Discipleship from Generation to Generation

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To have a biblical worldview is to interpret every aspect of our lives—including our relationships with children—within the framework of God’s story. At the center of God’s story stands this singular act: In Jesus Christ, God personally intersected human history and redeemed humanity at a particular time in a particular place. Yet this central act of redemption does not stand alone. It is bordered by God’s good creation and humanity’s fall into sin on the one hand and by the consummation of God’s kingdom on the other.

This story of creation, fall and law, redemption, and consummation is the story that Christians have repeated to one another and to the world ever since Jesus ascended into the sky and sent his Spirit to dwell in his first followers’ lives. This age-old plot-line should frame every aspect of our lives—including how we treat and train children.

GIFTS FROM GOD AND SINNERS IN NEED

In each movement of God’s storyline, it is clear that children are neither burdens to be avoided nor byproducts of human sin. Every child is a blessing and a gift (Ps. 127:3–5). Even before humanity’s fall into sin, God designed the raising of children to serve as a means for the multiplication of his manifest glory around the globe (Gen. 1:26–28). A few bites of forbidden fruit, raising Cain as well as Abel, and a worship service that ended in fratricide took their toll on that first family—but God refused to give up on his first purpose to turn the family into a means for revealing his glory. God promised that, through the offspring of Eve, he would send a redeemer to fulfill his plan to pour out his glory over all the earth (Gen. 3:15; 4:1, 25). In a pattern that persists throughout Scripture, the family becomes a path both for bringing the Messiah into the world and for passing the message of the Messiah from one generation to the next.

After the fall, men and women still exercise divinely-ordered dominion over God’s creation by raising children (Gen. 1:26-28; 8:17; 9:1–7; Mark 10:5–9). What has changed in the aftermath of the fall is that children have become not only gifts to be nurtured but also sinners to be trained. And yet, in all of this, the family remains a means in God’s plan, never the goal and never the source or center of our identity.
1. **In a biblical worldview, the training of children is a primary parental responsibility**: Parents possess a responsibility not only to provide their children’s needs but also to train their children to reflect God’s glory. This doesn’t release the larger community of faith from a responsibility for shaping children’s souls. The Great Commission to “make disciples” was given to the whole people of God and includes every age-group (Matt. 28:19). Neither does this mean that parents must be the sole instructors in their children’s lives. Parents may partner with church ministries or enlist schools to develop certain skills in their children’s lives—but parents still bear final responsibility before God for how their children are trained for life.

In the Old Testament, Moses commanded parents—and particularly fathers—to train their children in God’s ways (the pronouns translated “you” and “your” in Deut. 6:6–7 are masculine singular in the original language). Moses expected children to ask their parents about their family’s spiritual practices, and he prepared fathers to respond in ways that highlighted God’s mighty works (Ex. 12:25–28; Deut. 6:20–25). These expectations persisted throughout Israel’s songs and early history (Josh. 4:6; Ps. 78:1–7). This ancient heritage of songs, statutes, and ceremonies foreshadowed the coming of Jesus and explicitly recognized the primacy of parents in their children’s training.

Paul reiterated this point in the New Testament when he reminded fathers to nurture their children in the “training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Paul seems to have derived this phrase from Deuteronomy 11:2, where “discipline of the LORD” prefaced a description of how God disciplined his people to remind them of his covenant with them. In other letters, Paul applied these same two terms—training and instruction—to patterns that characterized the disciple-making relationships of Christian brothers and sisters. Training implied discipline and described one of the key results of training in the words of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Instruction included warnings to avoid unwise behaviors and ungodly teachings (1 Cor. 10:11; Titus 3:10). Such texts strongly suggest that Paul was calling parents—and particularly fathers—to do far more than manage their children’s behaviors and provide for their needs. Paul expected parents to train their children to engage with their world in light of God’s words and God’s ways.

2. **In a biblical worldview, the training of children is worldview training.** This training includes far more than merely increasing children’s biblical knowledge or involving them in a community of faith. Moses commanded the Israelites to teach their offspring to view all they did (“hands”) and all they chose (“forehead”), as well as how they lived at home (“doorposts”) and how they conducted business (“your gates”) within the all-encompassing framework of a God-centered worldview (Deut. 6:8–9). “Wisdom” in Proverbs was conveyed from father to child and included not only knowledge about God but also practical skills for engaging with the world in light of God’s truth. Skills in craftsmanship, leadership, and a broad range of other fields all fell under the heading of wisdom, which begins with “the fear of the Lord” (Exod. 31:3, 6; Deut. 34:9; Prov. 1:7). Persons outside the believing community may possess these skills, but only the believer sees them as God intended, as signposts pointing to the order and glory of God. There is no biblical warrant for separating the training of children into “secular” and “sacred” categories, with one handled by the world and the other superintended by parents. God is Lord over all of life.

3. **In a biblical worldview, the training of children includes formal and informal components.** Moses commanded the Israelites not only to teach God’s words to their children but also to discuss these truths informally throughout each day (Deut. 6:7–9). In Proverbs, the father passed on particular teachings to his son (Prov. 4:2) but he also provided occasional instructions in response to specific situations (Prov. 4:1)—once again, a combination of formal and informal components. The biblical pattern is for both parents to be involved in these practices of formal and informal training. The book of Proverbs specifically mentions the mother’s role five times (Prov. 1:8, 4:3, 6:20, 31:1, 26). According to biblical scholar Peter Gentry, this inclusion of the mother is unparalleled in the wisdom literature of the Ancient Near Eastern nations that surrounded Israel. The father possessed a particular respon-
sibility to lead, but the father’s responsibility did not negate or diminish the mother’s supportive role in the nurture and admonition of children.

YOUR CHILD IS FAR MORE THAN YOUR CHILD

Viewed from the vantage of creation and fall, children are both gifts to be treasured and sinners to be trained. Yet no amount of training can ever raise a child to the level of God’s perfect righteousness. And even the best training may not result in a child’s perseverance in the faith; the popular text that declares “even when he is old he will not depart” is not an airtight promise to parents but a proverb—a pithy observation about how life typically works (Prov. 22:6).

Every order of creation, including our training of children, has been subjected to frustration with the gap between the glory of God’s creation and the fact of humanity’s fallenness (Rom. 8:20–22). The ultimate answer to this gap is not better education but a perfect substitute—and that’s precisely what God provided in Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God himself bridged the gap between his perfection and humanity’s imperfection (2 Cor. 5:21). The death of Jesus brought about the possibility of redemption in the present; his resurrection guaranteed the consummation of God’s kingdom in the future.

This truth introduces a radical new dimension to how we view children. To embrace God’s redemption is to be adopted in Jesus Christ as God’s heir, gaining a new identity that transcends every earthly status (Rom. 8:15–17; Gal. 3:28–29; 4:3–7; Eph. 1:5; 2:13–22). As a community united in Christ, the church becomes the believer’s first family. “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother,” Jesus said (Matt. 12:50). Paul made much the same point when he directed Timothy to encourage “younger men as brothers” and “younger women as sisters” (1 Tim. 5:1–2). Because the church is a family, in instances where one parent is absent or an unbeliever, other believers may become that child’s parents in the faith (2 Tim. 1:2, 5; 3:15).

What this means for followers of Jesus is that every child is far more than a child. Every child is first and foremost a potential or actual brother or sister in Christ. Whatever children stand beside us in eternal glory will not stand beside us as our children or as our students. They will stand beside us because and only because they have become our brothers and sisters, “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17; see also Gal. 4:7; Heb. 2:11; James 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:7).

Every child is an eternal soul whose days will long outlast the rise and fall of all the kingdoms of the earth. They and their children and their children’s children will flit ever so briefly across the face of this earth before being swept away into eternity (James 4:14). If these children become our brothers and sisters in Christ, their days upon this earth are preparatory for glory that will never end (Dan. 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:17—5:4; 2 Pet. 1:10–11). That’s why our primary purpose for the children that we educate in our churches and homes must not be anything as small and miserable as earthly success. Our purpose should be to leverage children’s lives to advance God’s kingdom so that every tribe, every nation, and every people-group gains the opportunity to respond in faith to the rightful King of kings.

WHAT’S IN THIS ISSUE

A wide range of articles and perspectives can be found in this issue! A couple of historical articles—one about the mother of fifth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo and one about John Wesley’s recommendations on the reading of Scripture to children—are balanced by a consideration of the pastor’s home and a couple of other bits of significant research. James Hamilton introduces us to his new children’s book, and books on prayer, family worship, and family ministry are up for review. A broad range of academic and pastoral leaders—including R. Albert Mohler, John Piper, and Stephen Altrogge—have provided content for Equipping the Generations, addressing issues ranging from the war against pornography to the necessity of raising godly children.

CORRECTION

In the memorial tribute to Dr. William Cutrer in the last issue of Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry, an attribution at the end of the article was inadvertently omitted; the attribution should have read: “Aaron Cline Hanbury contributed to this article.”
“So many voices”: The Piety of Monica, Mother of Augustine

MATTHEW HASTE

In The History of St. Monica, Émile Bougaud (1823–1888) introduced his subject with the lofty claim that readers should sing such a biography rather than read it. Believing Monica had possessed “the most beautiful love that perhaps ever existed,” Bougaud encouraged mothers to look to her example and recognize “how divine is the strength with which God has endowed them in the interest of their children’s eternal salvation.” While such a statement may sound admirable, Bougaud goes on to explain that a mother’s divine strength consists of her ability to bring about her children’s salvation through her own steadfast will. Bougaud continues, “As regards the life of the body, a mother can do much; with regard to the life of the soul she can do all; and the world would be saved could we succeed in convincing mothers of this truth.” The author closes his work by praying to Monica and asking her to intercede for mothers throughout the world. Such erroneous conclusions, often built on hagiographic depictions, are common in the many Catholic biographies of Augustine’s mother. At the other end of the spectrum, modern secular scholars have examined Monica from seemingly every angle and yet few have focused on her personal piety. From Elizabeth Clark’s literary theory study of the “Monica-functions” in Confessions to Anne-Marie Bowery’s conclusion that Monica provides “the feminine face of Christ,” many of these works reveal more about the presuppositions of the author than Monica. Modern readers of Augustine’s Confessions may wonder if there are other options for appreciating this fourth-century woman. To put it more bluntly, one might ask, “What can an evangelical Protestant learn from Monica, the mother of Augustine?” This essay will endeavor to answer that question by examining the life and piety of Monica as set forth in Confessions, with particular reference to her final days recounted in Book 9.17–37. As this study demonstrates, Monica is a helpful model of Christian piety because she practiced the biblical virtues of persistent prayer, confident faith, and humble service to others.

THY HANDMAID: THE LIFE OF MONICA

Augustine (354–430) wrote Confessions a decade after his mother’s death, and yet, Monica (331–387) is more prominent in the narrative than any of his...
contemporaries. Peter Brown notes that *Confessions* is ultimately a portrait of Augustine’s inner life, which was “dominated by one figure—his mother, Monica.” Given the prevalence of Monica in *Confessions*, many details of her life are available in this work.

Monica was born in Thagaste, where she received a Berber name reminiscent of a pagan god. Although her hometown was under Donatist influence at the time, her parents trained her in the Catholic faith, with the help of a particularly godly servant in their home. She married a man named Patricius (d. 371), who was unfaithful to her throughout their early years together. Despite his hot temper and infidelity, Monica was a faithful wife and her husband became a Christian at the end of his life.

Monica gave birth to Augustine in 354 when she was 23 years old. From an early age, Augustine recognized, “My mother placed great hope in [God],” and she “was in greater labor to ensure my salvation than she had been at my birth.” Amidst years of tearful prayers, Monica became convinced that her wayward son would eventually return to the Catholic Church. She believed God had promised as much in a personal vision and had confirmed this promise through the prophetic words of her bishop, who proclaimed, “It cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost.”

For her part, Monica did all she could to ensure that the bishop’s words would come true. Although Augustine moved to Rome without her, she joined him in Milan when he settled there, braving the perilous journey over the Mediterranean courageously. In Milan, she befriended Ambrose, the well-known bishop of the city, and became a devoted member of his congregation. Soon, Augustine would famously turn from his sins to the Savior his mother had so long commended to him. Monica was the first to find out and rejoiced to see her many prayers coming to fruition. After years of faithfully crying out to God on behalf of her son, the Lord had turned her sadness into, in Augustine’s words, “joy far fuller than her dearest wish.”

Monica continued to live with her son after his conversion, when the two moved to Cassiciacum with several of Augustine’s friends. Many scholars have noted that Monica was not merely present at Cassiciacum but was active in the philosophical discourses that Augustine recorded. Brown contends that Augustine set forth Monica as “an oracle of primitive Catholic piety” in these works.

While Augustine and his mother intended to return to North Africa, Monica would only survive as far as Ostia, where she contracted a fever and soon died. His mother’s final days produced some of the most memorable scenes in the pages of *Confessions*, to which we will now turn our attention.

**THE DEATH OF MONICA**

Two weeks before Monica’s death, she and her son shared an experience that has intrigued scholars for centuries. In Augustine’s own words, “We were talking alone together and our conversation was serene and joyful.” In their discussion of the eternal life of the saints, Augustine describes the pair as ascending toward Truth until they “passed beyond” their own souls and reached “that place of everlasting plenty, where [God] feed[s] Israel forever with the food of truth.” In a climactic moment, Augustine exclaimed, “For one fleeting instant we reached out and touched [eternal Wisdom].” Such a preview of the world to come left Monica with little interest in this present life. God had answered her prayers for her son and she was now ready to die in peace.

While scholars have long been fascinated with the apparent mysticism in this scene, Augustine’s primary purpose for the story was to demonstrate Monica’s readiness for her pending death. Unlike various other scenes in *Confessions*, he did not slow the narrative with philosophical reflection, but rather quickly moved on to his point: “It was about five days after this, or not much more, that she took to her bed with a fever.”

On her deathbed, Monica told her sons that she was not concerned about the place of her burial, which Augustine saw as fruit of her spiritual maturity and detachment from the world. Within days, he reported, “Her pious and devoted soul was set free from the body.” Monica’s sojourn in this world came to a quiet end, but she left behind a legacy that has endured for generations.
REFLECTIONS ON MONICA’S PIETY
One can appreciate Monica’s devotion to the Lord and humble faith, despite misgivings about some of the particulars of her theology. This section will briefly highlight the commendable elements of Monica’s piety.

PERSISTENT PRAYER
For centuries, the church has recognized Monica as a model of persistent prayer and motherly devotion. From the beginning of his life to the end of hers, Monica faithfully prayed for her son and sought his conversion. Although Wills contends that “too much is often made of her role in Augustine’s life,” this opinion can be traced to Augustine himself. He understood her prayers to be instrumental in his conversion and praised her persistent prayer in several of his works.

Bougaud was correct to identify the divine strength available to mothers through prayer, but he was woefully wrong about its source. Bougaud was correct to identify the divine strength available to mothers through prayer, but he was woefully wrong about its source. Bougaud was correct to identify the divine strength available to mothers through prayer, but he was woefully wrong about its source. Bougaud was correct to identify the divine strength available to mothers through prayer, but he was woefully wrong about its source. Bougaud was correct to identify the divine strength available to mothers through prayer, but he was woefully wrong about its source.

CONFIDENT FAITH
A second noteworthy aspect of Monica’s piety was her confidence in the Lord. Once she received a dream confirming that her son would one day become a Christian, she appeared to rest in this promise. Her unwavering confidence was evident in the noticeable change in her demeanor and strategy toward Augustine after the dream. When she learned of her son’s rejection of the Manichees, for example, she calmly viewed it as only the beginning of his transformation. While Monica had taken matters into her own hands in Thagaste and frequently implored her bishop to speak with her son, in Milan she seemed to wait quietly on the Lord, even with the eloquent Ambrose available as a resource. Her faith had matured and it altered her approach to her wayward son.

HUMBLE SERVICE
A final significant aspect of Monica’s piety was her humble service to others. While Monica’s marriage with Patricius was hardly a model Christian union, her faithfulness to him and patience with his infidelity are commendable. Augustine recognized that she submitted to Patricius with an evangelistic aim and praised her for her commitment to her husband’s salvation. As Augustine saw it, “The virtues with which [God] had adorned her, and for which [Patricius] respected, loved, and admired her, were like so many voices constantly speaking to him of [God].” The “many voices” of Monica’s piety were pivotal in both her unfaithful husband and wayward son eventually coming to Christ.

Whether in her home or at the country estate in Cassiciacum, Monica strived to be a servant who considered the needs of others greater than her own. Such humble service caught the attention of Ambrose, won her husband to Christ, and earned the admiration of Augustine and countless others since.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, there is much to appreciate about Monica, the mother of Augustine. Through persistent prayer, confident faith, and humble service, she remained faithful through a difficult marriage, the wayward wanderings of her son, and even in her final days. Her legacy commends to future generations not a divine strength inherent to the office of motherhood, but rather the incredible way that God can use someone devoted to himself and his purposes. Despite the confusion that may surround her history, Monica remains a worthy subject for study and reflection. When properly understood, the “many voices” of her piety can speak of God in the present day even as they did so long ago.

ENDNOTES
2 Bougaud, *St. Monica*, ix, xi.
3 Bougaud, *St. Monica*, xii.
4 Bougaud, *St. Monica*, xv.
5 Bougaud, *St. Monica*, 368–369.
6 W. Atkinson provides a helpful survey of Catholic...


This does not mean, of course, that every aspect of Monica’s piety is exemplary. This essay will focus primarily on the commendable elements of her personal piety.


Gary Wills notes that the Berber spelling would have been “Monnica” and that the name is related to the Libyan god Mon. Wills, Saint Augustine (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1999), 2.

The biographical account of Monica’s childhood in the following paragraph comes from Augustine, Confessions 9.17–22 unless otherwise noted.

Interestingly, Augustine reported little about his father in Confessions, seemingly mentioning him only to illustrate Monica’s piety. Even his death receives a mere parenthetical reference. By contrast, Augustine reflects upon Monica’s death from 9.17–9.37 and the death of his young friend from 4.7–10.

Confessions 1.17 (Pine-Coffin, 31–32).

Confessions 3.21 (Pine-Coffin, 70). For the description of her vision, see Confessions, 3.19–20.

Confessions 5.14, 6.1.

Ambrose would have an influence on both mother and son. Monica deeply admired the bishop and even altered some of her personal practices according to his wisdom. Although Augustine initially resisted Ambrose’s teaching, he eventually respected him as a man of God who spoke truth. Confessions 6.1–2.

Confessions 8.30 (Pine-Coffin, 179).


Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 118. Clark agrees, noting that Monica represents “a second means of faith: not the approach through study that he enjoys, but a way of holiness that simple people of no education can embrace.” Clark, “Rewriting Early Christian History,” 102.


The quotations from this paragraph come from Augustine’s retelling of the experience in Confessions 9.23–26 (Pine-Coffin, 196–199).

