your children.**

You cannot change their hearts. Only God can. Discipline can accomplish only so much. It cannot give your children a new heart. So beg God to give your children new hearts.

The goal of disciplining your children is not merely that they externally obey you. It’s that God changes their heart so that they love God with their whole being and apply the gospel to every area of their lives. You can’t legislate and enforce that. You can’t save your children from their sins. But you can pray for them.

**Application 2. Evangelize your children.**

Constantly. In all aspects of life—including when you discipline them. All three levels of discipline can be remarkably teachable moments to discuss why God hates sin, how sin results in terrible consequences in this life and the next, and how Jesus solves the problem of sin.

Some of the most teachable moments will be when you transparently share with your children that you’re a sinner, too. When you sin against your children, ask them to forgive you. Communicate that you can’t obey without God’s help either and that we’re all sinful people who need Jesus to save us from our sins.

**Application 3. Use multiple levels of discipline.**

Spend as much of your disciplinary time as possible in levels 1 and 2 (teaching and warning) and as little as possible in level 3 (enforcing). But use all three levels. Wegner explains,

The person who has wisdom will understand the principle of using the proper amount of discipline to curb improper behavior. . . . [E]ven within this level of discipline there are various levels of severity, and the wise parent uses only the level of discipline necessary to curb the incorrect behavior.”
Application 4. Love your children, and tell them and show them that you love them.

- Proper discipline is evidence that you love them.
- Never discipline in unrighteous anger. That is not loving.

Your children can do things that will frustrate and anger you, but there should be nothing they can do that will ever make you stop loving them. Make sure they know that.

We frequently read a “storybook Bible” to our children that refers often to God’s “Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.” We should love our kids the same way.

Application 5. Beware of two extremes: (a) not disciplining and (b) over-disciplining.

There are at least two drop-offs on the path of biblical discipline. That is, there are two extremes of disobeying: (1) not disciplining our children at all and (2) over-disciplining them in a harsh, abusive, loveless, authoritarian manner. Both are serious errors, and we shouldn’t gloss over either.55

There are a lot of ways to sin, and don’t assume that you’re OK simply because you’re not guilty of a particular sin. You may not be guilty of not disciplining, but do you over-discipline? You may not be guilty of over-disciplining, but do you discipline at all? Ask God for wisdom to shepherd your children with just the right blend of grace and truth.

Application 6. Fathers, take the lead in discipline.

Hebrews 12 talks specifically about human fathers disciplining their children. Ephesians 6:4 directly addresses fathers:

“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

Fathers, you are the head of your wife, and you are responsible for your home. Lovingly lead your wife and family by taking the lead in discipline. Don’t passively sit by while leaving the burden of discipline exclusively or primarily to your wife. Don’t leave the hard stuff to Mom. Support your wife. Your children should know you are a unified team.

Application 7. Learn how to discipline each of your children most effectively.

Every child is different, so don’t rigidly, inflexibly, and thoughtlessly apply the exact same methods to all of your children. Ray Ortlund, a former OT professor who is now a preaching pastor, says this in his recent commentary on Proverbs: “It is hard to read the Bible and get the impression that children should never be spanked. You have to figure out how it works best in your home, and some kids need only a stare to melt their hearts.” A stern word and hardly any physical discipline may be sufficient with one child but not with another.

Application 8. Distinguish between family rules and the Bible.

It’s important in the discipline process to communicate biblical principles. That’s not hard to do for sins like direct disobedience or lying, but especially as our children grow older, it is important to distinguish between family rules and the Bible.

There is a difference, for example, between “Make your bed in the morning” and “Speak truthfully.” The Bible does not command us to make our bed in the morning; it does command us to speak truthfully and not lie. But if you’re a child and your parents ask you to make your bed in the morning, then the biblical principle is not “I must make my bed in the morning because God says to make my bed in the morning,” but “I must make my bed in the morning because my parents are asking me to make my bed in the morning, and I must obey my parents when what they command does not contradict Scripture.”

If we don’t distinguish family rules from the Bible, then our children may think of all our rules in the same category. That may clutter their conscience with taboos, make it difficult for them to process why other Christian families follow some different rules and why Chris-
tians in other cultures follow some different rules, and tempt them to reject all rules later in life instead of simply adjusting some of the family rules.

**Application 9. Be humble about parental discipline; don’t be proud and judgmental.**

You need God’s grace, and God gives grace to the humble (Prov 3:34; Jas 4:6; 1 Per 5:5). It’s so easy to be judgmental towards other parents regarding how they train (or don’t train) their children:

- Especially before you have children.
- Especially if you have comparatively well-behaved children.
- Especially if your children have not yet reached the same stages as other children (e.g., parents of young children may be tempted to be judgmental towards how other parents train their teens).

Be discerning, but don’t be judgmental and self-righteous. Beg God for wisdom—because you need it! You can’t produce “good” children on your own. Ask your Father in heaven to help you love your children like he loves you.

**Application 10. Persevere with a long-term view that trusts God’s word.**

“Discipline may be the most demanding task of parenthood.” Intentionally, consistently, and lovingly disciplining your children is exhausting. “It is much easier to let children have their own way and wander off into sin.” You will frequently be tempted to take shortcuts and not teach, reiterate, or enforce guidelines. Don’t give up. One pastor observes, “When the parent is qualified to discipline, he probably does not feel like it, and when he feels like it, he is probably not qualified.”

Trust God; take him at his word (as we’ve seen in Hebrews and Proverbs), and fulfill your high calling before God as a father or mother to the children he has graciously given you. If you have a short-term view, then you may choose to operate in a way that is more convenient and pleasant for you, but if you have a long-term view and trust God, then you will forego your personal convenience and pleasure by training your children for their good and for God’s glory.

God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:10b–11).

Father, thank you for loving us. Thank you for loving us by disciplining us. Please give those of us who are parents grace to love our children like you love us. Help us love our children by wisely disciplining them. We beg you to save our children. And we beg you for wisdom to discipline them with just the right blend of grace and truth—for their good and ultimately for your glory.

### 4. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


Wegner, Paul D. "Discipline in the Book of Prov-


ENDNOTES
1 This is a lightly edited manuscript from a sermon preached to Grace Bible Church in Moore, South Carolina on June 3, 2012 as part of a series on parenting. Special thanks to friends who examined a preliminary draft of this sermon and shared helpful (sometimes critical) feedback, especially Jenni Naselli (my wife), Wendy Alsup, Chuck Barrett, Brad Baugham, Doug Becker, Bob Bixby, Denny Burk, Ken Casillas, Brian Collins, Bruce Compton, David Crabb, Jason DeRouchie, Kyle Dunham, Jeremy Farmer, Andrew Fransen, David and Stephanie George, Phil Gons, James Grant, Jim Hamilton, Matthew Hoskinson, Josh and Miriam Hurst, Tim Keese, Tom Keiser, Jack Klem, Aaron Mahl, Bob McCabe, Kerry McGonigal, Mark Minnick, Dan Phillips, Mark Rogers, Larry Rogier, Dwight and Kristen Sands, Owen Strachan, Daniel and Keren Threlfall, Joe Tyrpak, Robert Vincent, Mark Ward, Dan Winnberg, Richard Winston, and Mike Wittmer. Also thanks to friends for sharpening conversations as I was preparing to preach this sermon, especially Jack Collins, Randy Jaeggli, Dan Kim, Jason Meyer, John Piper, and Tom Schreiner.


4 There’s a sense in which all humans are God’s children. Paul quotes and agrees with a pagan poet that “We [i.e., all humans] are his [God’s] offspring” (Acts 17:28). But that’s not the sense in this passage.


6 Douglas Wilson, Standing on the Promises: A Handbook of Biblical Childrearing (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1997), 105.

7 John Piper, “The Painful Discipline of Our Heavenly Father (Hebrews 12:3–11)” (Minneapolis, August 24, 1997), http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-painful-discipline-of-our-heavenly-father: “The word ‘seems’ (discipline ‘seems’ not to be joyful) hints that there is a kind of residual joy of hope that hangs on beneath the cloud, but the tears and the sighs and the groans are so many that it looks like sorrow has the upper hand—at least for a season. As it does when a child cries after a spanking.”

8 I preached on Hebrews 12:3–17 on March 3, 2013 to Sovereign Grace Church in Greenville, South Carolina (available at http://andynaselli.com/wp-content/uploads/20130303_Heb_12.3-17.mp3), and I only briefly mentioned parental discipline because that is not the passage’s primary point.

9 “Hardship” is not in the original text but the context implies it.


11 The table is from Wegner, Wegner, and Herman, Wise Parenting, 32.


15 It seems like there are several positions on physical discipline that appear along a spectrum, e.g., (1) It is virtually the only disciplinary tool in the parental toolbox. (2) It is one of several disciplinary tools in
The priesthood of the believer does not mean that people with little or no understanding of Hebrew or Greek can make exegetical arguments about Hebrew or Greek that carry the same weight as people who are experts in Hebrew or Greek. Chuck Barrett, a seminary professor of historical theology, explains, “Another component of the priesthood of all believers is the hermeneutical rules that guided interpretation even in the sixteenth century when this concept was articulated in a more developed manner. And the application of the concept was not limited to interpreting Scripture, but focused on a person’s ability to approach God through Christ without the need of a priest. But back to the interpretation part: priesthood of all believers was never intended to be a shield to hide behind when one wants to make the Bible say something it actually does not say. Nor was it ever intended historically to undermine an educated ministry” (email on May 19, 2012, quoted with permission).

(b) I’m pretty familiar with NT Greek (cf. the intro to http://andynaselli.com/bible-translation), but I’m not a Greek scholar. If a view I hold contradicts the nearly unanimous view of Greek scholars, it will cause me to carefully rethink whether I properly understand that view.

(c) When I teach first-year Greek courses, I tell students that they are far more dangerous now than they ever were before they knew a little bit of Greek. The analogy I use is that they’re like a toddler with a chainsaw (especially when they use programs like BibleWorks or Logos). Sometimes it takes years and years of familiarity with a language to be able to use it responsibly. It’s irresponsible when people make really strong arguments about what the Hebrew or Greek means when they couldn’t read a Hebrew or Greek text if you put it in front of them.

(d) I am not a Hebrew expert. I took only five semesters of Hebrew in graduate school and a half-dozen OT exegesis and theology courses that built on that foundation. My primary field is NT, not OT. So in addition to consulting about thirty commentaries on Proverbs (none of which argue against physical discipline), I sent a draft of this sermon to over a dozen OT experts—men who have PhDs in OT and who teach the OT full-time as professors on the graduate level.
I’m grateful that their feedback was sharpening and affirming: all of them agree with my exegesis. I don’t think that appealing to experts like this is “snobbery” but a mark of wisdom and humility.


19 “The rod” is probably just a generic use of the article.


25 Cf. Dan Phillips, God’s Wisdom in Proverbs (Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2011), 274: “We should see ‘the rod’ is emblematic. That is: the rod is a literal object representing a metaphorical reality, larger than (but including) itself. It is similar to “the sword” in Romans 13:4, which denotes government’s legitimate punitive power, not limited to but leading up to and including the death penalty. The rod represents the parent’s God-given authority to enforce house law, not limited to corporal punishment, but including it and everything leading up to it. Standing in a corner is a legitimate use of the rod; writing sentences or doing chores is a legitimate use of the rod; a spanking is a legitimate use of the rod.”