Coyle agrees with this assessment, noting, “In the Ostia account this mutual exploration serves as a preamble to Monica’s death, which follows on her declaration that there is nothing more she wants from this earthly life.” Coyle, “In Praise of Monica,” 96. For more on Augustine and mysticism, see John Peter Kenney, The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Confessions 9.27 (Pine-Coffin, 199).


Confessions 9.28 (Pine-Coffin, 200).

For example, her practice of making offerings at the tombs of saints and her pressure on Augustine to dismiss the women he lived with are both highly questionable.

For more on the historical appreciation of Monica, see Atkinson, “The Figure of Saint Monica.”

Wills, Saint Augustine, 57.

Confessions 5.13. See also The Happy Life 1.6 and Order 2.20.52.
31 Bougaud, *St. Monica*, xi.
32 *Confessions* 5.17 (Pine-Coffin, 103).
33 In fact, Monica’s firm trust in this promise impressed Augustine more than the dream itself. *Confessions*, 3.20.
34 *Confessions*, 6.1.
37 Augustine notes that she cared for the Cassiacum company like a mother in *Confessions*, 9.22.
38 Augustine noted that Ambrose was impressed with Monica in *Confessions* 6.2. The language of 1 Peter 3:1–6 is intentionally echoed here and by Augustine in his description of how Monica “won” Patricius to Christ. *Confessions* 9.22 (Pine-Coffin, 196).
John Wesley on the Formative Reading of Scripture and Educating Children

PHILIP McKinney II

In the last decade, research has demonstrated that today’s Christian teens believe in the Word of God. For instance, a 2005 Gallop Youth Survey reported that 39% of Protestant and Catholic teens surveyed said that the Bible is the “actual word of God” and should be taken literally; 46% said that the Bible is the “inspired word of God” but believed that not everything should be taken literally in its pages; and 14% said that the Bible is just an “ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man.” In another study, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) reported that about one-third of Protestant teens (32%) read their Bibles by themselves at least once a week or more. These statistics alone would suggest that we are raising children who believe in God’s Word. Unfortunately, belief in the truthfulness of Scripture does not equate to being transformed by it.

In the same study conducted through the NSYR, researchers found that reading the Bible once a week or more did not necessarily bring teens closer to God. These teens believe in God and that he is personally involved in people’s lives. They generally believe in the afterlife, angels, miracles, and a judgment day. Sixty percent say that faith is very or extremely important in shaping how they live their lives and seven out of ten of these teens report having committed to live their lives for God. Yet, these same teens (who appear very religious and committed to God) also report that they do not feel very or extremely close to God (56%) and there are still some 40% of the teens surveyed who do not feel that faith is very important in shaping their lives.

What might these statistics tell us? We could simply say, “Job well done.” Or, we could look at them and realize that we might be raising individuals who believe in Scripture, but this belief has very little to do with forming their relationship with God.

Could this be because we have approached Scripture as a textbook rather than the Word of Life? We approach textbooks informationally. They are there for reference when in need. They provide us valuable information only for particular subjects and we rarely read them in their entirety. Instead, we approach them...
to gain only the bolded, italicized information that is most pertinent to our task at hand (i.e. passing the test). Typically, textbooks have a negative connotation in our minds and they are not something we see as life changing or are they something we pick up everyday.

If we approach Scripture in this fashion, then we will find children and teens that only go to Scripture when they have a question they cannot answer. They will look for the “bold, italicized” passages that are most pertinent to the questions they have and then will return the book to its shelf to be referenced at a later date. Scripture will be seen in a negative fashion as a book of rules and regulations that they do not like and filled with stories that are out of date and have no bearing on their lives.

In direct contrast to a “textbook, informational” approach to Scripture is reading God’s Word formationally. In this information-laden age, when data is manipulated and controlled, it is difficult to help children and teens understand that Scripture is not to be controlled, but instead should control, form, and shape them. Mulholland believes that formational reading is a way in which we encounter the God who spoke us into being and continues to speak us into the image of Christ for the sake of others. According to Mulholland, “Spiritual or formational reading is the exact opposite of informational reading.” He goes on to say,

Instead of coming to the text with our agenda, we come in a posture of openness to God’s agenda. We read attentively, seeking not to cover as much as possible as quickly as possible but to plumb the depths of the text so that the text may plumb the depths of our being and doing. Rather than an analytical approach, we take a contemplative posture that is open to ambiguity and mystery. The final goal of spiritual reading is to be mastered by God for the fulfillment of God’s purposes in us and through us.

Is it time to reconsider how we approach Scripture with our children and teens? Instead of waiting till they become adults to instruct them in the formational reading of Scripture, perhaps we should begin the process as early as possible. John Wesley seems to have had some sense of formational reading of Scripture, and he urged parents to engage their children early in such diligent reading:

But does it follow, that we ought not to instill true religion into the minds of children as early as possible? Or, rather, that we should do it with all diligence from the very time that reason dawns, laying line upon line, precept upon precept, as soon and as fast as they are able to bear it? By all means. Scripture, reason, and experience jointly testify that, inasmuch as the corruption of nature is earlier than our instructions can be, we should take all pains and care to counteract this corruption as early as possible.

Perhaps we can learn from individuals like John Wesley. Wesley was deliberate in his efforts to aid individuals in the process of Christian formation and he firmly believed that the formative reading of Scripture was vital to this process. Moreover, the education of children using Scripture as a guide was a conduit for Christian formation according to Wesley. Wesley is not commonly known for his interest in educating children, yet history demonstrates his deep interest in religious education for the primary purpose of helping children (and all humankind) grow into the image of Christ.

John Wesley’s engagement of Scripture and religious education with children has been thought of as rigid and harsh at times (as will be demonstrated below). However, it may more adequately fit the category of formative reading of Scripture for training in the image of God. A more adequate interpretation of Wesley’s methods could lead to a more intentional approach toward the formative reading of Scripture with children for the intent of Christian formation and discipleship. This article will seek to discover the treasures found in Wesley’s formative approach to Scripture. It will also seek to discover how Wesley’s religious education methods and emphasis on Scripture could aid churches and schools to lead children and teens to an engagement with Scripture that will be more formative rather than informative.
JOHN WESLEY ON THE FORMATIVE READING OF SCRIPTURE

John Wesley, the principal founder of the Methodist movement in the eighteenth-century, was deeply concerned about the process of shaping individuals into the image of Christ. An integral part of his spiritual development process was the formative reading of Scripture. Wesley believed that through Scripture one comes to know God and that knowledge and understanding of Scripture would form one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength toward holiness. He believed that Scripture pointed the way to heaven and therefore he made a self-proclamation to be “a man of one book.” He goes on to say,

I want to know one thing, — the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.

Wesley believed that one could participate in God’s redemptive work through what he called “the means of grace.” He believed that these “means of grace” were channels whereby God presents His grace. Although the means were not an end in and of themselves, they were a way in which an individual could be an active participant in the process of sanctification and justification. He speaks to these “means of grace” by saying, “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”

According to Wesley, these means included: (1) Prayer, (2) Searching the Scriptures, (3) the Lord's Supper, (4) Fasting, and (5) Christian Conference. In these five, Wesley stressed that the chief of these means were three:

(i.) Reading: Constantly, some part of every day; regularly, all the Bible in order; carefully, with the Notes; seriously, with prayer before and after; fruitfully, immediately practicing what you learn there?
(ii.) Meditating: At set times? by any rule?
(iii.) Hearing: Every morning? carefully; with prayer before, at, after; immediately putting in practice? Have you a New Testament always about you?

As in many other areas of Christian formation, Wesley had a methodological approach to reading Scripture formationally. As we have already noted, Wesley believed that one must engage the Bible through (1) reading, (2) meditating, and (3) hearing. Yet, his methodology toward formative reading went much deeper. In the preface of his Notes on the Old Testament, Wesley comments on his deep love for the Bible and the means by which he designed his commentary. His purpose was not to simply provide a reader with information concerning God’s Word, but help in the area of understanding and meaning. He hoped that one could simply approach the “naked” text and find God’s message clearly. He states,

I design only, like the hand of a dial, to point every man to This: not to take up his mind with something else, how excellent soever: but to keep his eye fixt upon the naked Bible, that he may read and hear it with understanding. I say again, (and desire it may be well observed, that none may expect what they will not find). It is not my design to write a book, which a man may read separate from the Bible: but barely to assist those who fear God, in hearing and reading the Bible itself, by shewing the natural sense of every part, in as few and plain words as I can.
He goes on to share that he does not intend to keep one from the process of thinking. Instead, he hopes to assist individuals in thinking more deeply and critically (formationally) about God’s Word. Therefore, he sets out to write in a way that both learned and “ignorant men” could gain understanding of the Bible for the purpose of growth and Christian formation. He clearly writes on his belief on how to understand the things of God (the Bible):

This is the way to understand the things of God; Meditate thereon day and night; So shall you attain the best knowledge; even to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent. And this knowledge will lead you, to love Him, because He first loved us; yea, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Will there not then be all that mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus? And in consequence of this, while you joyfully experience all the holy tempers described in this book, you will likewise be outwardly holy as He that hath called you is holy, in all manner of conversation.

There are several points that Wesley makes here. First, to formatively engage Scripture one must meditate upon it day and night. This meditation is the constant repetition of God’s Word through the day so that His very words will bring one to know God: Father, Son, and Spirit. As the psalmist wrote, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.” The psalmist believed that meditation brought about understanding and knowledge. That knowledge would then lead one to love God according to Wesley. This love would not be a surface nor passing love. Instead, one would come to love God as he loved us (with everything: heart, soul, mind, and strength). One cannot love God in this way without knowing God intimately through his Word. Knowing God and Christ in this way is to truly have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). This intimacy will form one’s “holy tempers” in a way that will transform their entire life and actions.

Now, it is important to help us understand what Wesley meant by “holy tempers.” Wesley used the word “tempers” to describe our very nature and character. He believed that who we are deep inside guides our words and actions. Therefore, corrupted “tempers” would then cause a flow of sinful words and actions from our hearts. In order to be shaped truly into the image of Christ, one must deal with the problem of sin at a much deeper level. Wesley’s “mature definition of Christian life placed primary emphasis on this inward dimension, the recovery of holy tempers, from which would flow holy words and actions.” In other words, the formative reading of Scripture would engage and transform one’s very core (their very self). This is what Wesley said would lead one in the way toward Christian perfection.

Having established his view on the Bible and its ability to transform, Wesley provides the “how” to read Scripture formationally. He gives his readers six pieces of advice toward engaging God’s Word:

1. To set apart a little time, if you can, every morning and evening for that purpose?
2. At each time if you have leisure, to read a chapter out of the Old, and one out of the New Testament: if you cannot do this, to take a single chapter, or a part of one?
3. To read this with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it? In order to know his will, you should,
4. Have a constant eye to the analogy of faith; the connexion and harmony there is between those grand, fundamental doctrines, Original Sin, Justification by Faith, the New Birth, Inward and Outward Holiness.
5. Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used, before we consult the oracles of God, seeing “scripture can only be understood thro’ the same Spirit whereby “it was given.” Our reading should likewise be closed with prayer, that what we read may be written on our hearts.
6. It might also be of use, if while we read, we were frequently to pause, and examine ourselves by what we read, both with regard to our hearts, and lives. This would furnish us with matter
of praise, where we found God had enabled us to conform to his blessed will, and matter of humiliation and prayer, where we were conscious of having fallen short. And whatever light you then receive, should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve, begin to execute the first moment you can. So shall you find this word to be indeed the power of God unto present and eternal salvation.\textsuperscript{23}

Let us now examine each of these methods for Bible reading to determine what might be useful for the formative reading of Scripture today.

**TIME**
The first thing that Wesley mentions is time. One must set aside specific times throughout their day to engage Scripture and allow it to engage them. Time also indicates that Bible study should be regular and consistent. In the same way that we know we will eat food in order to be properly nourished throughout our days, we need to have a steady diet of God's Word in order to be spiritually nourished. This time must be "set apart" as well. Therefore, it is important to (as much as possible) study the Bible without distractions, both outwardly (an environment without distractions or interruptions) and inwardly (letting go of the stresses of life in order to be open to God's message).

Part of the aspect of time also includes giving God your best time.\textsuperscript{24} To truly allow for formative reading, one must engage it when they are most alert and attentive to its message. Unfortunately, we often approach Bible study when we are most depleted. Our emotions are spent and we no longer have the ability think clearly. In essence, we give God our "leftover" time and expect that it will be enough. This is when we are truly searching the Scriptures out of obligation rather than expectation. Yet, to truly allow the Spirit of God to inspire us through the Word, we must give the best time we have. Whether that is the morning or evening or somewhere in the middle, our best time is needed for approaching Scripture formationally.

**WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE**
Second, read portions from both the Old and New Testaments. If one cannot do this, he encourages them to delve deeply into one portion of the Bible. There are three things to take note of here: (1) Wesley engaged the entire Bible. He did not limit himself to only the New Testament. He wanted to warn his readers not to fall into the habit of many Christians and neglect the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{25} Reading the entire Protestant canon was (and is) vital to spiritual growth and maturity.\textsuperscript{26} (2) Wesley encourages his readers to work through the entire Bible, not just the passages that we like the most. We often find ourselves returning over and over again to the same passages that have helped us grow spiritually. Yet, we are missing vital lessons the Spirit may need to teach us in order to move us on in our journey toward spiritual maturity. (3) Wesley indicates here that we should engage Scripture in smaller portions. Reading large portions of the Bible each day will only lead to informational reading. In contrast, we should read smaller portions so that we can digest and meditate on them properly.

**WHOLE WILL OF GOD**
Third, Wesley instructs that we should read "with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it." This is a critical component in the formative reading of Scripture. There are a few things to understand in this instruction: (1) Reading formationally should focus on knowing the whole will of God. That means that we come to our study in openness to what God wants for our lives in every aspect. As Mulholland notes, “To read the scripture in this focused way is to bring the whole of our life before God and to seek expectantly and receptively God’s will for everything in our living.”\textsuperscript{27} (2) Wesley instructs his readers to put into practice God’s will that has been made known to them. This is a call to obedience. Throughout Scripture, God instructs His children to not only hear and know His Word, but to put it into practice through love and obedience.\textsuperscript{28}

**ANALOGY OF FAITH**
Fourth, Wesley stresses that one should “have a constant
eye to the analogy of faith.” He explains that this “analogy of faith” consists of the fundamental doctrines of faith. What Wesley is saying is that there are truths in Scripture that are found from beginning to end; truths that are consistent and a part of God’s overall redemptive plan. These fundamental truths, or analogy of faith, are to be viewed in harmony. Wesley’s truths always centered on: Original Sin, Justification by Faith, the New Birth, Inward and Outward Holiness.

Through church history, this “analogy of faith” was also known as the “rule of faith” passed down from church fathers such as Augustine. The “rule of faith” (or “analogy of faith”) “gathered the early church’s communal sense of what was most central and unifying in Scripture, to serve in part as an aid for reading the whole of Scripture in its light.” The “rule of faith” came in several forms, but each conveyed a summary of God’s redemptive work as demonstrated through Scripture (the Apostles’ Creed is one such example). The “rule of faith” became a source of contention during the Reformation as Reformers stressed that “Scripture alone” was the rule of faith. Yet, Protestants also believed that there were central and unifying themes found in Scripture of God’s redemptive plan that should be used as a lens when interpreting God’s Word. Therefore, they changed the name to “analogy of faith.” As Maddox notes, “they typically defended under this label the practice of consulting at least the Apostles’ Creed when seeking to interpret Scripture correctly.”

Wesley inherited this understanding of interpretation from his Anglican roots and therefore employed this principle in his formative method of reading Scripture. It is important to note here that although Wesley claimed to be a “man of one book,” he viewed and interpreted the Bible through unifying lenses (e.g. the Apostles’ Creed) in order to understand what the authors of Scripture really meant. The point he is stressing here is that one should approach Scripture as a unified whole that maps out God’s redemptive purpose and will for humankind. Everything that one reads in Scripture should be viewed through the lens of God’s saving and redemptive plan. One caution: It is easy to fall into a trap of viewing God’s Word too systematically and “pigeon holing” the Bible into nice and neat categories. This can lead to an informational/functional approach to Scripture reading. In contrast to this trap, “we must realize that in reading the scripture we are engaged with a living and holistic Reality, who seeks to form our lives into wholeness of being and doing.”

**PRAYER**

Fifth, Wesley emphasizes the importance of coupling formative Bible study with prayer. Part of Wesley’s process of searching the Scriptures always included the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Wesley believed that in the same way the Spirit guided the process of the writing of Scripture, so also the Spirit guides one toward clarity of thought and understanding in searching God’s Word. As Blevins says, “When confronted with difficult passages, Wesley would first turn to divine guidance...” In a letter to the Bishop of Gloucester, Wesley writes on this reliance of the Spirit’s guidance by quoting Thomas à Kempis, “I do firmly believe, (and what serious man does not?) omnis scriptura legi debet eo Spiritu quo scripta est: ‘We need the same Spirit to understand the Scripture, which enabled the holy men of old to write it.” Maddox points out that when Wesley sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he did not do so apart from Scripture. Instead, he prayed and asked the Spirit to aid him in reflecting upon Scripture in order to enlighten his understanding of the meaning of God’s Word.

This guidance is for the purpose of training God’s children in righteousness (as he preached often from 2 Timothy 3:16) and to move them forward in the process of being transformed into the image of Christ. In his explanatory notes on 2 Timothy 3:16, Wesley wrote:

> The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those that read it with earnest prayer. Hence it is so profitable for doctrine, for instruction of the ignorant, for the reproof or conviction of them that are in error or sin, for the correction or amendment of whatever is amiss, and for instructing or training up the children of God in all righteousness.

Wesley believed that transformation into the image
of Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit. He wanted to encourage his readers to not only read God’s Word, but to seek the Spirit’s guidance in their *formative* reading of Scripture. As we have seen, he firmly believed that understanding Scripture conceptually was vital in this process. However, his deepest concern was more *formational* rather than *informative*. He desired a more personal embrace of the truth found in God’s Word for the purpose of forming an individual into Christ’s image. “The Spirit’s inspiring work is essential at this point.”

Wesley did not believe that a mere rational engagement of Scripture would suffice. A personal embrace of the Bible as God’s saving truth was a gift from “which must be nurtured by continuing reliance on the inspiring work of the Spirit.”

**REFLECT AND RESPOND**

Finally, Wesley ends with encouraging his readers to stop and reflect on what they have read. This indicates Wesley’s firm belief that not only do we examine Scripture, but also that Scripture examines us. This also indicates the need for individuals to open themselves up to Scripture in order to be addressed by God and His Word. This cross-examination will delve into the depths of our outer actions and inner being. Again, he tells his readers to pause frequently. Do not be consumed with the amount of Scripture you read and how fast you read it. Instead, one should frequently pause in order to allow for this cross-examination. This will draw one deeper into the depths of the text and will allow the text to delve deeper into the recesses of one’s heart. “Instead of informing the text with our own agenda, we present the inner and outer dynamics of our life to be formed by the text. Instead of trying to bring the text under our control, we allow the text to take control of our being and doing.”

Once one has allowed for an appropriate cross-examination of the text and self, then they are then to act immediately upon what they have received. Here, Wesley indicates that to allow the Scripture to truly sink into the depths of one’s soul, he or she needs to act upon it. In other words, the Word must immediately become the Living Word as was demonstrated through Jesus Christ. This is a vital part of the Christian formation process. The more we know the mind of Christ, the more we live Christ; and the more we live Christ, the more we are Christ (him living in us) to the world and its inhabitants. In essence, we become the word God speaks forth in his world.

Wesley stresses the immediacy of acting on the word by saying “immediately,” “Let there be no delay,” “begin to execute the first moment you can.” If we do not begin to act upon the very Word that engaged us, then we will struggle with using it to engage the world. As humans, our tendency is to simply read and absorb. This is indicative of our informational approach to reading. However, a formational approach cuts us to the core and motivates every aspect of our being into doing. As James tells us, “faith without deeds is dead.” It is evident that Wesley believed that if the Word did not become the Living Word through us, then we would simply allow those life-giving lessons of Scripture to drift away into obscurity. This approach to Scripture leaves one no more transformed into the image of Christ than they were before reading the text. The formative reading of God’s Word must always be accompanied by action and obedience or the reader has only absorbed information.

**CONSULTATION**

Before concluding this section, it is important to recognize that Wesley believed that formative reading was always done in consultation. Wesley consulted many resources in order to understand, be formed by, and act upon Scripture. Some of these we have already discussed, but before proceeding, let us take a moment to recognize each of these:

1. **Consult Others** – Wesley believed in consulting those who were more experienced in the things of God.
2. **Consult Other Writings** – Wesley read Scripture in connection with writings from the early Christians. “If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.”
3. **Consult the “Analogy of Faith”** – As we
discussed earlier, Scripture was to be interpreted through this lens.

4. **Consult Nature** – Wesley wrote on his understanding of creation in five volumes. In the preface of his work *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation*, Wesley expresses that his intent is to examine and display “the invisible things of God, his power, wisdom, and goodness” as found in creation. His expressed desire was to study the natural world in order to strengthen his faith through Scripture.

These consultations provided support for Wesley’s understanding of Scripture. Although he was a “man of one book,” he consulted other sources to determine what God’s truth was and therefore allow that truth to transform him.

As we have seen so far, John Wesley provided a detailed understanding of the importance of God’s Word and its ability to change and form one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength. He also provided a formative methodological approach to reading Scripture that can be useful in the process of Christian formation today. This methodology permeated every aspect of Wesley’s life and may prove beneficial in teaching children and teens to read God’s Word formationally. As we will see, Wesley not only stressed Christian formation in adults, but was also adamant about it in children. He firmly believed that being formed in the image of Christ began as early as possible. We will now examine Wesley’s views on educating children and how his formative approach to Scripture influenced his educational methods.

**JOHN WESLEY ON EDUCATING CHILDREN**

John Wesley had a strong conviction to save children’s souls. Any suggestions or instructions Wesley provided for child rearing or education were always toward the goal of religious and spiritual growth. In order to accomplish this goal, he believed it was important to teach them from an early age. For Wesley, teaching in the home, the church, and in schools was vital to the Christian formation process. Therefore, *Wesley placed the onus of Christian formation first on the parents and then on teachers*. Felton points out:

Wesley realized that the home influenced the lives of children even before the church, and that parents were, for good or evil, the first religious teachers of their children. The foundations for subsequent spiritual development must be appropriately constructed in the context of family life...If children are to mature as faithful Christians, their nurture must continue in the Christian community.

With this conviction, Wesley set out to provide instructions for both parents and teachers toward a methodology of helping children grow in their knowledge of God and spiritual maturity. To this end, he wrote and preached on the subject often. Most notable is his sermon “On the Education of Children” (1783) (which he directed to parents for the purpose of emphasizing parental responsibility for religious education in the home) and his treatise “A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children” (1783) (which stressed the importance of discipline and true religion in any good education). In criticizing some of the education of his day, Wesley speaks on true religion and says,

With regard to the former, how few are there of those that undertake the education of children, who understand the nature of religion, who know what true religion is! Some of them supposing it to be barely the doing no harm, the abstaining from outward sin; some; the using the means of grace, saving our prayers, reading, good books, and the like; and others, the having a train of right opinions, which is vulgarly called faith. But all these, however common in the world, are gross and capital errors. Unless religion be described as consisting in holy tempers; in the love of God and our neighbor; in humility, gentleness, patience, long-suffering, contentedness in every condition; to sum up all, in the image of God, in the mind that was in Christ; it is no wonder if these that are instructed therein are not better, but worse, than other men. For they think they have reli-
igion, when, indeed, they have none at all; and so add pride to all their other vices.\textsuperscript{50}

To Wesley, the sum or all education to children was forming them into the image of God, in the mind of Christ. Christian formation would then be evidenced through their holy tempers (see earlier discussion), through love of God and others, and through the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Felton states, “Education in the faith was crucially important for Wesley because it was an instrument by which persons were brought to conversion. Wesley believed in the capability of even young children to experience conversion.”\textsuperscript{51} Therefore, teaching and instruction should start early in childhood and have discipline and structure. This strong belief compelled Wesley to spend of good portion of his life dedicated to the teaching of children. This was evidenced through his writings (many of which were written solely for educational purposes) and through the programs/institutions of education that he established.

Wesley’s method of education was built upon two principles: sound religious training combined with perfect control of the children through discipline and structure.\textsuperscript{52} This method of education was evidenced in the Kingswood School. Many remembered the school for its strong religious element and rigorous schedule and discipline. Heitzenrater details the regimen at Kingswood:

The rules for the children at Kingswood meant rising at four a.m. and retiring at eight p.m.; starting the day with two hours of private and public devotion and ending the day with an hour of private devotion and an hour of public evening prayers; having no time during the day for play and spending from seven to eleven a.m. and one to five p.m. “in school.” Students should at all times be in the presence of a teacher and never be allowed to roam free or have contact with the collier’s children in the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{53}

Some criticized this structure and Wesley was thought to be too harsh and strict. They believed that Wesley lacked an understanding of children and therefore his educational approach to them was too severe and should not be a method used in education.\textsuperscript{54} Wesley himself took such criticism from a gentleman in conversation,

A gentleman with whom I was conversing a while ago, was speaking largely on the manner of educating children. He objected strongly to the bringing them up too strictly; to the giving them more of religion than they liked; to the telling them of it too often, or pressing it upon them whether they will or no...He thought that the common methods that are used in those that are called religious schools, of talking about divine things continually, and daily pressing it upon children, did abundantly more harm than good; especially if any severity were used: And concluded with saying, that those children who had been trained up in this manner, as soon as the restraint was taken off, were commonly worse than others.\textsuperscript{55}

Criticism did not deter Wesley from what he was doing nor from his convictions to save the souls of children in the manner he felt most prudent. He never waivered from his understanding of the purpose of religious education: “to instill in children true religion, holiness and the love of God and mankind and to train them in the image of God.”\textsuperscript{56} This passion for training and teaching children toward righteousness and Christian formation is admirable and necessary still today. However, it is important that parents and teachers infuse God’s love and grace in their training in righteousness in order to help children and teens understand why they are learning Scripture and how it deepens their relationship with God. God’s Word needs to be relevant to how they live and not just associated with rigorous rules, discipline, and structure.

Yet, Wesley’s emphasis on structure and instruction is not unlike that of ancient Jewish practices. Discipling in the Jewish home came first in the form of education—not education in the sense we have today, but for the purpose of developing the whole of a person for lifelong service to and worship of God. This goal was accomplished through knowledge of God by understanding His Word and by obeying everything the Word
(Law) commanded. Obedience was a product of loving God with all one’s heart, soul, and strength. Emil Schürer states this succinctly by saying, “Obedience was a product of loving God with all one’s heart, soul, and strength.”

The whole purpose of education in family, school and synagogue was to transform the Jewish people into “disciples of the Lord.” The ordinary man was to know, and do, what the Torah asked of him. His whole life was to conform to the precepts and commandments of the “Instruction” or “Enlightenment.” Obedience to these rules, which were firmly believed to have been laid down by God himself, was seen by Torah scholars, Pharisees and rabbis alike as the only way to put into practice the heavenly command, “You shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6).

The ultimate goal of this education (discipleship) was to develop the individual toward holy living (to be set apart for God in every aspect of life). The primary setting for this education was the home. Parents shared in this task, though the father bore the primary role of discipling his children. The home in Jewish thought was essentially a “small temple.” Wilson notes that, “Foundational to all theory on the biblical concept of family is the Jewish teaching that the home is more important than the synagogue. In Jewish tradition, the center of religious life has always been the home.”

God gave to parents the primary responsibility of passing on the faith to their children, and this happened largely in the home. Deuteronomy 6:7 instructs parents to disciple their children at home. “These words” were to be passed on to all the coming generations so that God’s people would never forget God, his commands, and most importantly his love for them. This was first and foremost the responsibility of the parents in the home. Verse 7 reads, “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” These “God-discussions” were to take place first in the home and then outside the home; from the beginning of the day to its end.

The home was only the primary setting for discipleship. The actual duty of discipling children belonged to the parents. In light of the home being a “small temple,” it should also be understood that parents were viewed as “priests” or “teachers” in that temple. It was therefore the responsibility of the parent (predominantly the father but in partnership with the mother) to provide instruction to the children in the same way a priest would instruct the Jews in the Torah within the holy Temple. However, in Jewish tradition, each parent fulfilled a specific role as priest in the home.

Wesley’s form of religious education reflects many of these practices found in the Jewish home. Wesley was passionate about helping children in the process of Christian formation and he firmly believed it was primarily the responsibility of the parents. Through his personal experiences, education, and theology, Wesley built a program and theory of educating children that was unique and often criticized. Yet, his concern for the spiritual welfare of children could not be dismissed. Though he was considered harsh, strict, and lacked understanding of children, Wesley pushed on in his endeavor to help children be formed into the image of God through the mind of Christ. He firmly believed that the formative reading of Scripture was foundational in this process and provided both children and adults several ways in which they could read God’s Word so that the Word could in turn read and change them. Even though Wesley took sharp criticism from some, perhaps there are some specific lessons we can learn from him and his methodology that will aid in the Christian formation process in children and teens today.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN FORMATION**

What are the “take-aways” from a study like this? Can we really learn anything from Wesley that we didn’t already know? I believe that understanding the principles laid out in this study by Wesley can aid parents and the church leaders today in several ways:

1. **We must be intentional about the Christian formation process in children from a very early age.**

As Paul says in Ephesian 6:4, children are to be brought us in the training and instructions of the
Lord. What Paul says here to fathers and parents is reminiscent of instructions given to Israelite parents and the larger community in Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and later instructed in Psalm 78:1-8.

2. Parents hold the primary role in this process; yet, the Christian community is vital in aiding the process. As noted in the passages in number one, the command to instruct children in the ways of the Lord lay primarily in the hands of parents, especially fathers.

3. Scripture is crucial to the formative process and must be studied in both an informational and (more importantly) formational manner as described above. Scripture must not only be considered important and informational to children and teens (a sacred book to be respected but not digested), it must be transformational and taken in on a steady diet. As Paul notes, all need to be transformed by the renewing of the mind in order to test and approve what God’s will is (Romans 12:1-2). This approach to Scripture heightens the “renewal of the mind” process.

4. Perhaps a more structured and disciplined approach to the formative reading of Scripture and religious education (as outlined above) with children and teens is necessary. We do not allow the method to become the end, but we allow God’s Word to be a natural part of the daily walk of our children and teens to be a guide, a teacher, and a companion in life. As noted, Ephesian 6:4 commands fathers and parents to train (or perhaps a more accurate translation, “discipline”) and instruct children in the Lord. This implies a disciplined approach to religious education with Scripture being the guide.

5. We need to understand that children are headed toward the same end as all humankind unless they accept Christ as their Lord and Savior (Romans 3:21-26) and be transformed into His image (2 Corinthians 3:18). This discipline of regularly teaching through the Scripture must never be neglected and must remain our guiding principle.

Wesley’s deep passion for Scripture (“man of one book”) and involvement in the education of children should challenge parents and church leaders to take increased interest in and responsibility for the Christian formation of the young. Not only must the central role of parents in this process be understood and named, but the church must also equip parents and other caregivers for this task. The church must provide parents and caregivers with encouragement and realistic assistance in the Christian formation process with the young. Practical and formative approaches to Scripture are essential to this process and must be taught to parents and caregivers in order to equip them for their God-given responsibility. Teachers in the church must also be taught these methods in order to help children (from a very early age) gain a deep love for God’s Word and understand its formative nature.

Perhaps John Wesley has provided us some direction in this. Through his formative approach to Scripture and his methodologies in Bible reading and religious education, we can gain insight into how we might teach children and teens that the Bible is much more than a textbook. God is not a side-item to be ordered through the drive-thru. Instead, God desires our love (heart, soul, mind, and strength) and asks us to love others in the same way. He longs for us to know him intimately through his Word and to allow this Word to engage and transform us.

ENDNOTES


3 Ibid., 21-23.
5 Ibid., 29-30.
6 Ibid., 24, 29.
7 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., Invitation to a Journey: A
Road Map for Spiritual Formation (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1993), 111. This usage of Mulholland’s distinction between formational and informational reading is not intended to embrace or to commend every aspect of Mulholland’s work; it is simply to recognize that this particular distinction is helpful and applicable to John Wesley’s usage of Scripture with children.

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 111-12.
11 Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, Preface, Works, 5:62.
13 Ibid., Minutes of Several Conversations Between Wesley and Others, Works, 8:355-56.
15 Ibid., Minutes of Several Conversations Between Wesley and Others, Works, 8:355-56.
16 Wesley, Minutes of Several Conversations Between Wesley and Others, Works, 8:355-56.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 7-8.
20 Psalm 119:97, See also 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 99, 148.
21 Psalm 119:99.
22 Maddox, 32.
24 Ibid., 125.
25 Maddox, 16-17.
26 Mulholland, Shaped, 126.
27 Ibid., 127.
28 Matthew 7:24-27; James 1:22-25.
29 Maddox, 22.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Mulholland, Shaped, 129.
37 Maddox, 14.
38 Ibid., 15.
40 Mulholland, Shaped, 131.
41 NIV, James 2:26.
42 Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, Preface, Works, 5:62.
43 Ibid., Emphasis mine.
44 Wesley, Survey of the Wisdom of God, Preface, Works, 14:413.
47 Ibid.
48 Works, 2:100-12.
50 Ibid., 567-68 (emphasis mine).
51 Felton, “John Wesley and the Teaching Ministry,” 95.
55 Works, 13:566.
56 Prince, 99.
57 “A distinctive mark of Intertestamental Judaism was
that the law, Torah, was the center of daily life. It regulated the living of each day, not just special occasions. At the most basic level, no food was eaten without the pronunciation of a blessing. The Shema and other prayers were recited before the household started the affairs of the day and at other times. There were several different tithes: of produce, of land, of dough or bread, and of money. Tassels worn on the fringes of cloaks, Scripture portions affixed to the right-hand doorpost of homes and buildings (mezuzahs), phylacteries (or tefillin) that bound the words of the law to head and arm all served as constant reminders of God, his law, and the obligation to obey.” J. Julius Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 251-52.

58 Ibid., 279.

59 Deut. 6:5.


61 Ibid.


63 Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 216.

64 Deut 6:7, NIV, emphasis mine.

65 Wilson, 216.
As a young, newly-married man with no children yet, I listened intently to what sounded like a helpful idea for the small congregation where I served at the time.

“I really want to see our church minister to families,” my pastor declared, “and I want my family to connect with families as well!”

To meet this goal of leading the church toward more family-oriented ministry, the pastor presented this plan: He put out a jar with small slips of blank paper beside it; families in the church could write their names and telephone numbers on a slip of paper if they were willing for the pastor’s family to come over for a visit and then place that piece of paper in the jar.

Each week the pastor reached into the jar, pulled out a slip of paper, called the number listed on it, and took his entire family over for a visit on Sunday afternoon. The idea was well-received, and the jar filled up quickly. It had been a long time since this church had been pastored by a man who so sincerely desired such a personal connection with families in the congregation.

Within a few weeks, something began to happen that was a bit awkward for the entire congregation—something that worked against the pastor’s intention of leading the church toward family-oriented ministry. The little slips of paper began to disappear from the large jar, but not because the pastor was working overtime at making those visits. After four or five weeks, the jar that was so full at the beginning only included a few lonely papers—and even those slips, rumor had it, weren’t deposited by the families whose names were written on them but by others in the church.

Why was this happening?

The pastor and his family were well-liked; the problem was that his family was not well-ordered. It hadn’t taken long for news to spread that if the pastor’s family came to visit, your valuables might not be safe—and your children might not be safe either. The pastor was a kind, warm-hearted servant—and his popularity never waned during the course of the ordeal—but he lost his credibility in attempting to lead the church toward family-oriented ministry.

People were looking for someone who could practice in his own family what he was preaching from the pulpit.
HOW DO WE GET FROM HERE TO THERE?
In the 1980s and 1990s, discontent with segmented-programmatic ministry began to simmer in many evangelical churches. In the dominant segmented-programmatic approach, families functionally said goodbye after exiting the car in the church parking lot and greeted one another again when they climbed back into the car to return home. In the worst cases, ministry environments were so tightly tailored to the preferences of individual groups that there was nothing to discuss on that car ride home.

In the opening decade of the twenty-first century, this simmering discontent boiled over into a full-scale movement in many evangelical churches—a family ministry movement that is now sweeping across a broad range of methodological and ecclesiological boundaries. This movement toward comprehensive-coordinative family ministry is not a program or a denominational campaign; it is made up of local churches coming to grips with the failure of segmented-programmatic ministry and then searching the Scripture for a more biblical alternative.

I praise God for this movement, but I also recognize that every church desiring to move toward a comprehensive-coordinate family ministry model must answer a single crucial question: “How do we get from here to there?” In answering that question, there is a key component, often overlooked, that will be essential: No church will effectively establish any form of comprehensive-programmatic ministry and then searching the Scripture for a more biblical alternative.

FATHERS AS SHEPHERDS
Fathers are called to be pastors in their homes. “What the preacher is in the pulpit,” Lewis Bayly declared, “the same the Christian householder is in his house.” The idea of fathers as the pastors of their homes is not one constructed artificially; it arises from the testimony of Scripture. The word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd”—and every father is called to serve as a shepherd in his home.