27 Wilson, Standing on the Promises, 41; cf. 76–77.


31 The South Carolina Code of Laws from the South Carolina Legislative Council distinguishes between “child abuse” and “corporal punishment or physical discipline”: (4) “Child abuse or neglect” or “harm” occurs when the parent, guardian, or other person responsible for the child’s welfare:

(a) inflict or allows to be inflicted upon the child physical or mental injury or engages in acts or omissions which present a substantial risk of physical or mental injury to the child, including injuries sustained as a result of excessive corporal punishment, but excluding corporal punishment or physical discipline which:

(i) is administered by a parent or person in loco parentis;

(ii) is perpetrated for the sole purpose of restraining or correcting the child;

(iii) is reasonable in manner and moderate in degree;

(iv) has not brought about permanent or lasting damage
to the child; and
(v) is not reckless or grossly negligent behavior by the parents.


38 C. John Collins is Professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He served as Chair of the ESV’s OT Translation Committee and as the OT Editor for the ESV Study Bible.

39 This is a very good analogy. Physical discipline is just one of many “tools” in “the parental toolbox.” It’s an important tool, sometimes a necessary tool. But it’s not the only tool. When your only tool is a hammer, you begin to see the world as a nail.

40 Waltke, Proverbs 1–15, 574.


44 Sally Lloyd-Jones, The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2007).

45 Similarly, when we talk about the role of husbands and wives, we may err by focusing exclusively on how the wife must submit to her husband without warning husbands against the sin of authoritarianism.

46 Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., Proverbs: Wisdom That Works (Preaching the Word; Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 155. Cf. Wilson, Standing on the Promises, 105–6: “Because children are very different, this means that there will be godly distinctions in the discipline received by various children. To say it again, kids are different—their personalities differ, their attitudes toward pain differ, and of course, they differ in sex. Consequently, if parents are seeking to accomplish a particular end through discipline, the amount of discipline required will vary as the nature of the child varies. Many parents know what it is like to spank a tough little tank of a boy, who always tries to make it as far through a spanking as he can without crying. They also know what it is like to see their other child dissolve into tears if the displeased parent looks at her sideways.”


50 Wilson, Standing on the Promises, 110; cf. 133, 141–4.
“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things and the God of peace will be with you (Phil 4:8-9).”

We live in dangerous times. A battle with high stakes rages among us and even inside us. It’s a battle for the mind, and it has an ancient history. The apostle Paul exhorts his Christian believers to “war not according to the flesh, but with divinely powerful weapons, destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God and taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). Clearly, God expects His people to think rightly in order to live rightly. God, by His grace, has accomplished salvation for all who believe in Christ; He is worthy of Spirit-empowered holy living.

Sadly, however, statistics tell us that the enemy has taken new ground in the war against pure thoughts. Surveys suggest that 50% of Christian men and 20% of Christian women are addicted to pornography. Focused research reveals that many church leaders and even a higher number of church members have visited sexually explicit websites within the previous year. Men, and increasingly women, sacrifice marriages, ministries, reputations and their Christian testimonies for the fleeting pleasure of pornographic stimulation. Though men outnumber women ten to one when faith is not considered, by putting the images into the context of story, such as explicit romance movies and soft-porn novels such as the Fifty Shades series, the industry increasingly lures women into the trap.

**SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM**

The multi-billion-dollar pornography industry thrives because no clear legal definition exists that would effectively protect the vulnerable. According to Struthers in *Wired for Intimacy*, the pornography industry generates more than $12 billion annually in the United States alone, if one includes adult videos, magazines, and pay-per-view television. And claiming “freedom of speech,” this industry demands
Constitutional protection to produce and distribute materials that only a few decades ago would have been deemed excessively graphic or deviant. The claim that “no proof” exists that pornography causes any harm to individuals or society remains, to a large extent, unfuted.

Now with Internet accessible everywhere, including phones, televisions, and other handheld portable devices that can access WiFi in private, the danger is pervasive. Pornography is affordable, easily accessible, and gives a false sense of anonymity—a perfect storm of temptation. While sobering statistics do nothing to deliver a person from pornography, such evidence should motivate Christian caregivers to mount an aggressive counteresive for the minds and souls of this generation and the next.

It all starts with temptation. And from a biblical perspective, we know that “each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren” (Jas. 1:14–16).

Understanding the draw of pornography requires examining the human heart in its fallen state and the pull of the “old person/old nature” of the regenerate person. Sexual lust can be defined as “the overpowering desire to possess something that substitutes for God and His love.” Anything that takes primacy in a person’s life in this fashion constitutes idolatry. As John the elder writes, “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world” (1 Jn. 2:16). Viewing sexually explicit material applies to all three spheres: lust of the flesh—to satisfy illicit sexual desire; lust of the eyes—visual imaging that arouses sexual desire apart from covenant marriage; and pride of life—the choice to do what is contrary to God’s commands, elevating one’s own decisions above the expressed will of God.

**WHY PORNOGRAPHY?**

Viewing graphic sexual material stirs a “boiling over” with lust, which delivers a pleasurable, exciting escape from the reality of one’s circumstances. Like other forms of stimulation, pornography satisfies initially as the endorphins produced in the brain wash over the pleasure centers. But afterward, guilt and shame well up as the Holy Spirit pushes through the mental resistance. With remorse comes a vow to stop. But as with most obsessive-compulsive activity or frank addictions, that vow to stop, while sincere in the moment, is usually short lived. A stimulating thought or experience breaks through again and begins the cycle of arousal, pursuit, completion—whether masturbation, seeking a prostitute, or other form of acting out sexually—and ultimately despair.

Pornography enslaves to the degree that most deeply involved in this deadly practice want deep down to continue engaging in the behavior, and they doubt they can permanently quit. Sin lies at the root of pornographic addiction—the sin of idolatry. Choosing to indulge in pornography offends the very holiness of God. Such a choice constitutes rebellion against meditating on what is pure and right.

**WHAT PORNOGRAPHY DOES TO THE MIND**

According to Struthers in Wired for Intimacy, compelling evidence now exists to support the assertion that “repeated exposure to pornography and the objectification of the female body changes the way our brains see each other. Repeated exposure to any stimulus results in neurological circuit-making in the brain. Pornography dishonors the image of God in an individual by treating him or her as a sexual object to be consumed directly or indirectly.” Using the illustration of rainwater falling on a hill that gradually makes a deeper and wider pathway, Struthers pictures the effect of repeated exposure of pornographic images on the actual neurologic anatomy of the brain. That is, the more one views, the deeper the erosion “channels” grow. Consequently, exposure to any stimulating image—whether a picture, movie, or a co-worker—causes the brain immediately to track to the locus of sexual arousal. The powerful neurochemical response makes viewing others as persons made in the image of God increasingly
difficult. Instead, the person with a compulsion to view pornography sees people increasingly as objects for one’s own sexual gratification.

The research findings described here help explain why those entrenched in pornography have such a long struggle to overcome both the temptation and the resultant masturbation fantasies that generally accompany acting out. Rewiring a brain influenced by pornographic images may take months to years to normalize. But there is hope!

**SEXUAL ADDICTION**

Overwhelming evidence links pornography use to “sexual addiction.” While from a medical perspective sexual “addiction” more closely resembles an obsessive-compulsive type besetting sin, the literature dealing with this sexual compulsion has fixed upon “addictive” terminology. Yet unlike addiction to alcohol or narcotics, a person with a sexual addiction does not experience the dramatic withdrawal symptoms such as spiking temperatures, hallucinations, seizures, and/or other psychotic behavior when the activity stops. The brain of the person exposed long-term to pornographic images, however, does undergo changes that include creation of an endorphin response—biological neurochemicals with a narcotic-like effect, without the physical symptoms of withdrawal when interrupted.

Sexual addiction has been defined by Willingham, as well as other experts in the field, as “an obsessive compulsive relationship with a person, object or experience for the purpose of sexual gratification.” Symptoms include a progressive need for repeated exposure, often more graphic exposure, and ultimately to feeling “abnormal” unless one views sexually explicit material or acts out in other illicit fashion (such as prostitution, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and/or frotteurism).

According to Laaser, most such addicts have felt abandoned of touch, love, nurture, and affirmation during adolescence. A history of sexual abuse may be present in as many as 81% of these addicts; 74% report physical abuse; and 97% have felt emotionally abused. These dramatic statistics do not excise the wrong choices, but they do help caregivers and strugglers alike to understand high-risk individuals and identify those who may require long-term ministry to find victory in Christ. Besides sexual abuse as a risk factor, early sexualization (viewing explicit material under the age of ten years), dysfunctional family dynamics, isolation, and feelings of loneliness can predispose one to addictive behavior with pornography.

**WHAT THE MINISTER CAN DO**

The body of Christ and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit provide essential defenses when dealing with the effects of pornography exposure. First, the addicted person must choose the path of relentless honesty with a seasoned, mature believer. In this battle, no one succeeds in isolation. He or she must have direct accountability to a same-sex mentor, pastor, or teacher with regular and intentional contact. And the mentor must remain involved in the life of the individual throughout his or her crisis. Nevertheless, while accountability can change behavior, only genuine repentance changes the heart. People who succeed in conquering their sexual addiction do so only when they incorporate both repentance and accountability into the recovery process.

In addition, the person enslaved to pornography must evaluate his or her relationships. Who can speak honestly to him or her and ask the difficult questions in accountability, while modeling Christlike love, forgiveness, and grace? A mature believer who can guide the struggler into the appropriate spiritual disciplines becomes invaluable. Prayer, Bible study, and meditation become vital parts of the journey to purity. As poison defiles the body, so pornography defiles the mind. The antidote can be found in the words of Jesus, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, from his innermost being will flow rivers of living water. But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; (John 7:37–39). The purifying presence of the Holy Spirit through the power of the gospel truth can empower and enable the Christ follower to experience victory over this sin.

Fasting is perhaps the most important discipline for those struggling with sex addiction. Fasting is voluntarily abstaining from something for a higher spiritual purpose. And by developing a regular pattern
of fasting from food, as directed by the mentor, the struggler can experience self-control, a gift of the Holy Spirit. To the person who has been unable to "say no" to pornographic temptation, the confidence instilled by the discipline of fasting can be accessed to battle sexual lust. Personal spiritual disciplines pave the road, providing space for God to act within the soul. This begins the process of reconfiguring the brain pathways in conformity with Christlikeness.

Sexual desire is a normal part of humanity. Indeed, it is a God-given gift. As with all good gifts of God, however, the world, the flesh, and the tempter can pervert a beautiful part of creation, twisting it into a self-destructive path to idolatry. As excessive and improper diet can lead to obesity and a myriad of physical health problems; so, indulging in sexual expression outside of the covenant commitment of God's design results in spiritual and relational turmoil. Trying to satisfy normal sexual desire with images that God abhors damages the viewer, changing his or her brain's perception of male and female into consumer and object, and wounds the soul.