Sheep are mentioned in the Bible more than any other animal and shepherds appear in the text more than one hundred times. Any examination of pastoral responsibilities must begin with the Lord who revealed himself as “the God who has been my shepherd all my life long” (Gen. 48:15; see also Ps. 23:1). When many contemporary evangelicals consider what it means to be a shepherd, their minds conjure pictures of an effeminate Jesus gazing longingly at a sheep as he strokes its wool. In the Ancient Near East, however, shepherds were rugged warriors who bore scars from protecting their sheep. To identify God as a shepherd suggests that he is the authoritative head of his people, the one who directs, disciplines, and defends his own. The psalmist Asaph celebrated God’s redemption of his people from Egypt by singing, “You led your people like a flock” (Ps. 77:20). This same event was described by the Israelites as a time when God went to war on their behalf (Exod. 15:3).

David made the case to Saul that he could defeat Goliath by appealing to his experiences as a shepherd:

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Your servant used to keep sheep for his father.
And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth.
And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them. (1 Sam. 15:34-36a)
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In the context of the Old Testament, the compassionate care offered by a good shepherd was costly and sacrificial. The mark of an unfaithful shepherd was that he served himself and did not sacrifice himself for his sheep (Jer. 23; Ezek. 34). Jesus fulfilled the ancient promises of a Shepherd-King (Matt. 2:6) and identified himself as “the good shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). In the end, it is Jesus who will defeat the enemies of God’s people, wiping away his flock’s every tear, precisely because he is “their shepherd” (Rev. 7:17).

When the triumphant Shepherd-King ascended to
the Father, he extended his care to his people as “the chief Shepherd” by providing the gift of “under-shepherds”—elders or overseers who would direct, discipline, and defend local communities of believers (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:1-7). The apostle Peter commended these church leaders to “shepherd the flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:1-2).

Peter warned elders about those who abandon the sheep rather than leading and protecting the sheep, just as Jesus before him had warned about those who were “a hired hand and not a shepherd” while establishing the fact that he was “the good shepherd” (John 10:12-14). Peter wrote that elders were to honor the good shepherd by “exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2b-3).

Likewise, the apostle Paul referred to the church at Ephesus as “the flock” and described how he counted his ministry among them as more dear than his own life (Acts 20:17-38).8 His intent was that the Ephesian elders—and, by extension, that all pastors—would follow his example.9 Pastors bear the weighty responsibility to reflect Jesus, the good shepherd, by leading, guiding, directing, teaching, disciplining, and defending the flock of God gathered in local churches.

But the application of the shepherding imagery does not end with the call for elders to reflect the ministry of the good shepherd in the local church. Scripture also draws parallels between the responsibility of Christian fathers to pastor their families and the responsibility called men to shepherd the local church.10 Paul had this to say about anyone who might become an elder: “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:5).

SHEPHERDING THE “LITTLE FLOCK”

“Leaders must be good shepherds of their little flocks at home before they are qualified to serve as shepherds of God’s flock, the church.”11 Every man in a local church should be able to look to his pastor’s ministry as a model of faithful shepherding to be imitated on a smaller scale in his own home. If the congregation’s pastor is shepherding the church but not his family, his influence is muted and his model is one of tragic hypocrisy.

A family is not a church; every Christian believer, as an individual, functions under the authority of the congregation. Yet the principles of directing and caring for the church and the household are the same.12 Paul called local churches “the household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15) and uses family imagery to exhort these congregations (1 Tim. 5:1-2; 1 Cor 4:15-16; 1 Thess 2:11). The interplay in the Scripture between the household of God and familial households, as well as the interplay between pastors and fathers, should arrest the reader’s attention.

“The church is the family of God,” Randy Stinson asserts, “and family relationships represent a divinely-ordained paradigm for God’s church—which is why it is so important for our relationships in the family and in the church to reflect God’s ideal.”13 It is common today for families to have the mentality that the church exists to serve the family. In reality, such a view needs to be turned on its head. Our households exist to portray to the world the church, the household of God. The congregation, then, is to be conformed to the Word of God and be determined to know nothing but Christ and him crucified—and to call families to do the same. The Scripture makes an unequivocal and vital link between an elder’s calling to pastor a local church and a man’s responsibility to pastor his family. Pastors reflect Jesus in the church by directing, disciplining, and defending the flock of God, and fathers must do likewise with the little flock God has entrusted to them.

If you are a pastoral leader, honestly ask yourself, “Am I doing what I am asking my congregation to do? Do I disciple my children? Am I consistently guiding my wife toward Christian maturity?” If you are a church member, consider this question: “Does my congregation provide our pastoral leaders with sufficient family time to disciple their families?”
THE WELL-EQUIPPED FATHER AND THE FAMILY-EQUIPPING CHURCH

A family-equipping church desires every father in the congregation to acknowledge and to embrace his role as the shepherd of his family. To live out this role every father must begin to see himself as a rugged, shepherd-warrior who leads his family like a flock—enduring whatever sacrificial hardships are necessary for his family’s provision, protection, and care. A father’s oversight is costly—but this is to be expected, because he is a shepherd.

A father is the head of his home, the spiritual leader, who has the responsibility to feed his family the Word of God on a daily basis. He also must know that, even though he is the shepherd of his little flock, “the chief Shepherd” has graciously placed him under the authority of the church and its shepherds, “the flock of God” (1 Pet 5:2, 4). Therefore, each father leads his family to the church as a vital partner as he guides his family. He should be able to say, with the apostle Paul, that he ministers night and day with tears, declaring the whole counsel of God and refusing to count his life more dear than his ministry to his family (Acts 20:17-38). The church that implements coordinative-comprehensive family ministry must have fathers who understand these shepherding responsibilities not as preferential matters but as essential spiritual warfare.

Far too often, Christian fathers define success according to self-generated standards, forsaking their role as the shepherds of their home in an ambitious pursuit of power or achievement, material possessions or personal acclaim. Other fathers, typically young adults in what has been appropriately dubbed “Generation Me,” simply forsake their role as the family shepherd in the quest for self-pleasure and trivial pursuits. While it is common for evangelical pastors to bemoan the passivity of men in their congregation—passivity exhibited through a lack of paternal leadership in the home—too often the passivity they critique is nurtured by the very leadership model they present to families in the congregation! When the pastor of a church possesses an aggressive mentality in leading his congregation—one in which he will do whatever it takes to cultivate measurable success at the church—but then takes a secondary role in shepherding his own family—as though he is his wife’s helper—his poor example effectively drowns out his homiletic rhetoric. Likewise, when a pastor organizes his life around golf outings and college sporting events in the name of “ministry”—all while his wife raises the children—then the men in the church hear that daily “sermon” delivered with far greater clarity than the one delivered from the pulpit on Sunday.

For a church to move toward a family-equipping model of ministry, the pastor of the church must daily equip his own family. Every elder has the responsibility to lead by example. Sadly, this means that many churches will not move toward a family-equipping model of ministry simply because they cannot do so with integrity. The pastor of such a church is unable to say with authenticity, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1) when he calls men in the congregation to become genuine family shepherds.

I do not mean, of course, that a pastor must have a perfect home—or that he must pretend to have such a home—in order to lead the church toward family-equipping ministry. He must, however, be an intentional shepherd who “manage[s] his own household well” (1 Tim. 3:4). In fact, the way a God-called elder manages the challenges of home life will be invaluably instructive for the other fathers in the congregation. In the pastor, the men of the congregation must see a father who makes no excuses as he intentionally feeds, leads, serves, and sacrifices himself for his household, declaring with Paul that “I die every day!” in self-sacrificial service for his home, as well as the church (1 Cor. 15:31).

“The Bible says the ‘husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church’ (Eph. 5:23). Paul most emphatically does not say that husbands ought to be heads of their wives. He says that they are.”
Douglas Wilson
THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS IN A FAMILY-EQUIPPING CHURCH

What must not be overlooked in all of this, however, is that the most important reality in the life of the family is not the family but Jesus Christ. The entire cosmos was created by Christ and for Christ (Col. 1:16-18). All Scripture testifies of him (Luke 24:27; John 5:39); he is the final Word (Heb. 1:2); all the promises of God find their “yes” and “amen” in him (2 Cor. 1:20). It is God’s eternal plan to sum up all things in him (Eph. 1:10).

The shepherd of the church who is also the shepherd of a family has the responsibility to “sum up” both family and church in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His family must be one in which this Gospel is central to every facet of life. Any family movement in the church that fails to focus on the Gospel will produce family-Pharisees who settle for behavioral change, isolation from the world, and idolatrous focus on their own families. Family problems are, however, deeper than behavior; they are issues of the heart for which the only answer is the Gospel.

A home full of well-behaved, well-mannered children whose obedience is not understood through the lens of the Gospel is not holy but hellish.

The pastor’s family should function as a daily model of the centrality of the Gospel. An elder who is more concerned with the fact that his children’s behavior might sometimes embarrass him in public than he is concerned for the condition of their hearts is merely using his family as a prop in his personal public relations campaign. Such prideful obsession proclaims to the congregation what many already believe—that mere external changes are an acceptable goal for their families and their Christian lives. Likewise, the pastor who allows the whims of his children to determine his direction of his family perpetuates the prideful exaltation of self that is already too rampant in the pews.

The root problem with both scenarios is not that they lead to disastrous practical consequences; the problem is that they work against the Gospel. The Gospel deals with the internal transformation of the heart and demands self-sacrificial humility before the Lord Jesus Christ. If a pastor desires to lead a church in family-equipping ministry, he must not trade a segmented-programmatic approach to church ministry—one in which the desires of each individual stand at the center—for an approach in which the family become the center. The cross of Jesus must stand at the center both of church ministry and of family life; anything more or less is idolatry.

“I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry.”

D.A. Carson

CO-CHAMPIONSHIP IN THE FAMILY-EQUIPPING CHURCH

One’s commitment in all things to the centrality of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, should naturally lead to a love of the church, which is his body (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 1:22, 5:23; Col. 1:18, 24). In fact, Christ so closely identifies himself with the church that Paul writes that the church is Jesus’ “body, the fulness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23).

A family-equipping church seeks to champion both family and church. Marriage pictures the relationship between Christ and the church, and the family unit pictures the family of God—the church, the household of faith (Eph. 2:19, 5:22-33; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17). The following observations from Steve Wright and Chris Graves, although aimed primarily at student ministry, are applicable to all church ministries:

God created the family. God created the church. And in His wisdom, He created the two to function together. The biblical ideal is one of the family supporting the church and the church supporting the family, but it’s not happening today. It has reached such extremes that some parents want to stop all student ministries, and some student pastors want to stop trying to partner with
parents. What God has joined together man has separated over time.\textsuperscript{18}

**CHILDREN AS BLESSINGS IN THE FAMILY-EQUIPPING CHURCH**

Soon after I accepted the call to become the pastor of one particular local church, my wife began hearing comments that disturbed her greatly. Church members mentioned how the previous pastor’s wife repeatedly mentioned that she hoped none of her children would ever follow in her husband’s footsteps by going into vocational ministry and that her pastor husband felt the same way. My wife was horrified that a pastor’s wife would broadcast such negative attitudes toward the church.

Negative attitudes toward the church create a separation between the church and the family that makes family-equipping ministry impossible. Negative attitudes toward the family have the same effect. When a church member mentions the possibility of having more children and the pastor rolls his eyes and says, “Not for my wife and I! We’ve had enough. We are just glad this church has a nursery,” the consequences are tragic. Anti-child, anti-family jargon sounds more like the words of Pharaoh about the Hebrew children than the Word of Christ (Gen. 1:28; Exod. 1:8-22; Ps. 127, 128; Matt. 19:14). God refers to children as a blessing and to the church of Jesus Christ as the community of the blessed. It is dangerous, even jokingly, to call a curse what God has declared a blessing.

The shepherd who delights in weekly standing before a congregation of Christ’s sheep, lovingly preaching the glorious Gospel of Jesus in corporate worship, is to be the same shepherd who possesses the same delight before his little flock at home in family worship. In fact, there is a primacy to his responsibility to pastor his family with the Word of God. If he does not shepherd his family, he is not fit to shepherd the household of God (1 Tim. 3:5; Titus 1:6).

**THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PASTOR IN CALLING PARENTS TO THEIR RESPONSIBILITY**

The pastor who desires to lead a family-equipping church must sound a clear note in his own home that he understands it is not the church but parents—and fathers in particular—who are given the primary responsibility for calling the emerging generation to hope in God (Ps. 78:1-8). The church serves a supplementary role, reinforcing the biblical nurture that is occurring in the home. It is not the job of professionals at the church to train believers’ children in the fear of God. The family-equipping pastor who is also a family shepherd will not allow Sunday schools, children’s ministries, or youth ministries to become substitutes for the household discipleship of his children. This commitment provides a solid platform to call Christian fathers who have abdicated their God-given responsibility to repent and to embrace their role as family shepherds.

**WHAT IF PARENTS FEEL INADEQUATE?**

When God established Israel as his covenant people, he also established responsibility for parents to nurture their children in the faith. This is a clear charge given by the Lord God to fathers and mothers in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This text is known in Jewish tradition as the *Shema*, after the first Hebrew word in verse 4, an urgent command that is typically translated “hear” but that might also be rendered as “listen,” or “obey.”

It is interesting to note that it is Moses who is God’s instrument to convey this command to his people. When God first called him to speak his words to the children of Israel, Moses responded, “I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exod. 4:10). God quickly reminded Moses that the one who gave him the command was also the one who created his mouth (Exod. 4:11). Many parents need to be reminded that it is God who commands them to teach their children divine truth. All of the excuses—“I’m not smart enough,” “I don’t speak well,” or “the pastor is more qualified”—fade in light of the one who gives the command. This truth should call parents to ask themselves, “Who created me? Who is calling me to disciple my children? Who gave me these children in the first place?”

Deuteronomy 6:7 makes it clear that the commands of the Lord, which are to be on the hearts of the parent, should be passed on to the children to be on their
hearts as well. “You shall teach them diligently to your children” (Deut 6:7). The Hebrew word translated “teach them diligently” is a word that implies “piercing,” “carving,” or “whetting.” The word-picture is graphic. Parents are to engrave God’s truth into their children’s hearts like an engraver chiseling words into a solid slab of stone.19 This work of parents’ piercing their children’s hearts with God’s Word should take place when the family is sitting, walking, touching, seeing, coming, and going (Deut 6:7-9)—in other words, all the time.

One essential starting point in the carving of God’s Word into children’s lives is a set family worship time that centers on the Word of God and prayer. Just as the larger flock of God needs consistent corporate worship to live God’s Word in their daily lives, so too the little flock at home needs consistent family worship as a catalyst to cultivate constant conversations about God. If family worship is established as a priority in the home, then perhaps all of family life can be transformed into a pursuit of God.

WHAT IF PARENTS FEEL TOO BUSY?
The pastor of a family-equipping must teach parents the dangerous consequences for their children if family worship and daily conversations about God are not established as a priority. What if you think that you are too busy for such things? Then perhaps you should ask yourself: do you eat? do you provide meals for your family? If so, you have just admitted that physical food is more important to you than spiritual food. Do you watch television? If so, then you have declared entertainment a higher priority than worship. Do you partake in extra-curricular activities? If so, you are saying that recreation is more important than your children’s spiritual well being. Do you sleep? If so, you are telling your children that comfort has a higher priority than godliness. These are dangerous messages to communicate to children.

CALLING ALL MEN
The call for churches to embrace a family-equipping ministry vision begins with a call for men to embrace biblical manhood. In the very beginning, the man received a divine mandate of dominion, to rule the earth under God’s authority as his vice-regent, his warrior-shepherd (Gen. 1:28). The woman was a partner in the dominion mandate (Gen. 2:18), but the man was given a unique responsibility to lead in taking dominion. The man’s responsibility was to subdue the created order and to lead, to protect, and to provide for those within his care—all to the glory of God (see also 2 Cor. 11:8-9).

The Fall into sin represented Adam’s familial failure as a leader, protector, and provider. He did not provide his wife with the Word of God in her time of need, he led her into rebellion by his passivity, and he left her unprotected from the serpent. And thus, God held him accountable (Gen. 3:9; see also Rom. 5:12-14). Thereafter, the promise of a male seed from the woman who would someday crush the serpent’s head only intensified Satan’s assault, even as it also ensured his defeat (Gen. 3:15).

That is why pastors must minister to men not simply as one more special-interest group but as heads of households and future heads of households:

Pastors must ... find a way to encourage and equip men, as the heads of their respective households, to function in a pastoral way in their homes. The duties of a Christian father are clear in Scripture, and they are pastoral in nature. This does not mean setting up a pulpit in the living room or administering the sacraments around the dinner table. But a father is to bring up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. A husband is to nourish and cherish his wife, loving her as Christ loved the Church. These duties cannot be performed by anyone else in the church, and their performance (or lack of performance) directly relates to the health of the church. Sound households are the key to a sound church.20

The most fundamental way that a pastor can lead his church toward family-equipping ministry is to ensure that his family is a model of what he desires in the families of the church. This does not mean that the pastor holds his family up as a model of perfection, but his family must represent as a model of submission to God’s design. Attempting to embrace God’s design will lead to frequent repentance for everyone who follows this
part. This is not the path of least resistance—far from it! The evil one despises well-ordered, Gospel-saturated families. Shepherds must sacrifice and suffer for the sake of their flocks, but the flock is worth any amount of suffering and sacrifice (John 10:14-15).

Jesus once said to his disciples, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). What was Caesar’s was indicated by means of an image stamped on the coin; God’s image is stamped on our children. As the shepherd of my family, I must constantly render my children to God. Anything less turns family-equipping ministry into one more borrowed strategy or program and will yield only short-term interest in the church—or no interest at all. If no attempt is made to partner with parents and to equip them to disciple their children, the very ministry structures that appear successful outwardly will sabotage authentic effectiveness. When the church partners with parents and equips them to disciple their children, generations yet to come will learn to hope in God.

ENDNOTES

1 The conversation was predominately taking place in youth ministry circles. The youth ministries were the most radically segmented from the church as a whole and often functioned as a completely separate entity with its own worship, leader, name, and ministry focus. For a seminal early volume in this movement, see Mark DeVries, Family-Based Youth Ministry (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994).

2 From a pragmatic perspective, it might be difficult to call a segmented-programmatic approach a failed ministry philosophy because of the numerical success that has so often accompanied the approach. The failure instead is seen when the fruit of the approach is examined. Two of the more odious fruits of the segmented-programmatic approach are (1) parents who are subtly taught that they are not the primary people responsible for the discipleship of their children, as well as (2) the cultivation of a narcissistic preoccupation with age and cultural preferences. When catering to individual preferences becomes a methodological presupposition, the casualty is a call to self-sacrificial spiritual maturity; however, it must also be noted that some family ministry advocates have had an unhealthy response to these problems and have cultivated an equally self-oriented attitude in the opposite direction by failing to acknowledge the unique authority of the local church. This attitude of anti-ecclesiastical authority can produce an almost idolatrous attitude regarding familial authority.