**BIBLICAL APPROACH**

Even as Jesus taught about purity, extending the definition of adultery to include looking at a woman to lust after her, he taught how to deal with sin among believers (Matthew 18:15ff). We learn from Him that we must approach one-on-one, with an eye to reconciliation, the person caught in ongoing sin. This confrontation of church discipline is done in humility and brokenness, recognizing that all have sinned. Elsewhere in scripture, in the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians, we find encouragement to each believer to be available to "bear one another's burdens" while yet "carrying his own load." Thus, when the weight of his or her sin becomes too much for the fellow-believer to bear, others come alongside and offer restoration, forgiveness, and love in response to genuine repentance.

Because most Christians struggling with pornography are men, if married, their wives will feel the impact. Most wives of husbands with sexual addictions feel overwhelming guilt, fearing that they must be insufficient or that something must be wrong with them to "cause" the husband to view pornography. As part of the healing process, the counselor, pastor, or mentor must address the marital relationship, including the accompanying anger, feelings of betrayal, and disgust. The wife of the porn-addicted husband must understand that the problem resides not with her own "insufficiency" but within his mind as pornography seduces him. In fact, unless the husband aggressively fights this sin, no level of frequency or variety in the marriage bed will suffice to satisfy his urges.

Sadly, many single men involved with pornography believe that marrying will solve their problem. This assumption proves catastrophic, as marital sexual intimacy was never designed to compete with sinful habits or lifestyles. Unaddressed, the problem will resurface, and the poison will bring pain and sometimes even divorce, the death of a covenant relationship.

As with any battle, the fight for mental ground will take enormous effort and resources. The church, as family, as the bride of Christ must recognize the pervasive conflict hidden within the hearts and minds of so many, crafting a battle plan that is both vigorous and empowered by God. The battle for moral purity in the minds of our brothers and sisters is a war worth fighting, and one for which the victor has already been announced.

**CHURCHWIDE STRATEGY: PATH TO PURITY**

1. **Train Leaders:** Intentional Instruction covering
   a. Range of the problem
   b. Root of the problem
   c. Response to the problem
   d. Resources for leaders

2. **Teach the Church:** Conference, sermon series on purity and pornography
   a. Range of the problem
   b. Root of the problem
   c. Response to the problem
   d. Resources for responders (those struggling within the congregation)
3. Individual Soul Care
   a. Confession
   b. Repentance
   c. Accountability Work (weekly or twice weekly to start)

4. Small Group Discipleship
   a. Mentoring
   b. Spiritual Disciplines
   c. Ongoing Accountability

Resources for Recognition of the Scope of the Problem (Phase 1)
1. Wired for Intimacy, Struthers
2. The Purity Principle, Alcorn
3. Sexual Detox, Challies
4. Closing the Window, Chester
5. Breaking Free, Willingham
6. Sexual Addiction, Laaser

Resources for Refocus on Purity – Christlike Character (Phase 2)
1. Knowledge of the Holy, Tozer
2. Soul Keeping, Baker
3. Spiritual Disciplines, Whitney
4. Devotional Classics, edited by Foster
5. Radical, Platt
6. Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ, Piper
DEREK BROWN: Tell me briefly a little about yourself, how you got into ministry, and how you made your way to Compass.

BOBBY BLAKEY: I grew up and my dad was a pastor, so I got exposed to the idea of ministry, and I saw it done in a way that was biblical and a good example to me. Through Cliff McManis, my dad’s friend, I had an opportunity to do some high school ministry when I graduated from Master’s College and loved doing it. The Lord then led us to Compass Bible Church which has only been around for seven and a half years now in Orange County, led by Mike Fabarez. Clear biblical preaching and a clear explanation of the gospel is really the theme of the church, and in that environment it is awesome to do youth ministry where you can teach young men and women the Bible and hold them exactly to God’s standard and preach the gospel straight to them. It’s been just a blessing to do youth ministry in that kind of environment and watch the Lord use the gospel of Jesus Christ to save many high school age young people.

DEREK: So you told me what characterizes your high school ministry. Can you tell me a little more? You said biblical preaching, focusing on the Bible. What else would you say are a few things that really characterize your high school ministry?

BOBBY: Along with biblical teaching, another thing that we’re really trying to do is to disciple all of these students, anyone who professes Christ. We want to make sure we’ve got an adult leader that’s working with them, so we do small groups where we try to apply the sermon to our lives, and through those small groups we hope that our leaders are developing personal relationships with each and every student to help them grow in their sanctification. That’s a big emphasis. Then evangelism is a major emphasis in our ministry—equipping the students to know the gospel so that they can share it with others, and then challenging and encouraging them to do that right there at their high schools. We start Christian clubs on the campuses of the high schools where students will stand up and preach the gospel to their peers, and we’ll use free food and lunch to draw a crowd and we’ll train our kids to preach the gospel to their fellow students. It’s an awesome thing to equip our students and to build their faith.
and to also spread the gospel to many who might not otherwise hear it at their high school. We’ve gotten on nineteen different campuses now where we have students who are representing the gospel hopefully in their lives and in their words to their classmates.

DEREK: I think that’s one of the things that has been encouraging to me to see is how students have “taken up the mantle” so to speak in their own schools. Didn’t you have some students preaching “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”?

BOBBY: Yeah, we did that in the high school. They’ll be reading that sermon in during their time in high school. We were able to capitalize on that and have students preaching. We try to coordinate all these different lunches going on at all these different high school campuses with an invitation to come to an event at our church with more preaching or where I’ll preach, and as we’ve been coordinating those outreaches we’ve been drawing people to come to this event. The great thing about our group is that there are so many student leaders in our group that can talk through the gospel with someone. If we can get people to that environment and they can hear it preached then they’re going to have a follow up conversation about it with somebody, and it’s through a lot of those follow-up conversations that we see people getting saved.

DEREK: What role do parents play in your high school ministry?

BOBBY: They play a huge role. As parents, they are the primary disciplers of their students. All that we can really do in our ministry is partner with the parents. So, we’re always trying to encourage the parents to fulfill that role. Our ministry does kind of focus on the youth, but we’re always doing things to try to get the parents talking about the Bible and key issues of life with their kids. We always have events where we’re challenging the parents to do that and to bring them together with their kids.

For example, even this weekend at our church we had a conference that’s designed to equip families and even to equip people at our church to help other parents to fulfill their biblical roles. Dads are supposed to be teaching their sons and daughters the Bible. We are reaching out to the parents on a regular basis in our group. A lot of it is our church as a whole is trying to train the fathers and mothers of our students. Even though our ministry emphasizes talking straight to the high school students, we’re trying to keep the parents informed on what is going on and trying to bring them into having a spiritual conversation like Deuteronomy 6 with their kids. We’re trying to get them to think about instructing their kids and also correcting their kids. We’re constantly trying to find ways to bring that up with our congregation and really create a church culture where that is what is happening. That could be a real challenge. What I think you guys are trying to address is that that’s not what is happening in a lot of Christianity. We’re doing what we can to try to address that. We still definitely think it is important to have our youth ministry and time for the youth, especially with our emphasis on evangelism, because we are reaching so many kids whose families are not going to church or their parents aren’t saved at all. We’ve got all our adult leaders and staff discipling many high-schoolers like we wish their mom and dad were, particularly their father. But unfortunately that is not the case with so many of them. We’re doing everything we can to do that with as many students as we can.

DEREK: Briefly, what role do other adults play in your ministry?

BOBBY: We’ve got a staff of about 40 adults. A few of them are parents of the students. Then there are all kinds of college-aged people, singles, young marrieds, even a grandpa—all kinds of different adults who invest in the lives of the young people trying to get to know them in a personal way and disciple them in a one-on-one relationship. We have a program in our church that our pastor has put together that is a one-on-one discipleship program that a lot of our leaders are doing with our youth, and also guiding them through the high school years with a lot of practical issues that come up. They’re talking through the sermons with them in our small groups. So, we have a crew of about 40 leaders that are constantly reaching out to students and evangelizing and discipling. They are older men and older women, and they’re trying to raise up these young men and
women to become mature so they can stand for Christ for the rest of their lives. One thing that God has really blessed us with is that a lot of our leaders have now been doing this for four years. Once you create that kind of culture it becomes easy for new leaders to come in and see their examples and really learn how to disciple and love each kid. Now that we’ve been doing this for six and a half years we have some students that have graduated through the ministry so they really understand what our goals are and what we’re trying to accomplish so they’re great leaders because they are basically coming from the group so they really understand how to reach out to the group because they’ve been in it. It’s a great team. We get all our leaders together and it’s a lot of fun for everybody to be together. There’s a lot of camaraderie and partnership.

DEREK: What a blessing. You’ve already addressed a couple of these things, but if you’d like to mention anything else, tell us what God is doing in your ministry and in the schools of the greater Aliso Viejo area where the students attend.

BOBBY: When I came to this church in 2006, it was a new church, and their high school ministry hadn’t really gotten off the ground even though there were already hundreds of people coming to the church. There were very few involved in any kind of high school ministry. There was a lot of awkwardness and no real unity. It was really like starting at ground zero. The first weekend there were probably twenty kids in attendance. We just started with the philosophy of preaching God’s Word, and getting people to talk about it in a personal way and then evangelizing and spreading this Word to the schools. We even built our small groups based on what schools the students goes through, knowing that’s kind of the battlefield. Now six and a half years later we’ve just seen an incredible amount of students professing faith. Unfortunately not all of that is genuine, but a lot of it has been. A lot of students have become Christians and then passed it on to where now our group is about 300 people if you include the leaders and the students. It’s not the number of people that is so exciting but it’s the number of genuine conversions that are represented within that. So, it took a long time to invest in students and get some of them who were living out, walking worthy of the gospel, and then also could clearly articulate the gospel. Once we had that crew, we could kind of start cutting them loose, and we could support them and train them in how to speak and giving them the content to say. Then they could go to these clubs and do a good job of representing the gospel and start inviting people to the church. We’re reaching people in a place where they’re more comfortable, which is at school during lunch, giving them food, and that’s opening doors for conversations and for invitations to come to church. We’ve been doing that for a long time. It kind of depends on the students who run it, but some schools have to have their meetings in gyms or in multipurpose rooms. Some lunches have had up to 200 students come in and hear the gospel.

There was one group of young men out towards the beginning that I was working with and we had eight solid young men. We had two or three other people come to the lunches. I told the guys, “It doesn’t seem like you are trying and it doesn’t seem like your heart is for the lost or that you really want to promote the gospel. I challenged these young men. I said, “What if you guys will not play video games until you really got this thing going?” They took it to heart and went on a video games moratorium, and it wasn’t too long until the next lunch that they couldn’t even fit in the classroom where they were eating. The students were speaking out on the grassy slope there at their school to about a hundred students. Then they had to start meeting in a multipurpose room and they were getting close to two hundred people to come to these lunches. People were professing faith. There was real persecution rising up. It was a real work of evangelism happening, and that was probably three to four years ago.