3 The Greek words poimēnas (pastor), presbyteros (elder), and episkopos (overseer) are used interchangeably to refer to the same office in the church (Acts 20:17, 28; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). While the Bible indicates that it is normative for a local church to have a plurality of pastors (Acts 16:24, 20:17, 21:18; Titus 1:5; James 5:14), the primary focus of this chapter is the pastor who is called to the congregation’s preaching ministry.


5 For an extensive treatment of the biblical use of the shepherd language and imagery see, Timothy S. Laniak, Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).


7 Leon Morris is correct to note the uniqueness of Jesus’ role as shepherd in that his death for the sheep did not mean disaster for them, but rather life through his resurrection. Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, New International Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 454.

8 Ben Witherington notes that the reference to “the flock” makes it clear that “The Ephesian elders are not being called to shepherd the church universal, but to oversee all of the flock of which the Spirit has made them leaders.” He also points out that Ezekiel 34 seems to lie in the background of the warnings of those who would harm the flock of God from within. See Ben Witherington, The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 624.

Eerdmans, 2009), 568.

10 For an excellent lecture on the parallels between pastoring the local church and pastoring a family, see D.A. Carson, *The Pastor as Father to His Family and Flock* (Desiring God Conference for Pastors, 2008) [on-line], accessed 15 March 2010, <http://www.desiringgod.org>.


12 Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, 233. Laniak writes, “Authority is a feature of the shepherd’s role, but one comprehensively qualified by the reminder that elders are caring for the flock.” Likewise, the elder must exercise the same sort of caring authority in the home as he leads his little flock for God.


18 Steve Wright with Chris Graves, *ReThink: Is Student Ministry Working?* (Raleigh, NC: InQuest, 2007), 105-06.


JDFM FORUM: A Brief Interview with Jim Hamilton About His New Children’s Book, The Bible’s Big Story

1. You are a seminary professor, theologian, and the author of many scholarly articles and books; why did you choose to write a children’s book?

Because I love my kids and I love the Bible! The project started out as something that my oldest son and I were doing together. I would tell him about something in the Bible, and he would draw it. Some friends encouraged me to pursue getting it published. Christian Focus agreed to publish it, but they decided to get a professional artist to do the illustrations. We found ourselves reading some children’s books over and over to the point we had them memorized. I wanted to summarize the big story of the Bible and put it in a children’s book in the hope that parents and kids might memorize it through repeated readings.

2. What do you hope to accomplish among Christian families with your new book?

I hope to see parents—especially fathers—read to their kids, teach the Bible to their kids, and lead their kids to know God.

3. What would you say are the most important aspects of The Bible’s Big Story? Why is this kind of book important for kids?

I selected events that represent major plot-points in the big story of the Bible. My hope is that reading this book will give people a panoramic glimpse of the Bible’s whole-narrative canvass, and that the memorized rhymes will stay with them and help them put their Bible reading in the context of the broader picture.
Brian H. Cosby. *Reclaiming Youth Ministry From an Entertainment Culture*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012, 160 pp., $12.99. For years the model in youth ministry was to pursue the shock effect, eat copious amounts of greasy pizza, play games, and if possible connect Jesus through that with a simple message. Attendance in youth ministries was seen as the prize to pursue, from not only church leaders but also youth ministers. The idea seemed to have been, “If they come, we have reached them,” or at least that’s how it seemed to many of us (28). Moving from one high to the next was a never-ending pursuit, mirrored in the culture-at-large by the constant stream of “I’m bored” posts on Facebook. More so, youth ministries were segregated from the greater life of the church, removing the students from regular contact with senior adults and even their parents. The strange irony is, through Cosby’s experience in youth ministry, students are hungry for truth, doctrine, fellowship with the church, and challenging discipleship. This book is a response to the entertainment culture in many churches, with a plea for youth ministries to be foundationally about the gospel and to redefine “success” from numbers to faithfulness in ministry.

Cosby’s book is well-organized, with the middle chapters structured around the “means of grace” that he lays out in Chapter 2 as foundational for student ministry: the Word, sacraments, prayer, service, and community. He defines them as the ways that God works as he sees fit for the building up of his church (24). They are not ways of achieving salvation, but instead are seen as ways to build up students to be conformed to the imago Christi. For Cosby, the centrality of every youth ministry is the gospel, which he outlines as justification by faith. Service and ministry are seen then, not as paths to heaven by themselves, but a means of “strengthening our faith in His sufficiency, not ours” (31).

The Word preached and taught stands against a culture that is driven by what it can see. The response has been to diminish the role of exegetically-driven preaching and replace it with a casual story time with Scripture references throughout, even with visual cues on the screen behind the speaker. The premise is that because students are visually-saturated, this should be reflected in how they are taught. Cosby, however, is quick to point out that many students are able to memorize songs, so the transition to memorizing and treasuring Scripture should be natural.

Prayer is likened to the need of teenagers for authenticity, honesty and relationship, which are promoted in culture as coming from entertainment. The difficulty for many students is that they are exposed to passionless public clichés which robs students of intimacy with God and leads to burnout. Prayer is more than some-
thing done before a meal or trip; it is intercession, supplication and ultimately doxology (55). Entertainment starves students, but prayer as a means of fellowship with God and personal transformation leads them to the all-satisfying Christ.

One critique of Cosby at this point is his treatment of the “memorial” view of the Lord’s Supper, which he considers to be the prevalent interpretation of the Supper among Protestant evangelicals today. His premise is that the diminished view of the Supper among youth, and the church in general, comes from the acceptance of this view. The memorial view, in my opinion, is not at fault for the Supper being sidelined in churches. Instead, as Cosby points out, it comes from a diminished view of the Word preached and taught. The treatment of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 in itself demonstrates the significance of the Supper, with deadly consequences for its irreverence. If the Word is rightly divided, taught, and applied for what it is as the authoritative, inspired revelation of a holy and sovereign God, then a light treatment of the Supper is inexcusable.

Service and community are two means of grace that Cosby introduces that are not typically seen under that term, but are appropriate for the purpose of his book. Service is a means of grace whereby God grows our faith, extends our love, and brings us joy and peace (77). Community is a means of grace whereby God confronts our sin, feeds our faith, transforms our minds, and grows our love (96). These two confront the same product of entertainment, entitlement, with the biblical ethic of humility. Service to the “least of these” provides a model for Christian living, rather than the pursuit of shallow joy and ultimate meaninglessness. It removes the constant desire for the high points and replaces it with the ethic of giving, which is best demonstrated by serving and ministering together. Community is supplied in the local church that cannot be found in any parachurch or civic organization or Facebook group. It provides safety among those whose identity and eternity have been found in Christ to be free from hypocrisy, judgment and condemnation. Cosby uses the idea of the “D-Group” as a model for biblical community in student ministry (105-109) that is built on solid content, small size, age/gender division, consistent meeting, trained and called leaders, and an emphasis on discipleship evangelism.

In the last chapter, Cosby lays out the wisdom of a leadership team and some practical steps on how to build a leadership team in a student ministry. With the common perception that the average youth minister stays at a place of service for around 18 months, there is a great need to apply these principles to avoid the pressure that comes from a “Lone Ranger” mentality of ministry leadership. Building a team spreads decision-making, praise/blame, and creates a collective wisdom base greater than any single leader. There is also a section on purpose and vision in student ministry that serve as a way to unite the team and give a clear picture of where the ministry is headed. The last paragraph in the book bears enough weight that it deserves to be copied here:

> With all my heart, I plead with you not to be tempted with success, professionalism, or the fading fads of our entertainment-driven culture. Rather, pursue Jesus as the all-satisfying Treasure that He is, and feed His young sheep with the means God has provided. May the gospel of Christ fill your heart with grateful praise and guide your steps toward your heavenly home. (124)

This book is an incredibly helpful tool for youth ministers, regardless of theological persuasion. Though Cosby is writing from a Reformed Presbyterian background, his principles transcend doctrinal convictions and get to the heart of the issue: youth ministry can be far more than what many settle for. The individual reader will have to wrestle with Cosby’s theological persuasions and come to their own conclusions of agreement or disagreement. That said, it must be emphasized that Cosby is orthodox in his theology, holding to the primary doctrines that unite Christians under the gospel of justification by faith.

The book is organized in such a way that his prescriptive steps can be easily applied to a current ministry context. The appendices allow for the student minister to both examine himself and also his relationship with church officers and parents. Again, his language may be confusing for those outside Presbyterian circles (but ultimately I found it very helpful in terms of under-
standing polity and pointing out my own blind spots), but the core is universal: youth ministry is not done in a vacuum, it is done within the context of a local church and alongside the God-given parents of the student.

This is a book for any youth minister who seeks to make an impact that transcends the gratuitous use of the word “epic” in the entertainment culture to truly give students something epic, Jesus. In a world that seeks to replace substance with cheap thrills, this book offers something that is more satisfying and ultimately what students are looking for in their lives. The students in churches are tired of what has been pushed at them by not only MTV but also their youth ministry. Give them what they want, challenge them, teach them the Truth, and let the Holy Spirit do what a fog machine and light system cannot: make them into disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Scott Douglas
Minister to Youth
Westside Baptist Church


One does not have to be in pastoral ministry long to see the disconnect that can take place between the biblical teaching of marriage and what many marriages look like in the real world. To fight back against the tide of divorces and discontentment, there has been of late many great resources by seasoned pastors, such as Timothy Keller and Mark Driscoll, to aid in cultivating healthy marriages. In Water of the Word, Andrew Case discusses a helpful but often neglected area of marriage—prayer.

Specifically, Case focuses on the husband’s intercession for his wife. Cases uses Ephesians 5:25–26 (ESV), “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,” to point husbands to love their wives. It is crucial to “pray with all zeal and all knowledge for her” (8). This review will look at the two parts that make up this book.

The first section of the work is made up of an introduction and instructions. Both of these sections are vital to the book as they explain the theology behind the book as well as a way to use the book. In the introduction, Case begins by properly tying the relationship of husband and wife as a symbol of Christ and His Church. He writes: “Jesus Christ prays for us. He prays for His Bride. He sets the glorious example of the husband who never tires in making intercession for her. It is a breathless wonder, a staggering and stupefying truth. Are you a husband like Jesus? Do you want to be?”(7). Case then moves to one of the more helpful points of interceding for one’s wife, that is, a husband cannot give a wife everything she needs, only God can. He notes: “we are not God. There are many things a husband cannot do for his wife that only God can do. We are very small, very weak...therefore praying for her is not optional”(7). It is based on a desire to follow Christ and to love one’s wife that a husband must pray.

The way to read the book, as described in the introduction is to use the prayers as a “springboard” to bring intercession before God for one’s wife (10). The prayers themselves make up the vast majority of the book. Case bases each prayer on a passage of Scripture and includes the Scripture reference. He also gives a helpful scriptural index and bibliography which is well worth the price of the book. Beyond the Scripture references, about half of the prayers contain a thought provoking quote from a Christian leader.

The Water of the Word is a helpful devotional for husbands who are looking for a practical way to begin praying for their wives.

Jacob Dunlow
Pastor, Vassar Road Baptist Church
Ed.D Candidate,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary


Marriage is not easy. What many struggle with is the connection from the desire to have a God-honoring marriage and its practical outworking. In Prayers of an Excellent Wife, Andrew Case writes a devotional for women who are seeking to intercede for their husbands.
before God. Case’s work is divided into two sections, the first being a preface and instruction to the reader and the second being the prayers themselves.

The first section lays the theological and biblical groundwork for the book. Case begins with a helpful discussion of the biblical texts surrounding the creation of women and a wife’s responsibilities in marriage, based on her creation. As Case notes: “The implications of a woman’s origin are profound. Her dignity and worth, her necessity, her role in life and marriage, and her unique beauty have been established by God from the beginning. She was made to be a man’s faithful helper. And there is no greater help she can offer him than her prayers on his behalf to the One who alone can provide perfect, sovereign help” (9). It is from this position that Case exhorts his readers to pray for their husbands.

The instructions that Case provides are critical to getting the most form this work. Sometimes a devotional work becomes little more than a vehicle for mindless ritual. Case warns against this, urging readers to make each prayer ‘your own’ and to use the prayers as a ‘springboard’ (12). In doing this, readers are given freedom to take the prayers offered by Case and customize them to their own unique situation.

The bulk of Prayers of an Excellent Wife contains prayers for women to use in interceding for their husbands. Each prayer is based off Scripture, and readers can easily use it to guide their daily Scripture reading. In fact, one great feature of the book is the collection of Scripture and bibliography in the appendix. About half of the prayers in the book are accompanied by an encouraging quote from a Christian leader. The quotes help to spur the thinking of the reader as they work through the text of the prayers.

In Prayers of an Excellent Wife, Case gives Christian women a solid Word-centered devotional work on praying for their husbands. If you or members of your church are looking for a resource like this, I would recommend this book as a good place to start.

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“Seldom is there more exuberance than that which erupts when a new soul enters the world” (8). These words begin Andrew Case’s work Setting their Hope in God: Biblical Intercession for Your Children.

Many parents are familiar with the joy that comes with the arrival of a child. But shortly after comes arrival of the stress of trying to be a “good parent” to their children. The age in which we live puts tremendous stress on parents to make sure that their children receive the best education and are involved in the best extracurricular activities. But as Case notes in his work, “[O]ur duty remains to prayerfully labor and laboriously pray for their salvation and welfare. The parents who neglect this, even while offering their children every other worldly comfort and opportunity, waste their reward and do their children great harm” (9).

For parents who follow Christ, the desire to give their child a good life must be eclipsed by their desire to obey Paul in bringing up their children in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).” But what all goes into this instruction and discipline? In Setting their Hope in God, Case looks at the unseen aspect of raising children in the Lord, that is interceding for them before God. This review will look at the two major sections of the book.

In the first section, the preface and introduction provide the proper biblical perspective on praying for children. Along with a helpful collection of Bible verses that shows the importance of praying for your children, Case includes an edited work by William Scribner that was originally published in 1873: An Appeal to Parents to Pray Continually for the Welfare and Salvation of their Children (12-19).

The second section of the book presents a collection of prayers. Case urges parents to take these prayers and customize them to their own situations, not simply read them word for word (20). The prayers, like Scribner’s work quoted earlier in the book, revolve around the topics of salvation for children and intercession for their well-being. Each prayer is based on Scripture and is God-
centered. As with his other devotionals, Case includes many quotes throughout the book from Christian leaders, past and present, to strengthen the prayer time.

Parents who are looking for a simple, clear work to spark their prayer life for their children should consider *Setting Their Hope in God*.

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Book Reviews:

*Think Orange* by Reggie Joiner: A Review Article

DEREK J. BROWN


**A LANDMARK BOOK ON FAMILY MINISTRY**

Around the time Reggie Joiner was drafting copies of his second book (his first was a co-authored effort entitled, *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry*), a noticeable trend was taking shape in evangelical churches. Prior to the late 20th and early 21st century, “Family Ministry” as a distinguishable component of ecclesiastical life was not a topic of conversation among many church leaders and thinkers. To be sure, ministry to families had always been important to churches that identify themselves within the evangelical tradition, but the question of how the church and family should relate, interact, and work together for the sake of children and students has until only recently received sustained reflection.

Out of the many contributions to the discussion of family ministry, however, Joiner’s book resides as landmark. It’s popularity among church leaders and families cannot be overlooked, nor can the many conferences, books, and church-sponsored seminars that have found derivative inspiration and success as a result of *Think Orange*’s unique emphasis family ministry.

And there is good reason for the popularity. The book’s main point is as unmistakable as it is simple, and Joiner’s clever use of a secondary color to demonstrate that ministry to the next generation is neither exclusively yellow (the responsibility of the church only) nor red (carried out by the family only) but orange (both church and family working together) is a helpful way to remember what the book is all about. Joiner, also the founder of the reThink Group—a non-profit organization dedicated to helping churches develop innovative ministry to families—is a creative thinker who knows how to package his ideas in a way that is both accessible and memorable.

**BRINGING CHURCH AND FAMILY TOGETHER**

So what is Joiner’s main argument in the book? He states it clearly from the start: “In principle, this book is about two entities partnering to make a greater impact or to create a better solution. In practice, it explores the
possibilities of what can happen if the church and the home combine efforts for the sake of impacting the next generation” (24). In short: If churches and families are going to truly influence this next generation, they need to synchronize their efforts.

The call to cooperation between church and family, however, does not imply that both should start doing or accomplishing more. “In many cases,” Joiner contends, “the church and the home are each trying to do the best job they can for their children. Churches are full of programs that inspire families, and countless families participate regularly in their local churches” (26). Indeed, Joiner exhorts church leaders to relinquish some programs for the sake of the greater mission “to shine a light and demonstrate God’s love and grace to those who need it” (36).

Joiner, therefore, sets out to offer leaders and parents a vision of what is possible when church and family join forces, along with intensely practical suggestions for how both might begin to work together to instill genuine, “everyday” faith in the next generation. The first half of the book provides Joiner’s general vision as he unpacks the foundational ideas for “Thinking Orange,” while the latter half gives the five essentials for pursuing this kind of ministry. In order to cultivate an orange culture in the local church, leaders must Integrate Strategy (Chapter 6), Refine the Message (Chapter 7), Reactivate the Family (Chapter 8), Elevate Community (Chapter 9), and Leverage Influence (Chapter 10).

Throughout Think Orange, Joiner offers many useful ideas for helping parents impart and nurture everyday faith in their children. To list only a few, parents are encouraged to think long term (54-55), focus on cultivating their child’s heart (57-61), create a rhythm in the home where regular spiritual conversations are occurring (66-67), and expose their children to other godly adults who will reinforce what they are learning at home (70-74).

Joiner combines these practical ideas with several apt exhortations to church leaders, like the warning not to overvalue church programs (36) and the call to make sure one’s ministry to families is marked by intentionality and purpose (83). Joiner encourages pastors to avoid developing a family ministry framework in which the various departments (children, students, parents) function independently of each other, thus “dilut[ing] the family” (124). He also reminds ministers to think creatively and carefully over how they express the substance of their teaching—to view their calling as craftsmen who labor over their words in order to communicate most effectively (135ff). I found this last bit of counsel especially helpful and motivating.

JOINER’S DISCLAIMER
Despite these practical aids and timely exhortations, however, there are some significant areas of weakness that, in my judgment, tend to undermine Joiner’s efforts to build a comprehensive framework for family ministry. Granted, it may not be Joiner’s desire to raise such a structure, as he notes in the introduction: “This [book] is not intended to be infallible or inerrant. I just hope to continue a conversion that I believe is worth thoughtful dialogue” (16). Joiner then proceeds to explain that his book is not “the answer,” “always right,” “theologically profound,” “deep,” or “the final thoughts on any issue” (16). Indeed, Joiner admits that his effort may at times seem “oversimplified, overstated, shallow, idealistic, sarcastic” (16). So, what I have to say by way of critique might be taken by some as clearly missing the point. Yet, while I appreciate Joiner’s humility in acknowledging that his work is not equivalent to divine revelation, nor the last word on the topic, I find this disclaimer rather unfortunate, for it seems immediately to preclude the thoughtful dialogue he hopes to stimulate. Nevertheless, I offer these critiques in a spirit of mutuality that seeks to continue the conversation over these important issues.

A DISTASTE FOR NUANCE
One of the main weaknesses I observe in the book is Joiner’s underlying distaste for theological and biblical nuance, even as it would be appropriate in a popular book on family ministry. On pages 83-84, for example, he comments,

There are a number of things we could argue—predestination, modes of baptism, symbolism in Revelation—but we’re not going to figure
out who’s right about those things until we get to heaven. We keep arguing about the things we can’t know for sure, even though most of us really do believe that a hundred years from now the only thing that will matter is someone’s relationship with God. And we can know something about that.

There are two things I find unhelpful in this paragraph. First, by placing the matter of predestination alongside of symbolism in Revelation, for example, Joiner makes it appear that these two issues reside on the same plane of significance. Although a controversial subject among some Christians, I suspect that many family ministers in Reformed circles would contend that the issue of predestination is far more important than symbolism in Revelation, and one that has profound bearing on how a child understands his “relationship with God,” especially as he or she grows and is able to handle weightier biblical truths. Second, by placing “mode of baptism” in his list of theological uncertainties, Joiner makes light of important denominational distinctions. This would not be much of a problem except that convictions related to the mode of baptism have held sway in Baptist and Presbyterian churches because each denomination considers their form of ecclesiology a matter of obedience to Jesus.

Joiner tries to surmount the impasse created by doctrinal differences by simply going around it. “To combat all this, I go by a simplistic doctrinal statement. I know it lacks a lot of detail, but I have this one memorized: Jesus is who he says he was. What the Bible says is true is true. Everybody is going somewhere forever” (84). Yet, this doctrinal statement raises several questions that a Christian with only a cursory level of training would likely pose. Who did Jesus say he is? What does the Bible say is true? Didn’t you just imply that there are debates about what the Bible actually says?

**NOT ENOUGH ‘ESSENTIAL’ TRUTHS**

These statements would be less of a bother and taken more as rhetorically motivated understatements if Joiner at some point carefully described the basic elements of the gospel and how a child comes into a relationship with God. When it comes to explaining these things, however, the reader will find no reference to sin, confession, guilt, or repentance, and where the cross of Christ is mentioned, it is used in generic references to the love Jesus demonstrated there (49), in a passing allusion to John 3:14 (31), or as one of Jesus’ “object lessons” (153). I don’t doubt for a moment that Joiner believes confessing one’s sin and having some understanding of what Christ achieved on the cross are essential to salvation, but to my mind his lack of clarity here does not serve his primary purpose of helping parents further their child’s relationship with God if that relationship has anything to do with believing the gospel.

**A TENDENCY TOWARD AMBIGUITY**

Joiner is also vague about other important issues as well. His tendency toward ambiguity occurs throughout the book with undefined references to “our message” (143) or “the story” (208), or admonishments to focus on “what really matters” or to not create “unrealistic expectations” for parents (168). I am happy to agree with Joiner on all these points except that we are never really told in any significant detail what “the story” is, or “what really matters” (except for generic references to a child’s relationship with God), or what it means to place “unrealistic expectations” on parents. But these are small concerns. A more serious example of Joiner’s ambiguity appears in his discussion of how the church is to fulfill her purpose.

In order for the church to retain its luster as a city on a hill, Joiner contends that she must be careful not to “drift from what she was originally designed to do” (32). The church tends to drift when her lampstand is used to further personal agendas or to “justify our opinions or win debates” (32) or to “make political statements” (33). Although I agree with him in principle, I find it unhelpful that Joiner never really indicates explicitly what debates or political statements he has in mind. He does, however, tell of times when he and his church staff have
been asked by other Christians where they stood on issues that fell within the “4-H Club: Hollywood, Homosexuality, Halloween, or Harry Potter.” On such occasions he and the staff would remind each other “Don’t move the lampstand” (33)! Does this mean, then, that church leaders should not provide guidance from Scripture concerning these matters? Should the church not take a stance on an important issue—and one that Scripture clearly addresses—like human sexuality?

A similar admonishment appears a little later in the book when Joiner wonders aloud: “Have you ever considered the possibility that how families treat each other may have far greater consequences on children than where we draw the line on issues of sex education, gay marriage, or stem cell research” (53)? He answers: “It’s one thing to stand up for what you believe, but it’s easy to lose sight of issues that genuinely affect the family” (53). It’s difficult, however, to see how the church’s stance on such issues won’t directly affect the family, especially in the long run. While a charitable reading of Joiner at this point would take him to mean that we should not turn the church into a corporate means to exert political influence, his lack of clarity leaves the reader wondering whether the church should speak concerning these important matters at all. In my judgment, Joiner would have been better served to leave these topics alone and maintain his focus on the nature of family ministry rather than alighting on these complex issues only long enough to give quick, pithy opinions.

**DOWNPLAYING THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE AND KNOWLEDGE IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

Despite these instances of ambiguity, I believe that Joiner’s hesitancy to add some doctrinal detail to his book has to do with his desire to keep things simple and to distinguish his vision of ministry from those characterized by a brand of stale orthodoxy. I sympathize with these aims. But I am afraid he is in danger of swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction. On page 188, for example, Joiner observes, “The reality is when it comes to programming, many churches act as if truth was the most important aspect of discipleship. Teaching and content become the most important things that happen in every environment. We begin to think that discipleship is a class or a curriculum. What if discipleship is as much about serving in ministry as it is about Bible study?” Joiner wants to see other components to discipleship valued alongside of teaching and content: “life changing truth, spiritual disciplines, personal ministry, significant relationships, and pivotal circumstances.” All of these facets of discipleship are indispensable for genuine spiritual growth.

Joiner’s underlying concern here is certainly valid: To the degree we think that our ministry is only the dissemination of truth, to that degree have we become imbalanced and, ironically, unbiblical. There must be more to our labor as pastors and teachers than the mere download of biblical information, and Joiner is right to draw our attention to these other important components of discipleship. But it must also be kept in mind that truth is central to discipleship because it is essential to sanctification (John 17:17), and that the teaching ministry of the church is her primary ministry. Because biblical truth must shape and inform the other areas of discipleship, teaching will remain central to our work among students and families. Indeed, a disciple, by definition, is one who is consistently learning and gleaned knowledge from a teacher.

Joiner’s concern that we avoid a “classroom” approach to discipleship again appears a little later in the book as he discusses the role of service in cultivating spiritual growth. “So what do you think would be more exciting,” Joiner asks, “going to classes that teach you about mountain climbing, or actually standing at the summit after a hard climb to get a firsthand look at the view” (205)?

**Downplaying the Role of Scripture and Knowledge in Spiritual Growth**

Joiner ties this illustration to how churches plan their programming. “Most churches spend a lot of energy trying to get students to come to programs where they talk about growing as a Christian, but they forget that the way you grow is by experience.” He continues, “It’s important to understand how closely spiritual formation is connected to the act of serving...Too many churches teach as if students should sit and listen instead of actually experiencing hands-on ministry” (206). Having seen the passion kindled in students as a result of their participation in foreign or domestic mission trips, for
example, Joiner is discouraged when he sees these same students lose their passion after a few weeks back home. What happened? “I have a theory. Maybe it’s because when we return home from that exciting mission, we put them right back in a classroom. For a while, they had opportunity to experience what God designed them to be” (209). Joiner and his staff at North Point church eventually eliminated programming that included classroom Bible study so that students could serve on Sunday mornings (210). Joiner even entertains the idea that involvement in ministry may serve as a catalyst for “initiating faith in someone’s heart” (211).

There is an emphasis here that I happily welcome. Young believers, just like older believers, need to be led in discovering and using profitably their spiritual gifts. Joiner is right: Discipleship should involve more than just the intellectual element—a life of fruitful ministry is the will of God for all his people (John 15:8). And the reminder that young people should be entrusted with more responsibility rather than greater amounts of unencumbered freedom is a refreshing note sounded in the midst of a parenting culture prone to indulge junior high and high school students. So my quibble is not here in Joiner’s effort to motivate leaders and parents to help their kids develop their ability to serve; it is in his tendency—even subtly—to downplay the role of Scripture and knowledge in the spiritual formation of young Christians.

Generally speaking, it appears that Joiner is fighting against creating an overly intellectualized approach to family ministry. His comments on the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2:2-7 imply this concern.

This passage suggests that it really doesn’t matter what a church is right about if it is wrong about its relationship with God. God is more interested in the heart of the church than He is with its size or intellect. He is less impressed by our ability to debate church structure or theology than He is with our willingness to touch those living around us. We are called to love him and demonstrate his love to the world around us” (36, emphasis original).

Later in the book, Joiner negatively characterizes the Pharisees as those who, “loved to flex their spiritual muscles and theological intellect” (120). In several places—some of which we have already mentioned—Joiner appears to dismiss theological debate as a waste of energy (e.g. 38, 53, 136, 140, 146). So, while he is correct to highlight the danger of a church becoming interested in doctrine at the expense of love for Christ and others, I am afraid that these kinds of comments, coupled with Joiner’s general dislike for theological distinctions, give the impression that sound doctrine and good theology are not really that important to family ministry, at least not beyond the mere basics. Over time, I believe this kind of approach to discipleship will have a detrimental effect on ministry to families, for it will eventually detach ministry activity from the nutrient of biblical truth and the gospel.

**OVERPLAYING THE ROLE OF SERVICE AS AN GAUGE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

Beyond this, a related problem I see in Joiner’s conception of how service and ministry relate to spiritual growth is his neglect to consider what constitutes genuine spirituality. Many of us are tempted to place too much importance on external religious activity as a sign of vital relationship with Christ. The reason for this is that service and activity in ministry are easy to see and tally. If the evidence of a person’s conversion can be found in his participation in ministry and acts of service, then the more activity, the better! If students are ambivalent or indifferent toward spiritual things, then don’t expose them to more teaching; get them serving!

The problem, however, is that genuine conversion and spiritual growth are discerned according to different principles and far more difficult to cultivate. Joiner, on the other hand, sees activity in ministry as one of the primary, if not the primary marks of corporate spiritual health in youth groups. “Senior leaders, parents, and student pastors have to be intentional about changing their priorities. They should rethink the pressure that is put on the average student ministry to divine success by the amount of programming or attendance. Instead of asking, “How many came last week?” they should ask, “What per-
percentage of students are engaging in ministry” (214)?

To counter the attendance question with the service question is definitely a step in the right direction for many youth ministries. But it must also be noted that growth in genuine spirituality is often gradual, and, by and large, works from the inside out. It is for these two reasons that the predominant analogy in the New Testament to illustrate spiritual growth is agricultural, where root gives rise to fruit, not the other way around.7 Service and ministry have a role to play, but, I contend, not to the degree that Joiner advocates. Heartfelt worship, a sincere desire to obey Jesus in difficult situations, the growing ability to kill sin without legalism, genuine humility, an increasing concern over one’s sin, the willingness to acknowledge Christ in the midst of unbelieving friends at school, a hunger for God’s word privately and publically, a sacrificial love for other Christians, and a consistent honoring of one’s parents are the traits for which we should look and seek to nurture in our students as signs of genuine spirituality.8 Mere activity in ministry cannot guarantee, necessarily promote, or serve as a substitute of these “marks of the Spirit.” I have seen students—some under my own care when I was a youth pastor—who were active at church and in positions of leadership and influence, who found purpose in showing concern for the poor and disadvantaged, yet who were incredibly worldly, indifferent toward Scripture, ashamed of Christ at school, and consistently disrespectful to their parents and siblings. Activity in Christian ministry and service did not stimulate their spiritual growth; it may have even hindered it. Indeed, it is entirely possible to be active in exciting ministry, yet not know Jesus (see Matt 7:21-23).9

FINAL COMMENTS: APPRECIATION AND CONCERN

Overall, I appreciate Joiner’s call to view discipleship as more than just mere teaching. He wants leaders and parents to take a “holistic view of discipleship” (212) that cultivates the whole person, not just their intellect. A broader, more comprehensive picture of adult-to-student discipleship must involve other components as well: training in the spiritual disciplines, the development of a personal ministry, and helping students view pivotal life circumstances as a way in which God stretches and changes them (see p. 188). Joiner’s focus here, I believe, serves as a helpful corrective to those of us who are wired to think exclusively in cognitive categories. So my concern is not with his desire to draw attention to what may be some overlooked components of healthy discipleship, but with his neglect to wrestle theologically with some of the deeper, more foundational issues related to the discipleship of children and students.

Specifically, more attention needs to be given to what constitutes a genuine conversion in a young person, and how the Scriptures inform and guide our understanding of discipleship and authentic spirituality. It is the neglect to carefully ponder these two areas that Joiner’s discussion of the relationship between service and spiritual growth falls short. There is another interpretation one can offer for why the students Joiner described came home from their mission trip and lost their “passion” (209). It could be that they were stirred up with religious excitement and philanthropic zeal, but the roots of their hearts had not grown deep into the soil of the gospel and the truth of God’s word. Because their passion did not originate from within as it was kindled by the word and the Holy Spirit, once the external motivation and excitement of the mission trip was removed, these young folks lost their enthusiasm. So, we should ask: Are we equipping parents and leaders so that they will know how to distinguish these motivations? Could a young person be active in church activity but not really growing in vital spirituality? How can we tell if a young person is led by the Spirit or merely religious? These are tough but crucially important questions, not only for churches that have an obvious bent toward teaching, but for any church that cares for the spiritual health and wellbeing of its children and students.

Again, I anticipate the objection that these critiques are unfair inasmuch as I am treating Joiner’s book as something it is not—that I am placing standards upon it that belong to a book of theology. While I’m not convinced I have evaluated Joiner’s work by an unreasonable set of criteria, I do believe his tendency to doctrinal ambiguity arises not only from a desire to keep things simple, but also from his intention to reach out broadly to Christian church leaders and parents. He says as much
in the latter pages of the book: “Regardless of the size, denomination, doctrine, or structure of your church, you have incredible potential to partner with the family for the sake of a generation” (228). Joiner’s message is clear and can be applied across denominational lines: churches and families need to work together to have the greatest impact on the next generation. Point gladly taken. But without some theological and biblical contours, Joiner’s message runs the risk of becoming something less than distinctively Christian. And when that happens, leaders and parents will have very little to offer the next generation, no matter how well they say it.

ENDNOTES

1 Knighten makes this excellent point in his review of Think Orange found here: http://thomasknighten.com/?p=35.

2 There is one other time that Joiner mentions the cross. On page 83, he comments, “If we really believe that nothing is more important than someone’s relationship with God, it makes sense to combine the influences of the home and church. This is what motivated Moses to rally the Hebrew nation around the Shema in Deuteronomy 6. It’s why Jesus stepped on the planet and went to the cross.” The “this” to which the second sentence refers is “someone’s relationship with God.” So, here Joiner is simply stating that one of the reasons Jesus went to the cross was because there is “nothing more important than someone’s relationship with God.” As with the above references, however, there is no discussion as to what occurred at the cross more than that Jesus died there.

3 In a chart on page 154, Joiner provides a “Progression of Basic Truths” as a child transitions from preschool to student ministry. At preschool age, a child will learn that, “God made me, God loves me, [and] Jesus wants to be my friend forever.” In children’s ministry, they will learn, “I need to make a wise choice, I can trust God no matter what, [and] I should treat others the way I want to be treated. In student ministry, they will learn, “I am created to pursue an authentic relationship with my Creator, I belong to Jesus Christ and define who I am by what he says, [and] I exist everyday to demonstrate God’s love to a broken world” (see also page 244). Although I trust these ‘basic truths’ are meant to serve as broad categories under which teachers will form and plan their lessons, we must say that there are more vital truths we must teach our kids than what is implied in this chart. Even with two references to Jesus, this collection of truths seems basically moralistic more than distinctively Christian.

4 Joiner is also ambiguous about truth as it relates to one’s pursuit of God. For example, on page 146, he comments, “Isn’t it interesting that God doesn’t give us a lot of detail about Himself? You say, ‘What about the Bible?’ I know there’s a lot in the Bible, but have you ever stopped to think about what’s not in the Bible? I believe God told us the most important stuff, but there is still an element of mystery. Maybe God is more interested in our pursuit of Him than anything else. He doesn’t want us to package Him so neatly or define Him too narrowly. If we could explain everything there is about God, he wouldn’t be God.” Without some clarification, it is difficult to know exactly what Joiner is talking about here. What does it mean to “package God too narrowly?” Is he referring here to particular doctrines? When he says that God is “more interested in our pursuit of him than anything else” does that mean we should not strive know true things about God—even theologically nuanced things—because this is “packaging God too narrowly?” Should we have a conviction about whether, for example, God knows the future, or is this something that should be left in the category of mystery? I bring up the issue of God’s knowledge of the future not because Joiner alludes to it anywhere, but because it is an important theological issue currently debated among evangelicals and because it has direct bearing on how we teach our children about the nature of God. Although the debate itself is very complex, the main issue is rather simple to communicate to a child or high school student: either God knows the future or he doesn’t. Defining God narrowly, then, does matter in this case, even for children and teenagers. Whatever Joiner intends to convey in this passage, his language is far too ambiguous to be of much help.

5 The pastoral epistles strongly emphasize this last point as does great commission in Matt 28:18-20.
Throughout Scripture, genuine spiritual growth is connected chiefly to the word of God (Ps 1:1-2). It is when we abide in Christ’s word that we bear much fruit (John 15:7). The collective growth of the church depends upon the ministry of the pastors and teachers and the congregants speaking truth to one another (Eph 4:11-15). Individual growth is closely tied to knowledge (Phil 1:9-11; Col 1:10; 3:10; 2 Pet 3:18) and to the word dwelling richly in us (Col 3:17).

In my judgment, Joiner makes two mistakes here in his discussion of spiritual growth and service. First, he reverses the order of significance. Ministry is vital to spiritual growth like an apple is vital to an apple tree. The tree’s health and growth do not depend upon or flow from the apple, yet the only way to know if the tree is healthy is if we see good fruit (Matt 7:17). But this observation highlights a second problem: the good fruits to which we should look as signs of spiritual health are not necessarily formal ministry like participation on mission trips, but love for and obedience to the revealed will of God.