Now some of the kids who got saved through that outreach are continuing to run that group. It has clearly been passed on to the next group of kids, and they’re now very capable at preaching the gospel. In fact, we’ve had kids this year for the first time kind of professing their faith right there at the public high school. They’re getting saved at school before they even get to the church because the kids are clearly giving the gospel and the Lord is using them. Now we have seniors who are
doing a great job of representing Christ on the cam-
pus and they’re about to graduate. It looks like we’re
already seeing leaders rise up who will be able to con-
tinue it. That’s just the story of one high school that’s
right down the street from our church. We’ve got all
carries different Catholic high schools, preparatory schools,
public schools. We’ve had kids reaching out to their
homeschool groups. Once you start setting this vision
of “you can do the work of evangelism as a young man or
woman” you start to see examples of kids who are doing
that and even new Christians—kids now who have only
been saved a year—from the moment they’re saved
believing this is what they think they should do. They
start heading down that path right away and they’re able
to start doing an effective job of communicating the
gospel as newer believers. They get this example
and it becomes their passion. It has taken a long time
to create that kind of mentality and have examples like
that but each student has to want to do it and have a
passion for it themselves. It’s cool to see how the Lord
has used young men and women to advance the gospel
in an evident way.

DEREK: What are some of the greatest challenges
you’ve faced while serving in youth ministry?

BOBBY: There is a lot of challenge. One of the things
that has been clearly documented is the challenge of so
many youth that fall away from the faith especially after
they graduate and move into college. The challenge of:
“OK. That’s true. I see the statistics on that, and I can see
evidence of that in churches that I’m familiar with.” But
how do we combat that? I think that’s a real challenge. I
think working in a culture where salvation is assumed,
that anyone that grows up in the church, the assumption
is they are saved. That’s a challenge for youth ministry
when we need to be so clear on what it really means to
be saved, what is the gospel, and what is the response of
repentance and faith. For people who walk around and
assume they’re saved because they know the facts and they
do good things, that’s a real challenge for youth ministry
right now is articulating a strong understanding of what
salvation is really going to look like in the life of a young
person, which I would submit is no different than what it
is going to look like in any other person.

Some of the other challenges that are tough for
youth ministry: there’s a lot of personal discouragement
when you invest in people and then you see them turn
their back on Christ and on the church and when they
turn against you and begin to act like you were the prob-
lem rather than someone trying to help them, I think
that can be a real discouragement on a personal level.
Having a church that has a culture to preach the Bible,
to keep the Bible central, to say exactly what the Bible
says, to say it to the people we’re talking to and to try to
make sure that the gospel is explained in a biblical and
accurate way. When the church has a culture like that,
that is where youth ministry can thrive and that’s the
thing that I think is a challenge for a lot of youth min-
istry if what they’re doing doesn’t go with culture of the
church. To have a church that’s already kind of accepted
that tone or that template, that is something that has
made our ministry. Just from my personal experience,
I did ministry at a church before that maybe didn’t
have that kind of raised standard or high expectation
of biblical teaching, and we did ministry, but we didn’t
really see the effect that we’ve seen here, and I think
that’s because that’s the way our whole church is set up.
I think one challenge for me that has now turned into
a huge blessing is being in line with what’s going on at
the church.

DEREK: What do you think of the category
of “adolescence”?

BOBBY: I don’t think it’s a helpful categorization.
I don’t think it’s a helpful way to label young people.
I prefer to think of them as young men and women
and to challenge them as that. Definitely they’re liv-
ing with their mom and dad and they’re talking about
Facebook. They’re definitely going through a transition
in the way we set it up here in our American culture,
but the standard that we hold them to is a biblical stan-
dard which is to call them to be young men and women.
Creating a category of something between childhood
and adulthood is not something that I
find in the Bible
and something that I don’t really find to be helpful at
all. I find that the more that I challenge them as young
men and women the more they rise to God’s standard
as His Spirit works within them. I’m against any kind of dumbing down of what the Bible says. I definitely want to teach it straight to them with where they’re at in mind, our culture and everything that’s going on, but I don’t want to change one thing that the Bible says or expect any less from them than what God would be expecting from them.

I see examples in the Bible of teenagers being used by God to do great things. I think of people like Joseph, David, and even Mary, so I don’t know how our expectations got to be so low of what we think Christian young people can do. I’ve found that by speaking to them and treating them in a very mature, kind of adult way, and expecting them to be able to do what the Bible says I find that they respond to that greatly. I remember one student who I don’t even know if he was saved. He was not plugged into our ministry at all. He left our ministry. After a while he came back, and I said, “Hey, what brings you back?” He said, “Well, I went to other churches where my friends went to youth ministry, and they don’t teach what the Bible actually says. They’re just teaching them what they think they can handle.” So here’s a young person and I don’t even know if this person has been saved. He was not plugged into our ministry at all. He left our ministry. After a while he came back, and I said, “Hey, what brings you back?” He said, “Well, I went to other churches where my friends went to youth ministry, and they don’t teach what the Bible actually says. They’re just teaching them what they think they can handle.” So here’s a young person and I don’t even know if this person has been saved by the Lord. If they can see that the only way to do this is to teach clearly what God says and expect them to respond. Adolescence, I feel like, is opening a door to a category that is not biblical.

DEREK: What would you say is missing in many ministries today?

BOBBY: I think that the main thing that’s missing is a clear explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, what it is, and what it calls for: a response of repentance and faith. There’s a huge confusion, I think, about who really is saved in youth ministry. I think there’s an assumption that as long as someone is a good kid and as long as they’re associated with Christianity that they are saved. There’s not enough done to preach what the Bible says about conversion and regeneration and what that really is going to look like in somebody’s life. I think we’re creating a culture where phrases like “asking Jesus into your heart”, “rededicating your life to Christ” and repentance and grace are confused, and those are the biblical phrases and ideas that we should be marching these ministries forward with. I think one of the keys to what has happened in our church with seeing many conversions and seeing a lot of growth is a clear articulation of the doctrine of repentance. There is a turn from sin to God in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I think this really eliminates this idea of “I know about it and I believe it in some intellectual sense.” That would be similar to a demonic belief in Jesus Christ. This is what we are calling for: have you really been saved so that your life has radically changed? As we have articulated that we’ve seen kids who have grown up in the church, realized that they have not made that kind of response and want to do it, and also kids who can look at their lives and have a very straightforward way to evaluate if there has been a turnaround in their life from sin to God or not based not on any kind of works or self-righteousness but on real trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I think the problem is that we’re not getting specific enough with what we mean by the gospel at the churches I’ve worked at and as I interact with young people who go to other churches. There are way too many fuzzy answers about what the gospel is. It’s not like people can just quote 1 Corinthians 15 and dive right into it. They don’t know what they’re talking about, a lot of them, and to me that’s a big problem because, to say those things, what you’re going to be doing, is you’re going to be talking to moms on the phone who are upset with you that you gave their young person at their home an implication, perhaps, that they are not genuinely saved. That’s going to create some problems. I think that there is a path of least resistance in youth ministry. Also, just to speak to youth pastors specifically: too many of them are thinking more about the youth than they are about the pastor. I mean, it’s pretty clear what a pastor is supposed to do and the youth pastor would just do that with youth. It’s like guys have to figure out what their job description is and we’ve created a whole other category of pastor. I think we have to be preaching the Word and we have to be preaching straight to the young people. If a youth pastor doesn’t think of himself as that being his primary task like we would expect another
pastor to have then he won't have the right perspective on youth ministry.

DEREK: Is there anything more that you would want to say to encourage or challenge youth pastors?

BOBBY: I would want to challenge them with the question, “what is our goal?” Is it to do ministry just for the kids that are here at our church, or is our goal to equip these young men and women to do the work of the ministry? I think that is supposed to be our goal, and I think youth ministry gets very inward focused which it tries to help kids with their faith rather than expecting that because they have faith and they have the power of the Spirit they are going to be concerned with encouraging others and evangelizing others. So I think I would challenge other youth pastors to expect their kids to be able to not just be ministered to but to actually do ministry and to have that equipping sense. We want to prepare our young people in how to encourage others and to evangelize others and expect them to do that. We’re not just here to do that for them. We’re here to equip them to do that, and that’s a huge difference when you expect that these young people are capable of doing the work of the ministry, even serving right there in ministry, encouraging one another right there in the ministry, and then evangelizing right outside of the ministry. Part of the problem even in churches where we are going to preach the Bible and we are going to articulate biblical gospel is we won’t expect the youth to act on that and to do something about that. We’re just expecting them to know about it for themselves. You don’t see that in the Bible. You see that when somebody knows about it for themselves they will be immediately taking that and extending that beyond themselves. We need to have that expectation if the youth pastor is preaching the Word and he is trying to articulate a very clear, biblical gospel then he needs to be challenging his young people to give their lives away in evangelism, service, and encouragement, and having a real way for them to do that. I think that we have a concern for their soul, but are we giving them a concern for other people’s souls which is clearly fundamental to being a Christian.
**Book Reviews**

**EDITED BY LILLY PARK**


“This book represents an effort to join science and religion in ways that most positively impact the partnership between today’s churches and seniors” (11). With this self-imposed mandate, James Houston and Michael Parker begin their journey through the five fascinating sections of their book. The authors have the credentials to live up to their stated purpose. Houston, an octogenarian seminary professor, and Parker, a retired army officer and professor of geriatric medicine, utilize past and current research as they present new alternatives for ministry with senior adults.

Houston and Parker present a case for hope not despair as Christians move into “old age.” In so doing, they “address the part today’s church must play in meeting the demands and embracing the opportunities of senior living” (22). The authors’ approach is to ensure that seniors age well (22). Houston and Parker “propose the idea that longer lives can be more fulfilled lives,” and they reject the idea that age should restrict the function and value of senior adults in contemporary society (23).

Organizationally, the book begins with a discussion of society’s ageist view of mature adults, moves through biblical and historical themes of aging, to solutions for the aging church, presents a description of successful senior living, and closes with a treatment of end-of-life matters. Five appendices are included.

At the heart of their work, Parker and Houston present a model for successful aging as elders “avoid disease and disability, maximize cognitive and physical fitness, remain actively engaged in life through volunteerism and continue to learn and grow spiritually” (142). The Houston/Parker model makes use of current church/academic/governmental relationships and focuses on the lives of seniors and their adult children. Additionally, research and interventions in local communities allow these agencies to provide care for both the aging and their families. Through careful group planning, according to Houston and Parker, aging adults and their families will be enabled to live successfully as they embrace old age (142).

Beyond their comprehensive model for senior adult ministry, the authors make several interesting observations and recommendations. First, they insist that churches must focus on ministry “to” and “from” senior adults (32). In other words, churches must move beyond “doing ministry for” senior adults to leading seniors “to ministry to others.” As the authors write, “We believe that elders hold the keys to solving many, if not most, of society’s problems” (33).
Second, the authors examine the relationship of the fourth commandment (to keep the Sabbath holy), and the fifth commandment (to honor thy father and mother), and find support for their understanding that “the Christian senior is not to be discriminated against—least of all in the church—by the diminishing work he or she can now perform because of age, but by the sabbatical identify” they have in Christ (60). This understanding is foundational for the model for aging offered by the authors.

A third observation is that elder caregiving will be the biggest issue facing churches, families, and workplaces in the present century (127). Parker and Houston are critical of the efforts of the local church to prepare elders and their adult children for aging successfully. They call for planning and training for parents and adult children.

Another suggestion for helping elders age successfully calls for churches to encourage senior adults to complete a life review (164). According to Houston and Parker, “Everyone has a personal story to tell” (164). It is through these personal histories that elders can find meaning for life and can share important lessons with younger generations.

A final observation presented by the authors is the challenge of dealing with dementia and its relative illnesses. Parker and Houston suggest that seniors often struggle as they move from the Cartesian assertion “I think, therefore I am!” towards the biblical truth of “I am beloved, therefore I am” (195). The authors’ challenge to readers is to continue to value elders even as they no longer have the cognitive capacity society deems necessary for human value.

Christian educators and other church leaders may struggle with the writers’ continuous assertion that age-graded educational programs are counter-productive to successful aging for senior adults. More than once Parker and Houston insist that the biblical model for Christian education is intergenerational. Houston and Parker believe that American society is age-graded, designed to favor the young, and focused on three periods of life: education, work, and retirement (115). Further, the authors articulate the need for churches to move back towards a biblical model of education that “suggests that the old should teach the young” (115). They write, “Our churches need to cultivate attitudes and programs that foster lifelong learning and provide opportunities for seniors to instruct and teach the young” (115). However, most Christian educators would argue that their organizations include older people teaching the young, although their small groups are at least somewhat age-graded.

Readers will be fascinated by the research presented from the fields of neuroscience, geriatrics, and social work. The information addressing the church’s response to the crisis of Alzheimer’s disease is worth the price of the book. The authors lend an empathetic ear to those who suffer from this devastating disease as well as to their caregivers. Parker and Houston offer a high view of the human life calling for the family, the church, and society to hold dear their elders. God bless senior adults!

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Perspectives on Your Child’s Education: Four Views.

Every year millions of parents find themselves asking this question: “Where should I send my child to school?” This question drives the content of the eight chapters in Perspectives on Your Child’s Education. Editor Timothy Paul Jones sets the stage for a lively point-counterpoint presentation of schooling choices for Christian parents by sharing a short history of schools. Jones rightly concludes that, “Parents were viewed as the persons ultimately responsible for their children’s education” (6). That responsibility has not changed. Each of the presenters claim the authority of Deuteronomy 6:7-9 as they make their argument for what they consider “the right choice” for Christian parents.

Four contributors, each a theorist as well as a practitioner, present their personal choice of possibilities for Christian families (2). Troy Temple, professor at
Southern Seminary, advocates for public schooling but with a distinct purpose. Temple illustrates how his family serves in the public system as a means of fulfilling the Great Commission. Temple suggests that public education is not for every family in every location. He also underscores the truth that “every parent has been called to homeschool,” that is, parents are responsible to disciple their own children in the home (11).

G. Tyler Fischer, headmaster of Veritas Academy, an open-admission Christian school in Pennsylvania, insists that his approach is the most effective for educating Christian children and affecting non-Christians in the world. This approach allows for a delicate balance of Christian and non-Christian students based on careful admission practices. Fischer boldly suggests that even non-Christian parents should avoid public schools because they should not “want their children to be trained in an incoherent worldview” (42). Fischer also struggles with the truth that no school is “ir-religious” because all education, by its very nature, is theological (41).

Mark Eckel, an educational consultant, advocates for covenantal Christian schools. These schools intentionally limit their enrollment to students from Christian homes. Eckel summarizes the strengths of his approach in three words: wholeness, meaning, and coherence (78). It is the clear purpose of covenantal Christian schools to “partner with Christian parents to train students to think Christianly in every area of life and academics” (61).

The fourth approach available to Christian parents is homeschooling, advocated by Michael S. Wilder. Wilder serves as a professor at Southern Seminary and has broad experience in all four approaches. Wilder builds his chapter on three questions. “Who is responsible for my child’s education?” “What is the goal of education?” “How should my Christian beliefs influence my educational decisions?” Originally an opponent of homeschooling, Wilder states, “We did not begin with an ideological commitment to Christian education, and we certainly did not begin with a passion for homeschooling. It came as the result of a journey, and it provides a unique perspective on the process” (92). In brief, Wilder agrees with his co-writers that parents are primarily responsible for educating their children, the goal is to honor God, and parents must draw upon their own faith to determine where their child will be educated.

Although this book makes it clear there is no “one Christian approach” to the Christian education of our children, the writers present not only four practical options, but also biblical and theological foundations for making an informed decision. It is also clear that God calls families to one approach or another, at least for a time.

This diminutive book will serve Christian parents well as they reflect on their child’s educational future. Christian educators would do well to utilize it in the church context as an aid to help parents understand their role in educating their young. The book underscores at least three truths: all parents should be homeschoolers (disciplers) of their children, no approach is right for every child in every context, and no decision on education is permanent. Parents should review their choices annually and make adjustments as necessary.

Visionary Marriage begins with the simple question “Why marriage?” (and for those already married, “Why...
still married?). In other words, what is the purpose of it all? While there are plenty of how-to marriage resources available, sometimes what is lost is the purpose that stands behind it all. Why does God care and what does he intend? The Rienows focus not on items to add to the relationship to-do list, but the grand purpose for marriage and family. Like they say, “When our purpose for marriage is God's purpose for marriage, an everyday marriage turns toward becoming a visionary marriage.” In 150 pages, the authors lay a biblical foundation for God’s intentions in marriage (chapters 1-2), the husband’s responsibilities to love, serve, and lead (chapters 3-5), the wife’s responsibilities in helping, reverence, and training (chapters 7-9), and concluding chapters on oneness, spiritual transformation, encouragement, and mission as a couple and family. Drawing primarily from Genesis 1 and 2, Ephesians 5, and Titus 2, the Rienows offer a book that is biblically faithful, clearly written, and tremendously practical.

Three strengths stand out in particular. First, men are appropriately challenged. A visionary marriage like they describe “begins with a husband who has a dynamically Christ-centered, Bible-driven, multi-generational vision for his life.” Furthermore, they rightly state that “generally speaking, as the man goes, so goes the marriage. As the marriage goes, so goes the family. As the family goes, so goes the church. As the church goes, so goes the nation.” Second, chapter thirteen offers a helpful perspective on the topics of purpose, marriage, sex, and children. The authors argue for an interconnectedness according to God’s design, such that these are not four distinct categories to be viewed and pursued independently of each other, but that rather these are what the authors call “four life connections” that must be seen as a greater God-designed whole. Third, the Rienows finish strong with an encouraging vision that stems from the mission of their own family. They pray for a legacy-leaving discipleship ministry that over the next 200 years shapes and develops 336,000 men and women for kingdom purposes, with over 3,000 serving as pastors, 1,600 as missionaries, and giving (from modest salaries) over $53 billion to strengthen local churches, agencies of compassion, and mission teams.

One weakness of the book comes in the form of assumptions. While the authors do not avoid the idea that marriage is a picture of the gospel and that a God-honoring marriage must be empowered by the grace of the gospel, it also does not stress the idea in any extraordinary way. In other words, the gospel is more implicit than explicit, leading to the assumption that readers have the new hearts necessary to implement the “God-sized vision” that the Reinows commend. Even in our evangelical culture, we cannot afford to make such assumptions. This assumption also narrows the usefulness of the book, as non-Christians may walk away believing they can implement the book’s prescriptions apart from a saving relationship with and the empowering work of Jesus Christ.

Still, by way of a biblical framework, clear and accessible writing, and their own visionary example, the Rienows have indeed provided a strong foundation on which to build a God-sized vision for marriage and family.

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As a thirty-one year old, I’ve often wondered how my parents made the transition from parenting a child in their home to now parenting a child who is grown. Fortunately, I am married to a wonderful woman, am a father to two with a third on the way, and have a job that pays the bills. By God’s grace I don’t fall into the “twixer” category: still living at home and postponing adulthood until well into my thirties. But the challenges of an adult relationship with my parents remain. Whether you are the parent or the grown child, we have all asked the questions: What authority do parents have over their grown children? What should parents do if their adult children make choices with which they disagree? How does a parent relate to adult children still living at home? Should they be charged rent? Expected to do chores? Made to go to church?

You Never Stop Being a Parent by Jim Newheiser
and Elyse Fitzpatrick is a welcomed and wise book that deals with this unique relationship. Newheiser and Fitzpatrick draw on their experience as veteran biblical counselors as well as the great wisdom that can only be gained from a solid grasp of Scripture and its intersection with personal experience to help families transition into godly adult relationships. Over ten chapters the authors cover every question that can be imagined on the subject of parenting adult children, considering each biblically and theologically, yet also providing real-life scenarios that don’t shy away from the complexities of real family relationships. The book deals masterfully with the big issues that parents face—preparing for an empty nest, what it means to leave a spiritual inheritance, relating to adult children who live at home, not honoring children above God—as well as those sticky day-to-day issues of micromanagement, conflict, finances, marriage, and in-laws.

As good as every page is, there are two strengths above all others that distinguish this book. First, the authors are honest with parents. They avoid the trap of pinning all relational problems on the younger and less mature children, and instead deal truthfully with the sins, mistakes, inconsistencies, and failures of parents. They do not avoid the selfishness, fear, demandingness, vicarious living, and plain old idolatry that can sometimes mark the lives of parents. For example, the authors are honest that “nagging will always damage a relationship because it is not the fruit of humble respect. It is the fruit of pride and impatience.” Ouch. Yet the authors always give such necessary corrections with encouragement and the hopeful goal of godly and peaceful relationships between parents and children. They continue, “We’ll never be the understanding parent who draws out the deep plans in our child’s heart until the humility of Christ permeates our own hearts.” This honesty results in a book that is valuable not only for parents but for their children, as children will gain insight into the heart-level struggles that occur in parents who must see their children grow into adults who are now responsible for themselves.

Second, this book is about the gospel. Newheiser and Fitzpatrick lay it out early. “This book is unique... Rather than relying on a list of formulaic steps, it will point you to the cross and to the one Man who had a perfect Father, and who was a perfect Son.” They kept their word. On every page, and at every chapter’s conclusion, the example, motivation, and goal is the grace of God in the gospel. As they say so well, parents cannot and will not accomplish anything discussed in the book “if we don’t see ourselves as being both sinful and flawed as well as loved and welcomed.” Like the best books on biblical living, this one is not so much a book on parenting adult children as it is a book on the gospel and its applications to parenting. There is a profound difference between the two.

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In Trained in the Fear of God, Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones aim to do for family ministry leaders today what Hilkiah and Shaphan did for Josiah. Namely, they seek to ground practices of ministry in theological and historical contexts. Eight years into his reign, King Josiah enacted reforms against Judah’s unfaithfulness, felling the Asherim and crushing graven images. Not a bad start, but this course was not quite right, either. Not until Hilkiah and Shaphan presented to him the long-lost Book of the Law did Josiah fully lead his people in God’s will.

As Josiah saw his time’s problems, so also do contemporary ministry leaders in prevalent ministry practices. Namely, this book notes that growing discontent among evangelicals with what has come to be seen as traditional age-segmented ministry has led to burgeoning interest in more integrated family ministry models. Many within the evangelical community see traditional age-segmented ministry as having contributed to problems including the abdication of parental spiritual leadership for their children and the atomizing of the family unit within church life. However, those promoting family ministry within
congregations are often like Josiah. Good intentions and ideas about family ministry abound, but they lack sufficient guidance from God's Word. This book attempts to supply this guidance.