Joiner relays a story of dad whose young daughter was involved in an unhealthy lifestyle and relationship. Try as he might, this dad could not get his daughter to renounce the relationship and remove herself from the kind of life she was living. Finally, someone told him that he needed to present his daughter with a better story than the one she was pursuing: she had come to associate her dad and church with a boring, unadventurous story; the life she was living was thrilling and fun. So what did this dad do? He suggested to his family that they raise $20000 to build an orphanage in Mexico. Almost immediately his family was engaged with the project and his wayward daughter even offered her technological expertise to raise awareness on her MySpace page. “Within three weeks, the girl had broken up with her boyfriend. Why? Because she found a better story, one in which she gets to play the heroine. She gets to sacrifice and give of herself to accomplish something that’s great, and she wanted and needed that story” (208). While I am grateful for the turnaround in this girl’s life, we must notice a few things about this account. First, there is nothing distinctively Christian about it. The girl may have left her relationship and turned things around socially, but this does not mean she came into a saving relationship with Jesus. I know plenty of stories of unbelievers who offer similar accounts of how philanthropic experiences helped change their life, promote healing, and draw them out of destructive lifestyles. What makes this girl’s experience any different than these unbelievers except that it occurred within the context of the church? Secondly, the girl is still the center of the story. During the time this young woman was with her boyfriend, she refused her dad’s demands and pleas because she valued her desires over obedience to her dad and, ultimately, to the Lord. In other words, she saw herself as the center of the universe. By getting her excited in a mission opportunity in which she saw herself as the heroine—as a benefactor helping the less fortunate—this focus on self was merely transferred from one context to another. This disconnect occurred because the story to which she was introduced was mainly about doing good things and her feeling good about doing them, rather than the narrative of redemption where Jesus is the hero who rescues us from condemnation. In my judgment, a stronger grasp on the gospel and on what constitutes a genuine conversion would bring much clarity to Joiner’s discussion of the role of serving in one’s spiritual growth.
“Family worship” is an archaic phrase—and an increasingly archaic practice. It sounds austere and intimidating, like an outdated tradition for über-conservative, tightly sheltered, hyper-Christian families who care more about spiritual solemnity than family warmth.

Pastor Jason Helopoulos, assistant pastor at University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan, puts the lie to these misconceptions and seeks to revive a joyful Christian practice with roots deep in Christian tradition. In *A Neglected Grace: Family Worship in the Christian Home* (Christian Focus, 2013), Helopoulos dusts off, rewraps, and re-presents this forgotten gift.

**SUMMARY**

Chapter 1 (19-28) focuses on worship. The question is not whether we’re worshipers but what we’re worshiping. Helopoulos explains that worship is a lifestyle but that specific times of worship are also essential. Christians worship in three complementary spheres: secret worship, corporate worship, and family worship. Lots of pleasures and priorities—even good ones—can hijack the Christian’s passion and direction in life. It takes regular time and intentionality to reorient our hearts to God and his ways—individually, collectively, and as a family.

Chapter 2 (29-40) provides biblical reasons for family worship. Helopoulous agrees that there’s no scriptural command for a regular set-aside time of family worship. “However, there are plenty of commands that in our homes we are to teach our children, read the Word, pray: in essence—worship” (30). He highlights the joyfulness of the responsibility, its cascading effects on future generations, the value of weaving the biblical story into the lives of our children, and the essential role of male headship. He appeals mainly to Psalm 78:2-7, while also mentioning a handful of other passages (Gen 2–3; 18:19; Deut 6:6-7; Josh 24:15; Hos 6:7; Rom 5:14; 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Tim 1:14; and Eph 5–6).

Chapter 3 (41-49) explains some other practical reasons for family worship. Family worship centers the home on Christ, encourages children toward Christ, cultivates Christian character, fosters peace in the home, brings the family together, develops common knowledge, equips children for corporate worship, reinforces spiritual headship, and provides systematic discipleship.
Chapter 4 (51-66) gets into the nuts and bolts. Here and throughout the book Helopoulos focuses on three essential elements of family worship: Scripture, prayer, and singing. Practical, realistic examples fill the chapter (especially focusing on younger children). Helopoulos also explains how we can supplement (but not replace) these three essential elements by employing Scripture memory, catechisms, confessions of faith, responsive readings, and other books.

Chapter 5 (67-71) discusses the attitude and manner of family worship. These times should be reverent, joyful, regular, and consistent. Thankfully, Helopoulos is careful to guard against misunderstandings, answer common objections, and preempt misguided guilt. Reverence does not mean “cold and stiff formalism” (67). Joy should not be “contrived” or forced (68). Consistency does not mean perfect (71). Nevertheless, Helopoulos never backs down from the challenge, consistently urging families to “endeavor to approach God every day with resolve, focus, and ‘heart-felt’ faith.” Then: “Through all seasons, be patient, be gracious, and keep praying that God would bless” (71).

Chapter 6 (73-79) explains what family worship is not. Helopoulos warns against the family-as-church error, the idolatry of the family, and the all-too-common feeling that family worship is a burden. He encourages parents not to use these gatherings for individual rebukes, family activities, or gospel-less morality training. Nor should parents view these family times as a guarantee that their children will be converted and walk with Christ.

Chapter 7 (81-88) gives tips for planning like finding the best time, keeping to a specific time and place, starting slow, keeping it simple and short, making it a priority in the midst of busy schedules, being flexible while remaining committed, modeling the right attitude as parents, and persevering in the face of challenges.

Chapter 8 (89-98) gives practical advice for some typical challenges: single parenting, feelings of inadequacy, an unbelieving spouse, an unconvinced spouse, children of different ages, kids that won’t sit still, lack of response or fruit, and lukewarmness.

Chapter 9 (99-109) encourages us to “Just Do It” while providing seven real-life testimonies from Christians who’ve practiced, struggled at, and benefited from family worship. These stories are painfully, humorously, helpfully honest—from college students to young mothers to empty nesters.

Finally, the four appendices provide a rich reservoir of resources to draw from: sample family worship structures, questions for different ages of children, organized ways to pray together, resources for prayer and singing, an example of responsive reading, and catechisms and creeds.

STRENGTHS
This is a very helpful book for many reasons. First, Helopoulos is clear without being simplistic. He’s careful and thoughtful but never technical or nebulous. Second, he’s managed a concise book on a disputed and complex topic. He keeps it short and sweet without overexplaining or oversimplifying, both of which would have been tempting. Third, the book is filled with real-life examples along with resources to help guide the way. The focus isn’t grand theories or emotional appeals but biblical substance, healthy wisdom, and can-do practicality. Fourth, the practical sections cover a lot of categories, dealing with the major issues and questions encountered by those seeking to join Helopoulos in loving their families well. Fifth, the book is grace-driven, so that family worship is truly presented as a joyful responsibility and an exciting means of grace rather than the burden it can so easily become.

Helopoulos also digs down into the deep roots of historical perspective, quoting a handful of Christian figures from past generations: Richard Baxter (14-15, 26, 74), Robert Murray M’Cheyne (23), Charles Spurgeon (25), Jonathan Edwards (30), John Knox (37), James Waddell Alexander (87), and Matthew Henry (100). These glances at history remind us that faithful Christians from long ago can still help us reorient our lives by correcting (or confirming) our contemporary priorities.

SUGGESTIONS
First, I would have appreciated a more robust and nuanced scriptural grounding for Helopoulos’ particular format for family worship. He briefly mentions a handful of passages in chapter two, but it takes several logical steps and implications to move from the pas-
sages he cites to the specific structure he promotes as “essential” throughout the book (everyday time of Scripture, prayer, and singing). No mature Christian would disagree that parents should teach their children God’s Word and make prayer a priority. In fact, I agree with his basic “essentials” and am convinced by his reasoning. But for an entire generation that hasn’t grown up with this clear, structured model of “family worship,” along with a developing church culture that values non-tradition over tradition, more scriptural evidence may be needed.

Second, using synonyms for “family worship” would help round out the book. The constant use of this particular phrase seems to suggest that there’s only one acceptable look and feel to this time together. The exclusive wording also seems to tie the idea inextricably to past generations. Perhaps Helopoulos aims to recover the rich tradition of family worship and therefore wants to drive the “family worship” terminology deep. But it has the potential to miscommunicate when used exclusively, a potential that could be mitigated by changing up the terminology here and there. Contemporary testimonies from Christian leaders (within the book, not just in the blurbs) could also help combat the misguided feeling that family worship is a noble ancient tradition but an irrelevant or impossible contemporary practice.

Third, while the book is rich in practical ideas, helpful resources, and real-life stories, non-traditional forms of creativity are noticeably absent. I completely agree that Scripture, prayer, and singing should be central, but the main point of many parenting passages is teaching God’s truth and his ways to our children. The Israelites remembered God’s works through feasts and festivals involving all five senses. The prophets often used object lessons to communicate God’s truth. Jesus himself used many creative teaching techniques throughout his itinerant ministry. Each of these examples can be misunderstood and misapplied, but each also points to the multi-sensory ways that human beings learn, remember, and celebrate. Children can benefit immensely from creativity and diversity in the midst of consistency. Therefore, what about having an artistic 8-year-old draw the story and then explain it to the family? What about having a creative group of siblings perform a show based on the passage? How about a musical young teenager composing a song based on a biblical truth, story, or psalm? How about enterprising young boys building a Lego presentation to portray the passage? These should never replace or take over Scripture, prayer, and singing, but could inject energy and splash color onto the experience from time to time.

Fourth, I hope Helopoulos will revise this helpful resource in 15 years after his children have moved through the teenage years. Little advice is provided for those with teenagers and all the opportunities and challenges that attend those years. How should parents of older children think through scheduling, requirements for participation, leading hard-hearted teenagers, allowing the older children to teach the younger, or involving their children’s friends? Adding a chapter by someone who’s done family worship through the entire life cycle would help fill out the book (some comments from an empty nester are included in the testimonials, but there’s no explicit or organized advice).

Fifth, a chapter or appendix on doing family worship with children with special needs would be helpful. Physical, mental, emotional, and linguistic challenges can abound, requiring customized counsel and skillful advice from those who’ve walked similar paths. How should you approach family worship when you’ve just brought home a 5-year-old orphan from Africa who’s scared, suspicious, and speaks no English? What about children with mental disabilities or developmental challenges? I don’t expect Helopoulos to offer personalized counsel that’s meant to come from local pastors and informed believers, but addressing some common issues and categories would be a welcome addition.

I don’t offer these suggested improvements because the book is bad. The book is very good, and deserves a wide audience. Its strengths far outweigh its limitations, and I heartily recommend it to parents, grandparents, pastors, and mentors.

**CONCLUSION**

What’s the mark of a good book? It changes you. In some way—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, practically—you’re moved. The greatest compliment I can pay this book is that I’m walking away wanting to do
family worship consistently and well. I’m not discouraged, though based on my past performance I could be. I’m not unmotivated, though based on my weaknesses I could be. And I don’t feel helpless, though based on the inherent challenges, such feelings would be natural. Rather, I am instructed and inspired to lead consistent, intentional, wise times of worship with my family—not as a heavy obligation but a precious grace.
I was enjoying brunch at a local café with my wife after church. It was before we had kids, so it was just the two of us. Across the room I spotted one of the students in my youth ministry, sitting with his parents. I couldn’t help but notice something else, though. His parents were also enjoying time together—just the two of them. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a set of parents so thoroughly ignore their child through an entire meal. Seeing the relationship this only child lacked with his parents explained a lot about his behavior. I left the café wondering what sort of parent he might grow up to become if this is how family and parenting was modeled to him. Would he even bother to have a family of his own?

We know younger generations learn as much from what they observe as from what we actually tell them. Many voices insist actions speak louder than words. What, then, are we communicating to our youth about the church when every time we gather, they go to their own room for a separate program? What message do they receive when we give them one Sunday per year to participate in leading the service? For our “Youth Sunday,” the high school group led everything except the sermon. Were we expecting them to look forward to the day when they’d be grown up enough to participate in “big church”? Did we consider that, when that day arrived, they might not understand anything about it and just walk away? Or would they search for a church that most resembled their youth group experience because it would feel less foreign to them?

CONSTANT CHALLENGE

I spent ten years serving in a church where the youth ministry was segregated from the congregation. The constant challenge before us was to somehow teach and give them a taste of what the church is meant to be, even though they weren’t experiencing it themselves. Most of the youth didn’t worship with the rest of the congregation, nor did they experience aspects of gathered church life beyond “Youth Sunday.” This church has since changed its approach to youth ministry and become less segregated.

The next church I served in was vastly different. There I learned how to effectively model and shape a biblical view of the church for the youth. What was so different? To start, students were part of the church.
Rather than a token “Youth Sunday,” we regularly had students serving as ushers, greeters, choristers, music volunteers, and Scripture readers. Some of our older teens were teaching Sunday school, and when the church gathered for various functions, teens joined in the mix. This was an intergenerational church family where relationships spanned decades and all ages served side by side. Sure, we had youth Bible study groups and other activities specifically for students, but that never precluded their involvement in the gathered church.

Together as the diverse, multi-generational body of Christ, we worshiped God, sat under the preaching of his Word, prayed, shared communion, and enjoyed fellowship. As a result, students weren’t left wondering about the church’s purpose; they were experiencing it according to Acts 2:42-47. They learned the church exists chiefly to glorify God, not to please them. They experienced what it means for elders to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13).

OTHER DIVERSITY, TOO

Everything was set in an intergenerational context amid other forms of diversity, too. Imagine, for a student, the effect of standing next to an older gentleman with Down syndrome who’s singing his heart out in worship. Imagine a man whose faith carried him through D-Day praying daily for the youth of our church—youth he actually knows and loves. Imagine they knew people in every stage of life who were living out their faith against all kinds of challenges: the widowers and divorcees; the childless and the tired parents; the recovering addict and the recent college grad, still resolute in his faith.

Simply put, we do teens a disservice when we segregate them from the life of the church. When we build youth ministries that don’t fold students into the life of the congregation, the unintended consequence is a future of empty pews. Pew Research reports that twenty to thirty-year olds attend church at half the rate of their parents and one-fourth the rate of their grandparents.² These young adults were teens a decade or two ago, and many of them were active in youth ministries. As result, many today ask what we can do to reverse this regrettable trend, wondering how to get formerly churchgoing youth “back” into church. In my view, we must engage students in the life of entire congregations. Then and only then can we model and shape a biblical view of the church as we entrust the faith from one generation to the next.

In other words, maybe young adults aren’t actually leaving the church. Maybe they were never there to begin with.

ENDNOTES

1 This article originally appeared at The Gospel Coalition. Used by permission.
Is it just me or is there a lot of pressure on parents to provide their children with the absolute perfect environment for growth? We are told that our children need to be breast fed, need listen to classical music, need to be able to read by age four, need to play sports, need to play an instrument, need to be involved in theater, need to know Latin, need to experience the world broadly, need to understand various philosophical arguments, need lots of friends, need solitude, need to be nurtured, need tough love, and on and on. If we don’t provide these things for our children their growth will be stunted and they may end up as a hobo or drug dealer.

Talk about a lot of pressure! Who can possibly do all these things? I certainly can’t. But is it possible we’re setting the bar too high for ourselves and our children? That maybe we’re getting a little carried away? And that maybe, just maybe, we’re going beyond what God requires of us as parents?

Let me be honest, I don’t remember much from my many years of schooling. And don’t get me wrong, I did pretty well in school. I don’t say this to brag (because honestly I’m not too impressed) but I graduated from college Summa Cum Laude with a 4.0 GPA. I was very good at gaming standardized tests.

Yet despite my decent performance in school I don’t remember much. I can’t remember all the elements on the periodic table. I can’t remember all the countries in Africa even though I was forced to memorize them. I can’t remember who was the governor of Massachusetts in 1843 even though I took Advanced Placement History. I think James Madison wrote the Federalist Papers but I’m not sure. The only Latin phrase I know is “Carpe Diem” and I got that from the movie Dead Poet’s Society. I never played lacrosse or took part in a school play.

Let me tell you what I do remember. I remember coming downstairs every morning and seeing my dad reading his Bible. I remember all the times I went fishing with my dad. I remember all the music we jammed out to as a family, including Billy Joel, Sting, The Beatles, dc Talk, and Peter Gabriel. The constant presence of music in our house gave me a love for music as well as a biblical framework to interpret music.

I remember my mom and dad’s constant, appropriate physical affection. I remember that they always told me how much they loved me. I remember sitting in
church and feeling my mom’s loving hand on my back.
I remember our morning family devotions even though I often fell asleep during those devotions.
I remember seeing my dad serve my mom when she was battling depression. He made dinners, did dishes, and cleaned up after us.
I remember totaling my parents car and neither of them getting angry at me.
I remember my dad telling me he didn’t care what career I chose as long as I followed Jesus.
I remember all the fun books we read together as a family, which in turn instilled a passion for reading and learning in me.
Education and extracurricular activities are good and important. But maybe they’re not as important as we think. What’s most important is that we teach our children to love Jesus, love others, and be servants. If they know Latin, great. But if not it’s really okay.
Don’t feel guilty for falling short of your own unrealistic, extra-biblical standards. There are only a few things in life which really, really matter. Focus on those things and the rest will fall into place.

ENDNOTES
1 This article originally appeared at TheBlazingCenter.com. Used by permission.
“You’re so young,” my anesthesiologist commented as he prepped my back for the ever-so-long epidural needle. I was in the delivery room preparing to give birth to our second daughter, Evangeline.

“I just can’t believe you are already having your second child and you’re only twenty-six,” he continued. “Yes,” was all I could utter through my agony. I wasn’t really in the mood to carry on a conversation.

My anesthesiologist tried to make the experience lighthearted, but then the conversation turned and he started sharing how much he enjoyed his single lifestyle – the women, the parties, the late nights. It was obvious he thought his life was the one I should be leading, a life without marital commitment and raising children.

I began to relax as the epidural took effect. As he packed up his stuff and walked out the door, I wanted to say something, but I was speechless.

In his profession, he only saw women in immense pain. He was never around to experience the joy of seeing a new life entering the world.

All he saw was the needle, not the joy.

A PAIN THAT IS WORTH IT
Growing up, my mom embraced motherhood with all her heart. She helped me understand that being a wife and mother were gifts from God. I prayed that one day God would give those gifts to me.

She embraced the joys of motherhood fully. It’s not that she never experienced the pain that comes along with it – every mother knows that there is agony not only in childbirth but also during times of raising children. There are struggles. There are hard days. There is heartbreak.

But there is also joy.

I cannot even put into words the joy I experienced the afternoon that our first daughter, AudreyKate, was born. I labored inconsistently for four days prior to her arrival, which was eight days past her due date. She came out screaming and full of life from the get-go. The only word that comes close to capturing the way I felt at that moment is “joy.”

The evening Evangeline was born was exactly the same way. Grant and I wondered what size she would be, if she would have hair, and whether or not she would look just like her “big” sister. It was hypothetical though
until we saw her.

And when I saw her for the first time, I was amazed. I couldn’t stop the tears from streaming down my face, and once again I felt pure joy. Joy that God had given me this most wonderful and perfect gift to spend part of my life raising.