Trained in the Fear of God presents four sections toward this aim. It begins with an introduction by Bryan Nelson and Timothy Paul Jones. Nelson, the pastor of student discipleship at Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, is a thoughtful practitioner in the field of the family-equipping movement, and Jones is professor of leadership and family ministry at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The introduction conveys the importance of the work, briefly but powerfully noting the cosmic and eternal issues at hand in leading families in discipling children and also examining some of the factors that have spurred renewed interest in family ministry. It then provides a helpful paradigm for categorizing various approaches to family ministry such as the "Programmatic Ministry Model" and the "Family-Integrated Ministry Model." The main body of the book progresses in three parts, each part containing chapters by separate authors including such lights as R. Albert Mohler, Jr., and Kevin L. Smith. The first part takes up the biblical and theological foundations of family ministry, examining what God says about spiritual nurture within the home. The second part then examines how these biblical and theological truths have found expression in the history of the Church from ancient times to today. The third part then addresses practical issues in implementing faithful family ministry in contemporary congregations.

Strong themes resound across the sections. A complementarian view of human sexual identity pervades the work. In particular this book promulgates the view that God has ordained male headship within congregations and the home. Biblical and theological arguments are given for this view. The historical sections also take up this theme by noting how the magisterial Reformers and the Puritans called for fathers to exercise spiritual leadership. The practical section includes a chapter, "The Freedom of Christ and the Unforeseen Consequences of Feminism" by Carolyn McCulley, devoted to examining male headship from a former critic's perspective. Another frequent theme is that of faithfulness. Awareness pervades the book that the family itself may become an idol worshipped and adored instead of Christ Jesus. Authors also warn that pursuing faithfulness in family ministry may meet resistance within congregations and actually lead to numerical decline in involvement.

Many strengths commend this book. Its biblical and theological section offers extremely sophisticated arguments, most notably James M. Hamilton, Jr.'s chapter "That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord: Family Discipleship in the Old Testament" and Bruce A. Wëre's chapter "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: The Trinity as a Theological Foundation for Family Ministry." A highlight in the historical section is C. Jeffrey Robinson, Sr.'s "The Home Is an Earthly Kingdom: Family Discipleship among Reformers and Puritans." Especially illuminating was his discussion of family ministry among the Puritans. One highlight in the practical section is Peter R. Schemm Jr.'s "Habits of a Gospel-Centered Household," which offers helpful and time-tested practices of family discipleship. The practical section also features Carolyn McCulley's aforementioned article, an important voice to dispel potential objections to the theme of male headship.

The book has a number of weaknesses, however. A number of typographical and other editorial errors distract the reader. More significantly, the narrow confessional alliance of the contributors, almost all of whom are Baptists, at times mitigates understanding and applicability among readers of other traditions. Perhaps the book's greatest weakness is ignoring potentially problematic contemporary evangelical Protestant attitudes toward contraception and procreation within marriage. As authors like Alan Carlson of the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society have noted, the embrace of contraception and the mindset that accompanies it is a rather new phenomenon even for Protestants. When Christians see children as optional within marriage rather than the natural and desirable fruit of marital love, they are less likely to consider them as intrinsic blessings from God to be cherished and nurtured in love toward Him. They become more like accessories or possessions rather than sacred trusts. Perhaps an even greater threat to faithful family ministry
is not the decline of male headship but rather this more fundamental understanding about marriage and family.

Despite these weaknesses Trained in the Fear of God offers needed guidance applicable to churches and ministry leaders in diverse contexts and confessions. Any ministry leader concerned about family ministry should read it.

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Spiritual Parenting provides a framework from which to think about God, yourself as a parent and your children. It does not provide a ten-step or seven-step process, nor does it make any over-arching promises about “if you do this as a parent,” “then your child will be and do this.” Michelle Anthony (Ed.D) writes “Spiritual parenting is not perfect parenting - it’s parenting from a spiritual perspective with eternity in mind” (12). Anthony is not interested in behavioral modification, but transformation that represents an obedience of faith. Therefore, spiritual parenting declares “I want to parent the child or children that God gave me in such a way that I first honor God, and then second, create the best environment to put my children in the path of the Divine” (12).

Spiritual parenting means that first I, as a parent, must be a worshipper of Jesus and the God of the Bible. Then, I am prepared to pass on the truth of God’s Word and the vibrant faith that Christ will come looking for (28). This faith is active; it is a faith that loves, that works itself out in all spheres of life for the sake of the kingdom (27-34). Throughout the book Anthony anchors faith in Jesus, while making plain that faith in this Jesus will result in an obedience that flows from faith (36). Further, since God is personal, then biblical faith is relational. A spiritually minded parent, then, will aim to create space for God's spirit to be at work (38-42).

But, where are these spaces, and how do we create them? She suggests ten environments (spaces) to which she gives the rest of the book to explain: (1) Storytelling—the big picture of the Bible; (2) Identity—who we are in Christ; (3) Faith Community—clarifies and strengthens identity; (4) Service—“What needs to be done?”; (5) Out of the Comfort Zone—parents teach and model this in the home and in the world, leading to greater reliance on God; (6) Responsibility—parents teach and model responsibility to God in all areas of life; (7) Course Correction—spiritual parenting aims to correct our child’s course; (8) Love and Respect—represent the foundational categories in which to spiritual parent; (9) Knowing—includes content and relational knowledge of God; (10) Spiritual parenting seeks to model a vital faith in Christ (39-41).

Anthony argues that the big picture of the Bible is essential for spiritual parenting (48-54). Further Old Testament, she helpfully situates important people and climactic actions of God within its own context and then in the larger narrative of the Bible. This approach highlights a worldview approach to parenting, which I think is wise. But, it may have been helpful for Michelle to connect how individual Christians and the New Testament church fit into the Big Story; and further, how does the world fit into the Big Picture. She develops these a bit in other chapters, but these are important categories for the Big Story. Rightly she says the Bible’s Big Story is true! (54). I would suggest that spiritual parenting needs to emphasize the “Truth” nature of God’s Word, especially as parents seek to teach their children how to live in the world but not of the world.

My biggest concern and critique is found in Chapter 4: The Environment of Identity. I am thankful to see her strong emphasis on identity in Christ, but, there are a few closely related concerns and critiques. First, Anthony does not develop in this chapter or in others how we by nature are ‘in Adam’ and hence dead in our sins (Rom 5) and under the wrath of God (Rom 1). She briefly comments on Romans 1 but her development is minimal. Readers would be helped to see how our identity in Adam is compared and contrasted in the Bible by God creating us new in Christ Jesus.
Second, her focus on identity in Christ, as well as most of her book, leaves this book primarily helpful for parents with Christian children. Some readers may ask, “What if my child, or some of my children are not believers? Can I, or should I, talk in all the ways you have to my unbelieving children?” Third, she seems to limit parental counsel to a sinful or struggling child to ‘forgotten identity’. That is, a wayward child needs to remember who they are in Christ. This understanding is important but our children need to hear more than this. She does develop course discipline in Chapter 9, but even there she delimits spiritual discipline away from speaking to a child about God’s wrath, and issues of guilt and shame.

The resistance to use the categories of God’s wrath, shame, and guilt may be based on parenting strategies or parental patterns that leave a child buried in shame, guilt and desolation. I would agree that any kind of parenting strategy that is not restorative in nature is sub-biblical. I would, however, suggest that there is a right, loving and wise (redemptive) way to use the real categories of God’s wrath, shame and guilt with both our believing and unbelieving children.

Anthony’s Spiritual Parenting is a helpful and trustworthy book for what it does say. The book, however, would have been more accurate and broadly helpful if it had set spiritual parenting within the framework of children who are by nature in Adam, and hence this would have opened up the category to help parents spiritually parent their own believing and unbelieving children. Further, God’s wrath, shame, and guilt provide necessary categories to build into the heart of children so that they can come to know what it means that the wrath of God on sinners has been satisfied by the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus on the cross; and that this Christ bore our guilt and shame. All these categories are vital to retain for spiritual parenting.

Jim Rairick
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My best ministerial friend is ridiculous. He bleeds blue as a University of Kentucky basketball fan, he does not understand what a first down in football is, and he formerly studied rocks (that’s right, rocks). On top of that, he is twice my age, is finished with school, and has children who can change their own clothes. I’m a redneck Alabama football enthusiast who bleeds crimson red (roll Tide) and listens to country music.

So how did two men with two wildly different backgrounds come to experience cross-generational intimacy? The gospel.

The Scripture teaches that two thousand years ago, two other men with two wildly different backgrounds—the Hebrew of Hebrews, bigot and murderer, Paul (Phil 3:5; Acts 7:58, 8:1), and a circumcised half-Greek, Timothy (Acts 16:1)—came to experience cross-generational intimacy too. Again, the answer to the question, How is this possible? is: the gospel.

Their fellowship was grounded in a common confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ; this gospel drew them together as they labored expectantly for death-defying vindication in the resurrection. This gospel, which reconciled them to the Father vertically and to one another in Christ horizontally, made their cross-generational fellowship possible.

Paul and Timothy’s friendship is one of the most familiar cross-generational relationships in Scripture (Acts 16:1; Rom 16:21; 1 Cor 4:17; Phil 2:19; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1, 3:2; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Tim 1:2, 18; 2 Tim 1:2). Unfortunately, most people today interpret this gospel-relationship to be more like a medical fellowship for gospel students than a genuine friendship and relationship. As a result, many readers fail to notice that Paul and Timothy traveled together (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor 16:10), ministered together (2 Cor 2:1; Phil 2:19-24), wrote to one another (1 & 2 Timothy, respectively) and encouraged one another (1 Tim 6:20) as they lived life together and bore one another’s burdens. Lack of observation has resulted in contemporary evangelical churches struggling to enable their congregants to cultivate Rock-solid (1 Cor 10:4), cross-generational fellowship like that of Paul and Timothy. Typically, the relationships in which churches exhort their congregations to participate are shallow; they are not grounded in their common confession of faith in
Christ. Instead, they are manipulated by flashy events and are artificially created through overly formalized “discipleship” structures that do not teach congregants how to live life together and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). The Scripture, however, calls our churches to a different model by the Spirit of Christ. It presents a model of friendship that takes place over everyday conversations about loving your spouse and kids (Titus 2:3-4) rather than paradigmatic discipleship structures. This type of cross-generational intimacy is one aspect of what it means to not neglect meeting together as some are in the habit of doing (Heb 10:25). Indeed, this is what our Lord Jesus modeled as he walked with his disciples during his earthly ministry (Matt 16:13-20; Mark 1:21; Lk 14:1-17:11; John 21:1-14).

**HOW TO CULTIVATE CROSS-GENERATIONAL FELLOWSHIP IN YOUR LOCAL CHURCH**

The reality is, a significant majority of the people in contemporary evangelical congregations are lonely (this is true whether the church is comprised of six or sixty thousand congregants or anywhere in between), because they have not been taught how to live life together biblically in cross-generational fellowship. At Ninth & O Baptist Church, where I serve on staff, we contend that organic fellowship happens most naturally in our age-graded Bible Fellowship Groups (BFG), which meet on Sunday mornings and have fellowship throughout the week. Yet, we recognize that this is not enough. Our congregants need to experience healthy cross-generational fellowship in their own lives so that they may walk in the fullness of the Spirit of Christ and feel the gravity of being grafted into a people comprised of multiple socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and generations. It is our goal to create a culture in our church where it is odd to isolate oneself from participating in broader congregational cross-generational fellowship. Here are some practical principles we have adopted in order to create opportunities for our busy congregants to experience this type of cross-generational intimacy:

1. As a ministerial staff, we recognize that gospel ministers must model cross-generational fellowship in their personal friendships. So, on a regular basis members of our staff are intentionally getting coffee or going out to eat or inviting people over for dinner with multiple generations in our church. This has two effects. First, it allows our ministerial staff to stay in-tune with a variety of age groups in our church. Second, and most importantly, it models the kind of gatherings we consider to be most healthy in our church.

2. As a ministerial staff, we recognize that gospel ministers must create congregational opportunities for our people to integrate into existing cross-generational structures. About six to eight times a year we have Building Community Nights (BCN) after an abbreviated Sunday evening service. These events allow the generations that make up our congregation to naturally mingle over cookies, coffee, desserts, fruit and laughs (we also have church-wide meals on the grounds 2-4 times a year which have the same effect). These non-threatening settings allow congregants to form unforced relationships with like-minded people in the congregation who may not be in their BFG. Unforced relationships result in genuine relationships where wisdom and service are shared amidst the corporate body.

3. As a ministerial staff, we encourage our congregants to serve in ministries that allow them the fellowship while serving with various generations in order to create organic cross-generational intimacy. Some of the most natural opportunities for fellowship at our church are in the nursery and greeting ministry. Both of these ministries encourage communication and require that those serving work together. Other excellent opportunities we encourage our members to participate in are national and international mission trips as well as the local missions ministry. Friendships forged while doing gospel ministry together typically prove to be some of the most long lasting.

**CONCLUSION**

This is a call to war. Developing cross-generational fellowship in an age of individualism and social-media iso-
lation will not happen without intentionality. Further, this type of Christ-centered fellowship scares the people filling our churches. It is too intimate; it requires too much vulnerability. But, they will not learn to fight the Devil well nor learn what it means to walk in the fullness of the Gospel of Christ without this type of cross-generational fellowship. The gospel has called us into a cosmic-messianic community of faith; when we allow our people to isolate themselves, we make them susceptible to the alluring power of sin as well as to the enemy who prowls like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Pet 5:8). Therefore, gospel ministers must constantly remind their respective congregations that the church is a multi-generational messianic community of faith in Christ (Rev 7:9-12), which must be diverse ethnically as well as generationally.

ENDNOTES

1 This article is dedicated to Dr. Jeff Elieff and Dr. Bill Cook. Without their pastoral discipleship in my life I would continue to remain in uninformed ignorance about vibrant congregational relationships and fellowship. Special thanks to Pastor Cook for taking the time to read this article and offer comments.

2 Another helpful idea is to encourage two different age-graded BFGs to do a month of lessons together on Sunday morning and culminate the series with a fellowship at a member’s home. Again, this provides non-threatening fellowship and invites cross-generational intimacy.
Equipping the Generations: Intergenerational Ministry: Grandparents as Disciple Makers

AARON WILLIAMS

As I look back over my life, I can see God’s hand preparing me to minister to seniors. I can also see how God used many seniors to minister to me in my formative years.

MY GRANDPARENTS, THE PRAYER WARRIORS

My grandparents played a vital role in leading me to Jesus Christ. I don’t think they knew they were discipling me, but that’s exactly what God was doing through them. They were both prayer warriors, and I had prayer with them every Sunday morning before we ate breakfast and went to church. We would close family devotions by quoting Scripture. I remember my grandmother quoting Matthew 28:19–20, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

My grandparents had a profound impact on my life and how I view ministry as intergenerational. Embracing age diversity is the very core of my ministry. I learned from my grandparents that discipleship is a way of life. It’s not just something we do at church; it makes up the fabric of who we are and what we intentionally do in relationship with each another. They have both gone to be with the Lord now, but I take the lessons they have taught me everywhere I go.

I grew up in an environment where words such as “discipleship,” “mentoring,” and “spiritual formation” were foreign. But the Spirit of God was still at work.

During my early years as a youth pastor I was discipled by the elderly Reverend Nathaniel Irvin, who took me under his ministerial wing and modeled what a godly pastor is like. I went everywhere with him—to visit the sick, to conventions, funerals, and weddings. I watched him minister to a whole community and not just his congregation. I sat at his feet for ten years before I went to seminary. And I learned from him that authentic ministry is intergenerational. He taught me that the church is at its best when the young and the old are integrated throughout the life of the congregation.

CONNECTING OLD AND YOUNG

Seniors must remember what it was like to be young, and the young must remember that they may one day become seniors. We must be patient with one another.

Aaron Williams (Th.M., Dallas Theological Seminary) and his wife, Michelle, live in Seattle, Washington, where he serves as pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church. A native of Augusta, Georgia, where he was raised primarily by his grandparents, Reverend Williams is committed to bridging the generation gap that exists between seniors and young adults, thereby cultivating an intergenerational ministry within the church.

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If we have a contemporary service for the young and a traditional service for seniors, we teach the young and the old to be intolerant of one another. We are bordering on ageism. The young and the old must come side by side with each other and minister to the glory of God together.

Paul the senior told Timothy the younger, “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity” (1 Tim 5:1–2). Churches in the twenty-first century would do well to take to heart this admonition as it relates to intergenerational ministry.

During a class on discipleship and mentoring I took at Dallas Theological Seminary, I heard Professor Hendricks say something one day that resonated with my spirit: “Every Timothy needs a Paul, and every Ruth needs a Naomi.”

During my years in seminary my wife Michelle and I were fortunate to live and work at a retirement community. God made clear to us the calling He had placed on our lives to minister to the elderly. At this community I came to believe in the importance of ministering to seniors. A woman there named Prebble was about four-foot-five in stature, but she walked tall. She was ninety-three years old, and we became close friends. I became her son and she became my mother. She would always say to me, “You’re going to make a great preacher one of these days.” She encouraged me to teach a Bible study class at the retirement community every Wednesday. She said she would be there to support me. I agreed to teach the class, and attendance averaged about twenty seniors weekly. Prebble kept her word; she was there every week until she was no longer able to come. Teaching that class was one of the best decisions I ever made in ministry because the people ministered more to me than I did to them. They shared wonderful stories and nuggets of wisdom with me and each other.

God prepared my wife and me there to minister to a congregation in Seattle that is largely comprised of seniors. Older saints are the lifeline of the Mount Zion Baptist Church family. Every Wednesday morning I teach a Bible study class for seniors. We have a seniors ministry geared toward meeting them at their specific points of need. We have a seniors Sunday each year in which we celebrate their birthdays and accomplishments, both in the community and the church. And we have a retirement community of sixty apartment units called McKinney Manor. Our seniors serve the church family as a repository of wisdom, and we would be wise to listen. Almost everything I learned about ministry, I learned from seniors.  

ENDNOTES

1 Reprinted from http://www.dts.edu/magazine/.

A LIFETIME OF DISCIPLEING AND BEING DISCIPLED

During my years in seminary my wife Michelle and I were fortunate to live and work at a retirement community. God made clear to us the calling He had placed on our lives to minister to the elderly. At this community I came to believe in the importance of ministering to seniors. A woman there named Prebble was about four-foot-five in stature, but she walked tall. She was ninety-three years old, and we became close friends. I became her son and she became my mother. She would always say to me, “You’re going to make a great preacher one of these days.” She encouraged me to teach a Bible study class at the retirement community every Wednesday. She said she would be there to
It was late in the afternoon of September 23, 1986. I was two years old, and my dad had just taken off on a routine training exercise in his F-4 Phantom fighter jet. He was flying over the Atlantic Ocean, not far from our home in Beaufort, South Carolina, when his F-4 crashed into another F-4 during a dogfight maneuver. Both my dad, Captain Charles Kelly Castleberry, and his navigator, Major Christopher Brammer, were never seen again. Search and Rescue crews scoured the Eastern seaboard for days, but they were never able to locate my father.

Ever since that day, I have had a special place in my heart for the “fatherless” of this world, especially those who have experienced loss through traumatic circumstances. This ache for the fatherless was stirred up again on April 17, as the news aired the horrific events concerning the giant fertilizer plant explosion in West, Texas. I was distraught to learn that a crew of firemen had been at the site, trying to put out the fire when the blast occurred. Two thoughts immediately came to my mind: Unless there had been a miracle, the firemen on site would not have survived the blast, and, at least some of those firemen were never again going to see their wives and children on this earth. It may have been a “routine” call for these trained professionals. Then, in an instant, it became a deadly tragedy. The lives of their loved ones would never be the same. Their children would be left, clinging to every possible memory of their fathers, but they would never again, on this side of eternity, see their dads’ faces or be able physically to talk to them.

Losing a father is unspeakably horrific for any child. The son has lost the one person primarily responsible to train him to be a man, and to help him through that process. The daughter has lost her provider, protector, and the man responsible for teaching her what it means to be cherished and valued as a woman. I believe this is one reason why God has such a special, tender heart for the fatherless and the widows of the world. David, by the Holy Spirit, writes in Psalm 68:5, “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.”

I have experienced this special fatherly love of God throughout my life, as his special hand of providence has guided me in numerous ways. One way that he has shown this love is through another godly man, Preston Abbott, who was sent to be my earthly father four years after my
first dad died. Another provision from my Heavenly Father is the amazing legacy of my first father, Kelly. God enabled my father to do some extraordinary things in his short twenty-six years on earth. These have shaped and will continue to shape me for the rest of my life.

THREE WAYS MY FATHER’S LEGACY HAS IMPACTED ME

1. My Father’s Faith: God used my father’s untimely death to make me think about the realities of death, heaven, and hell at a very early age. This enabled my mom to share with me about my father’s Lord and how “because my father had trusted Christ as his Savior from sin, he was with Jesus now in Heaven.” Because I admired my dad so much, I knew that if he loved Jesus, then I should learn more about Jesus. Eventually, I came to see how irresistibly good Jesus is, so one night I prayed with my mom and expressed faith in Christ. I rejoiced that I too would one day get to see Jesus in Heaven.

2. My Father’s Purity: One night my dad’s squadron took a “mandatory” trip to a beach house somewhere along the Atlantic Coast. No wives or children were allowed to come. This was a special night in which many of the young pilots would receive their “call-signs.” Shortly after my father arrived at the beach house, he realized why family members were not invited. Someone had invited strippers as entertainment for the evening. Later that night, when he confided this event to my mom, she asked him how he responded. He said that he had stayed in the corner of the beach house with his hand over his eyes. A few months after my father’s crash, a pilot in the squadron gave my mom a picture that someone had taken inside the beach house that night. He told my mom that deep down “everyone respected Kelly for it, but no one had the guts to follow him.” Sure enough, in the background was my father with his hand covering his eyes. As a young boy, my mom showed me that picture and explained to me the integrity and courage my dad had displayed in that moment. She then explained the necessity of walking a path of purity in my own life. My mom framed the picture and put it in my room for me as a constant reminder to always walk in purity. The legacy of purity my father left for me has made a huge difference in my life. In high school, college, and the Marine Corps, I faced numerous temptations to compromise, but the Holy Spirit used the legacy of my dad and other biblical heroes—-to help me withstand temptation.

3. My Father’s Life of Prayer: After my dad’s death, my mom told me how he had spent hours each night over my crib, praying for me after I had fallen asleep. As a three-, four-, and five-year-old fatherless boy, when I missed my dad immensely, my mom would often remind me of these prayers and how much my dad loved me. She would tell me that God loved me more than my dad ever could and that he was my Father now. Since I was a boy, I have been sensitive to the blessings God has bestowed on my life, such as a calling to ministry, a beautiful wife, two precious daughters, and incredible relationships with family and friends. I thank God for these gifts (James 1:17), and I believe they are answers to my father’s prayers. Now, as a daddy to two little girls, I often spend time at night over their cribs praying for them. In that way, my father’s legacy has not only impacted me, but it has impacted my children as well.

WHAT I’VE LEARNED FROM MY FATHER ABOUT LEAVING A GODLY LEGACY

We live in a cursed world, and we never know when the Lord could take us from our families. As Christians, we no longer need to fear death because of Christ’s death and resurrection (Heb 2:15), but we should prepare for it. We should live every day to maximize the glory of Christ (Phil 1:20-26).

Any valuable Christian legacy that we have to pass down to our children is only due to the precious blood of Jesus Christ. After all, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet 2:24).

Don’t underestimate the value of a life lived for Christ. Although our lives are but a vapor, the Spirit can use the example of our lives in extraordinary ways for the building of the kingdom. Iain Murray wrote in his outstanding book Heroes, “The Bible no more knows a separate class of heroes than it does of saints. Because of Jesus Christ, every Christian is extraordinary and attains to glory. Yet grace so shines in some (as in the
portraits of Hebrews 11), that it lightens the path of
many.” As A.W. Tozer could write, ‘Next to the Holy
Scriptures, the greatest aid to the life of faith may be
Christian biographies.’"

As we consider the legacies that parents leave for
their families, please join with me in praying for the
children of the firemen and others who lost their lives in
West, Texas. Pray that God would use the legacy of their
fathers for good and that they would come to faith in
Christ. Also pray that we, like Paul, would be able to say
at the end of our lives, “Brothers, join in imitating me,
and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the
example you have in us” (Phil. 3:17).
It is a truly exciting thing to be involved in your child’s spiritual journey. Ensuring your child is cared for in terms of physical and emotional provision is certainly important. The greatest contribution you can make to your child’s well-being, however, is instilling a fervent love for Jesus Christ. But how does this happen? What steps must a parent take in order to lead their child to Christ? How can you ensure that what happens at church is a supplement and not a replacement for spiritual guidance at home?

Moses provided an excellent framework to answer these questions in Deuteronomy 6. In this text, God commanded parents to nurture their children spiritually during all parts of the day: at home, during travel time, when waking up and when going to sleep. These are all excellent times to share the Word of the Lord with your children and take intentional measures to grow them in Christ!

THE X-FACTOR—YOU

The primary way to lead your child day-by-day to Christ is through the faithful testimony of your own life. Paul called this a “sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5). Your child has watchful eyes and will attentively notice your spiritual ups and downs. Being an “X-Factor” means that you are a special piece with a special place your child’s spiritual puzzle. With this in mind, here are a few self-examination questions:

• How have you exhibited faith in God to your child?
• Have you been transparent with your children about your imperfections and your need for forgiveness?
• Do you openly talk about Jesus and how he is impacting your life?
• Do your children see in you a consistent desire to please God?
• Do your children see you reading God’s Word on a regular basis?
• Do you pray often and lead your children in times of prayer outside of bedtimes and mealtimes?

COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL CLEARLY

When teaching your children the gospel message be sure they recognize the basic premise that they are sinners and that, because of God’s great love, he allowed his Son Jesus to be crucified and buried then he raised him from the dead. Here are some Scriptures to talk about to convey these truths:
We are sinners—Genesis 3:1-24, Judges 17:6, Psalm 51:3-5, Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23

God is loving—Psalm 117:2, John 3:16, John 15:9, Romans 5:8, Romans 8:38-39, 1 John 3:16

Jesus died for sinners and rose from the dead—Mark 8:31, Luke 24:45-47, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Philippians 2:8-10, Hebrews 9:14

The proper response to the work of Jesus is repentance and faith—Mark 1:15, John 3:36, Acts 2:38, Ephesians 2:8-9, Hebrews 6:1

It is good to raise a child to know the Scriptures and to talk about what God has done. But never forget that no child is “born” a Christian! Your child must be born again by a work of God in his or her heart (John 3:5, 1 Pet 1:23). As a parent, look for changes in your child's life as a result of repentance and faith. Repentance is a recognition that sin is destructive to one's relationship with God coupled with a conscious turning toward God. Faith is reliance on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus to deal with one's sin, not on anything that any of us can do.

When talking about the gospel with your child, use clear terminology. Until the age of ten or eleven, children tend to think very concretely. They may not understand metaphors we use to communicate the gospel. Here are a few phrases that can muddy the waters for your child:

- Give your life to the Lord
- Ask Jesus into your heart
- Make a decision for Christ
- Come to Christ
- Get saved

If you steer away from these phrases and stick to clear and biblical terminology, children will be better able to understand the gospel message. Below are a few analogies which may help you communicate the gospel message more clearly:

Sin: Ask the child what happens when fruit punch is spilled on a white t-shirt in a store? It stains. The shirt cannot be sold now. Our sin stains us and keeps us from Heaven because nothing impure or unclean can enter into Heaven.

God’s love: Ask her how he would feel if her brother or sister or cousin took the punishment for something bad that she did. Tell him that if her relative took the punishment because they wanted to suffer in his place, he would know that the relative loved him. God in Christ was willing to become a sacrifice and a substitute for the people he loves.

Jesus: Ask what the coach does in a basketball game when a player is too tired to play. The coach has a substitute come in and play for the exhausted player. Jesus died to take the punishment we deserve and he was raised from the dead to give us eternal life that we don’t deserve. If we had to suffer the punishment for our sin, we would suffer death forever. We need a substitute.

OTHER THOUGHTS AS YOU LEAD YOUR CHILD TO CHRIST

- Pray for and with your child. Ask for the Holy Spirit to work in your child's heart and to give you wisdom.
- Remember that knowing the right answers does not mean your child is born again.
- Do not push or set a goal for your child to be saved at a certain time or age.
- Keep a journal of your child's questions or conversations to see how the Lord is working over time.
- Do not coerce your child into a decision or put words in his mouth. Let your conversations be conversations, not lectures.
- Let your child pray his own prayer of response instead of repeating after you. This helps you to grasp his understanding of repentance and faith.
- Steer away from yes or no questions when talking with him. Ask open-ended questions to discover what your child really understands and believes.
- Have your child tell you the plan of salvation and respond as if you are a friend who has never heard the gospel. Children enjoy role playing, and you will discover the degree to which your child understands the gospel.
While this issue of The Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry was being edited in preparation for publication, one of our contributors and editors died unexpectedly. Bill Cutrer left his home for a bicycle ride around 7 a.m. on July 13 and not long after, fellow cyclists found him tipped over on his bicycle. The cyclists and emergency responders tried to revive Cutrer without success.

“Bill Cutrer was known to many as ‘William Cutrer, M.D.’ For many years he was a prominent obstetrician in Dallas, Texas. He delivered thousands of babies, including some of our own students,” President R. Albert Mohler wrote in his letter informing the seminary community of Dr. Cutrer’s death. “Later, Dr. Cutrer trained for the ministry at Dallas Theological Seminary. He came to us as a member of the faculty more than a decade ago, teaching in the areas of ministry, medical ethics, marriage and family and personal discipleship. He was also known to the Southern Seminary family as a trusted doctor in the clinic.”

Cutrer became the first medical doctor to join the faculty of Southern following his successful medical career as an obstetrician and gynecologist in Texas. In 1999, he assumed an endowed professorship as C. Edwin Gheens Professor of Christian Ministry. He was also the director of the Gheens Center for Family Ministry. During his tenure at the seminary, he served as staff physician of the school’s Hagan Clinic, an on-campus limited health maintenance service staffed by a charge nurse and physician.

In his letter, Mohler wrote about “first-hand” knowledge of Cutrer’s medical expertise, referencing his own major surgery and ensuing complications.

“Dr. Cutrer cared for me and supervised my recovery and months of subsequent testing,” he wrote. “I know what a trusted physician he was, and I know what a friend he was to so many on the Southern Seminary campus. Bill Cutrer spent years helping thousands of babies to be born before helping scores of young Christians to be born as ministers. He was a remarkable man, and he lived a remarkable life. He touched and influenced thousands of lives and he leaves a great legacy. He died all too soon, from our perspective. We will miss him greatly.”

In addition to his duties at the seminary, Cutrer was an active pro-life advocate and practitioner in the Louisville community. For many years, he was the medical director for A Woman’s Choice Resource Center, a non-profit special health clinic that provides pregnancy testing, ultrasounds and other services for crisis pregnancies and post-abortion support.

In a 2006 article, a reporter for the The New York Times quoted Cutrer about his work with the
center. Noting the variety of needs and interests that attracted women into the center, Cutrer told the reporter that the center provided ultrasounds primarily for “persuasive, not diagnostic” reasons. He said: “The primary purpose is to show [women who come into the clinic] that [their pregnancy is] not a clump of tissues but a human being.”

Cutter, who spoke at conferences about various topics such as marriage enrichment, bioethics and wellness lifestyles, was the author or co-author of several books, including *Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*, *The Infertility Companion*, *The Contraception Guidebook* and *The Church Leader’s Handbook: a Guide to Counseling Families and Individuals in Crisis*. He also performed missionary work in a variety of countries and contexts. Cutrer held a medical degree from the University of Kentucky and a master’s degree from Dallas Theological Seminary.

Following announcements of Cutrer’s death, his former colleagues, students and friends filled social media outlets with appreciation and thanksgiving for Cutrer’s ministries, along with sympathy and support for his family.

One such student, Athanasios Bardis, an alumnus from Australia, sent out a newsletter expressing his appreciation for Cutrer. “In introducing himself [Cutter] told us he was a living time bomb and could die at any moment with a condition he had in his heart,” the student wrote about he and his wife’s first encounter with Cutrer during a marriage enrichment seminar. “This did not stop him, make him fret, or cause anxiety. He lived all out there for Jesus, pursued and continued to serve students till his last breath. His godly counsel, his living example of his life and marriage has impacted and influenced our marriage like no other.”

Cutter leaves behind his wife, Jane Curry Cutrer, and three children and their spouses—William Jr. (Elisabeth), Robert (Meredith) and Jennifer Snow (Casey)—and grandchildren Emily, Zachary, Maddie, Abigail, Alexis, and Victoria. The family asked that expressions of sympathy go to the Gheens Center for Family Ministry at Southern Seminary or to A Woman’s Choice Resource Center.