But the joy isn’t just on delivery day. It’s everyday. Sometimes I’m joyful because I successfully got both of them to bed at the same time. But most of the time, I am marveling at a new word, a new discovery, or something as simple as a smile.

Yes, it’s hard. But it’s a “good hard.” It’s the kind of hard that makes me joyful because I am doing something worthwhile. I am doing what I believe God has designed me to do.

EMBRACING MOTHERHOOD

When it comes to embracing and understanding motherhood from a biblical perspective instead of a cultural one, I always think of Mary.

Her attitude was one that embraced motherhood even though it came at a high price and even though she was most likely ostracized for it. Her words always come to my mind in the tough moments of mothering, “Be it done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Mary’s response to God’s call on her life was beautiful. Her response was one that came out of her mouth automatically because she was obviously immersed in scripture (Luke 1:47-55).

Mary was so young to have a child. Many believe she was around the age of sixteen. So young to have a child and yet it was God’s plan for her to be a young mother.

I used to wonder what it was like for Mary the night that Jesus was born. I used to wonder what she felt like when she saw her son, Jesus, for the first time. I can’t imagine the struggles she went through both emotionally and physically to reach that moment.

I still don’t know what that night was like for her, but now, as a mother myself, I have an idea.

He brought her joy. Immense and indescribable joy.

And not only to her, he also brought joy to the whole world.

Her joy in Jesus would be intensified throughout her lifetime as she came to understand her son. She knew the meaning of his name, as every mother does, but she would understand first hand one day what “Jesus saves” truly meant. She would feel the pain too – a sword piercing her heart as she watched her son die.

But first she felt joy. And last, she felt joy.

As I spend my days raising two little ones, I am again challenged by Mary’s attitude toward God and her attitude toward motherhood. She embraced God’s will for her life even though it wasn’t easy.

Mary’s life displays to me the value of my role as a mother. I am reminded that this was the way Jesus chose to enter the world – through a young mother, a young mother who didn’t have it all together and who wasn’t experienced or well off. A young woman whose heart did not reject motherhood, but instead responded, “Be it done to me according to your word.”

Each day I am faced with new challenges that come with motherhood, the dirty diapers, the consistent training, and the demanded attention that little people require. There are also the occasional comments from others, “Wow, you have your hands full!” In these moments, I am faced with a choice. I can choose to see the “needle” or choose to see the “joy.”

Like Mary, but most importantly, like Jesus, may I embrace the needle for the joy.
Equipping the Generations:
Children: A Blessed Necessity for Christian Marriages

DAVID SCHROCK

Last month, Time ran a cover story on “The Childfree Life.” It raised the question: Are children necessary for having a full and meaningful life? This month, Emily Timbol has picked up that question and stirred the pot again.

In her article, “The Fruitful Callings of Childless By Choice,” she makes the case that she and her husband are best able to glorify God by choosing not to have children. Supporting her thesis with a series of personal anecdotes, appeals to feelings, and a smattering of references to the Bible and theology, she suggests an alternative way to glorify God in marriage. She writes,

Skipping over a procreative opportunity isn’t a rejection of God’s purpose for me. When I think of what I was created for, what my purpose on this earth is, I don’t think of babies....My purpose is not determined by my ability or desire to reproduce. It is determined the same way as everyone else’s: by gifts, passions, talents, and skills that God has given to use for his glory.

For Timbol, glorifying God is not restricted to baby making and therefore children are not necessary for a fruitful marriage. Her article is in step with the spirit of the age, but I want to ask, do her experiences, feelings, and purported Christian liberty really find support in Scripture? Does it really glorify God to intentionally forsake children? I will argue that Scripture clearly calls believers to pursue children in marriage.

THE GLORY OF GOD IS FAMILIAL, NOT FREE-WHEELING

When God created the world, he made it for his glory. Scripture repeatedly tells us that God created and redeemed the world for his glory (see Ps 19:1; Isa 43:6-7; Eph 1:6, 12, 14). Yet, the pinnacle of creation is not a thing. Humanity is in fact called to be the glory of God (see 1 Cor 11:7).

In Genesis 1, when God gave his first couple the command to be fruitful and multiply, he did not give them a command to procreate as an end in itself. Rather, procreation was the means by which God’s glory would cover the earth. Psalm 8 tells us that God crowned mankind with glory. Thus, the command to procreate was a command to cover the earth with God’s glorious image and likeness.
The fall put a stop to this plan, but when we read Numbers 14:20 and Habakkuk 2:14, we are reminded that what man corrupted, God would put to rights: The earth will be covered with the glory of God (i.e., redeemed humanity) as the waters cover the sea.

When we think of ‘glory,’ therefore, we must not imagine a world glowing like a Christmas tree. No, the glory that will cover the earth is intensely personal. Christ, who is the very radiance of the glory of God (Heb 1:3), will through his death and resurrection justify, sanctify, and glorify a people who will forever cover the earth with his glory. Any abstract discussion of God’s glory fails to understand the Christ-centered and anthropological nature of God’s glory.

In this light, we see the darkness of Timbol’s free-wheeling approach to glory. She misunderstands how humanity glorifies God. She is right that we can glorify God in ways other than procreation, but she is wrong to suggest that able couples can bypass child bearing in the name of glorifying God.

THE GOSPEL RESCUES US FROM BARRENNESS AND SEALS US IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

In the Old Testament, barrenness is a curse, children a blessing. Hannah weeps because she does not have children; Sarah laughs when at 99 she feels the kick of Isaac in her womb. In the law, barrenness is a punishment for covenant-breaking. In the Psalms, a full quiver is God’s gift to families.

Now, some will say, as Timbol does, that the modern woman can find blessing in things other than children, that she has freedom to pursue her calling with or without papoose. Tragically, such an argument leaves behind the timeless wisdom of God’s word and the blessings found therein.

The blessedness of children is not an agrarian boon; it is the nature of the kingdom of God. New Testament salvation is regularly depicted with familial metaphors. When Christian families won’t—*not can’t*—have children, they are not taking some alternative path to godliness; they are living out of step with God’s purpose in the universe—the creation of God’s family.

The message of the gospel trades on this fact: In Christ, women will not be barren and men will not be eunuchs. Read Isaiah 53 and 54. The Suffering Servant died to make sure that Sarah would no longer be childless and Abraham would have to enlarge his tents. Though, we often neglect Isaiah 54, the message is clear: Barrenness, however you dress it up, stands at odds with the gospel. Gospel-minded Christians will pursue the increase of children, not the freedom to forego them.

CHOOSING TO BE CHILDLess UNDERCUTS THE GREAT COMMISSION

Timbol’s whole article stands on the mistaken notion that we can glorify God however we choose. The problem is that the Bible is not silent about how God wants to be glorified. First Corinthians 6:19-20 says, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” Consequently, a choose-your-own-path-to-fulfillment mocks God’s wisdom and glory. Paul understood this; he knew that his glory and joy was not his earthly gifts, but the children he was laboring to deliver into the kingdom of God (see Gal 4:19; 1 Thess 2:20).

So it seems that the Bible is not indifferent in its affirmation for Christian marriages to “be fruitful and multiply.” For those who have been brought into the family of God, they have the blessed responsibility to bear, raise, and disciple the children that God has given them. Yes, Matthew 28:19-20 calls Christians to reach beyond their families, but never at the expense of having a family.

In truth, the Great Commission must begin with our own families. In Christ, be fruitful and multiply takes on greater significance—we are to make disciples of those outside our families and we are to have children whom we can disciple. Refusing to have children for the sake of personal godliness is not a display godliness. It is a refusal to participate in God’s plan of creating image-bearers who worship him.

THE HOLY CITY WILL BE OVERRUN WITH CHILDREN

In the end, Emily Timbol’s argument doesn’t find support in the Bible. In the Bible, the women of faith pursue child-bearing (1 Tim 2:15), and godly men live
with an eye towards their offspring. The gospel itself promises an eternal kingdom alive with the sons and daughters of God.

If we are persuaded by the wisdom of this age, such a family-friendly kingdom may sound strange or unappealing. But make no mistake, the kingdom of God looks like a busy cul-de-sac filled with playful children, not an intimate table for two. As Zechariah 8:5 puts it, “the streets of [Zion] shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”

The choice to refuse children is by no means a mark of Christian liberty; it is a living parable of an empty eternity. It is a choice that exchanges God’s glory (children made in his image) for something else—namely, those things we can make with our hands. Such an exchange will never bring glory to God. It didn’t at Mount Horeb and it will not now.

In the face of arguments for ‘fruitful childlessness, God’s wisdom still holds true: “Children are a blessing from the Lord.”
You have read the books, been to the conferences, favorited the latest tweets, and perhaps even received a degree declaring that you are a “certified” expert on how to minister to families. Now, if the parents in your ministry will just follow your advice, their home will be overflowing with Bible studies and wonderful times of discipleship.

The parents in your ministry, however, sit in the pews each week exhausted from work, anxious over finances, disillusioned by the task of parenting, and disappointed in themselves for not being able to do what you are calling them to do. Perhaps busyness has won another battle, a lack of confidence has caused them to avoid the subject of family worship, or the realization of past mistakes paralyzes them so that they dare not attempt to provide spiritual leadership at home. Now they sit, once again, feeling guilty for not doing what they know they should do. What do you say to these parents?

Over the past several years, there has been a much-needed revival in the church toward a more biblical approach to the ministry to families. Leaving behind the program-driven student ministry paradigm of the latter part of the Twentieth Century, many pastors are seeking to reconnect the church and the home—the two primary institutions God ordained for the discipleship of children and teens.

One hallmark of this revival is the clear call from pastors for parents to be the primary disciplers of their children. Ideally, this call never comes without the pastor also equipping the parents he shepherds to fulfill their calling because parents not only need to know their calling, they also need to be fitted with the necessary resources and skills to carry out their calling. However, the reality is that as parents are called and equipped to disciple their children, they are naturally confronted with the grim reality that many of them have not been doing what God has called them to do in regard to the discipleship of their children. The result? Guilt, shame, and regret. The wise pastor must, therefore, realize the feelings of conviction experienced by his parents and minister God’s grace to them, for the grace we have received in Christ should compel us to extend grace to those we shepherd. But how do we do this?
In 1 Samuel 12:19-25, God’s people find themselves in the midst of a transition between the leadership of the Judges and life under an earthly king. Saul has triumphantly returned from battle, and Samuel gathers the people at Gilgal to officially recognize him as the first king of Israel. Joy is in the air as the nation exuberantly celebrates their king.

In this moment, Samuel gathers the people to address them. Calling upon his own years of faithful leadership, Samuel reminds the people of God’s faithfulness and righteous works as King. At this point, the people must have continued to rejoice and praise the Lord. However, Samuel, as any good spiritual leader would do, confronts the people with their sin—they had coveted the Ammonites because of their king and requested their own king (1 Sam 12:12). What was the problem with this? In doing so, they rejected God as King (see 1 Sam 8:7). Confronted with their sin, the people are convicted and penitent. In 1 Samuel 12:19, the people plead for God, and Samuel, to show them mercy.

Pastor, this is the point where many of us are with the parents in our ministry. They have rejoiced over the victories of the youth ministry—all the kids that are coming; the great curriculum; the wonderful camps; and the “good” kids we are churning out. However, knowing that God has ordained parents to be the primary spiritual leaders of their children (Deut 6:4-9, Eph 6:4), we have faithfully confronted them with their sin—they have coveted the Ammonites because of their king and requested their own king (1 Sam 12:12). What was the problem with this? In doing so, they rejected God as King (see 1 Sam 8:7). Confronted with their sin, the people are convicted and penitent. In 1 Samuel 12:19, the people plead for God, and Samuel, to show them mercy.

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First, he called the people to wholeheartedly follow God (1 Sam 12:20-21) instead of following the vain pursuits of the world. In so doing, he does not overlook their sin, but rather acknowledges it. Samuel knows that our struggles with sin do not absolve the call to love God with all of our heart, soul, and strength. In the wake of the realization that they have neglected their God-ordained role, parents under your care should be encouraged to continue faithfully following the Lord and loving him with all their being. Don’t ignore their neglect of their role at home, but don’t stay there thumping them over the head with your Bible and conference knowledge. Instead, call them to a more devoted and passionate following of Jesus. Yes, call them to repent; but more importantly, call them to a deeper love for Jesus.

Then, Samuel reassures the people that God will not abandon them (1 Sam 12:22). God is a faithful God who keeps his covenant with his people. The people needed to know that their sin did not change God’s love for them. Why? Because their “good” works did not merit God’s love for them in the first place. It was out of his grace and mercy that God made them his people, and he did so for his own name’s sake. Parents need to hear these words. They need to know that while they may not have done what they should as parents, God has not left them. He loves them not for what they do, but in spite of what they do. Yes, rejecting God and requesting a king was an incredibly grievous sin, just as it is for Christian parents to abdicate their spiritual authority and responsibility for their children’s discipleship. However, neither sin is greater than God’s grace. Pastor, Satan will hurl lies at parents and burden them with guilt, telling them that they do not measure up and that they are not “good” Christians. This is precisely the reason we must remind discouraged, penitent parents “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). This is the power of the cross and the grace-filled words parents need to hear.

Third, he tells the people that he would pray for and teach them (1 Sam 12:23). In the midst of their struggle with sin, the people needed to know that just as God would not abandon them for their failures, neither would their spiritual leader. Instead, he would be
interceding with God on their behalf. Samuel understood that they were in a battle with sin, so he committed to join with them in spiritual battle. But he didn’t just say, “I’ll be praying for you.” No, he also committed to instruct them in the ways of the Lord. When a parent stands in your office convicted of what they haven’t done, they need to hear from you that you will pray both with and for them, and that you will teach and equip them to fulfill their task. Are you doing battle for and with parents? Are you instructing them not only in what God’s Word calls them to do, but also in how to do it?

Finally, Samuel again calls the people to remember the Lord (1 Sam 12:24-25). It is significant that his final goal was to set their hearts and minds upon their God. As we counsel repentant parents, we would do well to end by reminding them of God’s faithfulness and goodness to them. Living in a culture that, as a whole, is perhaps the most affluent and materialistic in all of history, it is easy even for Christian parents to fail to recognize the depth of God’s goodness to them. Remind the parents you pastor of “the great things he has done for [them].” Remind them of his unmerited grace through Christ. Remind them of his covenant faithfulness. For, in so doing, their hearts will be filled with the thanksgiving that drives believers to serve God with all their heart.

As you shepherd parents, do so in a way that is grace-filled and God-glorifying, rather than guilt-multiplying. If this is your goal, like Samuel, you will find that God will use you for his glory and the good of those you are calling to be spiritual leaders in their homes. May we be pastors who extend the grace of God just as it has been extended to us through Christ.
In the months leading up to my daughter’s birth, I contemplated what it would be like to raise a child. I thought, if I can barely remember to put deodorant on in the mornings, how could I possibly steward another life? More importantly, how will I lead her to cherish Jesus? What if she one day rejects the gospel? I felt the enormous weight of Deuteronomy 6 where God commands his people to teach his statutes “diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deuteronomy 6:7). Raising an eternal soul was, and still is, terrifying.

The Bible tells us that the home is the most immediate context for discipleship. I am called to love God with all my heart, soul, and strength and to teach this diligently to my little girl. My wife and I have the unique mission of raising our daughter in a gospel-saturated home, reminding her about what God has done when we sit, when we walk, when we lie down, and when we rise. This is a beautiful calling, and totally beyond me.

When thinking of raising my daughter, I’m reminded that Jesus’s call for us to make disciples of all nations can also feel like a daunting task (Matthew 28:18–20). We wonder, how could I tell another sinner about Jesus when I myself am a sinner? What if I don’t say the right things? What if my own imperfections and foibles deter them from believing the gospel’s power? This calling, too, can be terrifying.

BEWARE THE OBSESSION

I love being a dad. I thank God for my little girl every day. But as with any great blessing from God, the blessing of a child can make us want to squeeze too tight and never let go.

I have already been tempted to shirk the “prefab parenting models” in an attempt to raise my daughter the “right” way. There’s both an internal pressure within my own heart and an external pressure from the world to have a child who turns out perfect. I want her to love Jesus and to desire the supremacy of God above all things, but these pressures, and my inordinate concerns, often command me to focus on her conduct more than her heart. I hear others complain about unruly, bratty kids and I think, “That won’t be my girl!” This can be consuming.
When we invest ourselves in the lives of others, this tension is no different. We experience the extreme joy of God’s call to show them the ways of Jesus. Discipleship is wonderful. We feel responsible for their souls, and we long to see their lives radically transformed by the gospel. One of the greatest phenomena in God’s creation is watching the caterpillar become a butterfly, and this type of spectacle is beautiful to witness in the heart of an unbeliever.

The dangers lie in basing your own worth on the actions of those in whom you invest. It is tempting to allow our self-esteem to rise and fall based on another’s failures and successes. If the person you’re discipling fails morally, it is easy to blame yourself. If they show impressive growth theologically, it’s easy to congratulate yourself on the extraordinary ability to relay the deep things of God. This, too, can be consuming.

Certainly, there are many ways we can go wrong in discipling others. The sin that corrupts our hearts can lead us to dark places. Yet when we look to the cross, the hope we find in Jesus can take away all the anxieties and dangers of placing the results of discipleship on our own shoulders.

**POINTING TO CHRIST**

In any discipleship relationship, whether our children or our neighbors, it is imperative that we continually point them to Jesus. And when we find ourselves getting rusty in this work, that’s when we need the gospel all the more.

Eugene Peterson says that “discipleship is a process of paying more and more attention to God’s righteousness and less and less attention to our own.” We were saved by grace through faith that was not, and is not, of our own power (Ephesians 2:8). In the cross we see our need, how desperate we are, and the ultimate display of God’s love for us. The cross that we proclaim is also the cross that frees us from mistaking discipleship to be about us. This is the good news that we must keep at the center.

If we’re not seeing this glory, we cannot expect to lead anyone else to see it. At least, not in a way that will truly matter. However, Paul reminds us that “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). If we recognize this, the shackles of self-affirmation will no longer weigh us down. We can joyfully disciple others with the expectation that Jesus’s life-changing gospel will prevail regardless of our shortcomings.

Whether I’m holding my daughter or talking to my neighbor, I’m liberated to make Jesus’s name famous rather than my own.

**ENDNOTES**

1 This article originally appeared at DesiringGod.org. Used by permission.
"Adoption is greater than the universe."

So says John Piper, and as sweeping as the statement may sound, it is absolutely true. Because the eternal communion of our triune God is behind, beneath, beside, and above the universe and is the ultimate reason and cause for our adoption.

THE LOVE STORY OF THE UNIVERSE

The eternal story of the infinite reciprocal love that the three Persons of the Trinity share with each other sheds the light of the Son on the immense size of our adoption. Pastor and author Gerrit Dawson captures just how this adoption envelopes the universe and empowers its inhabitants.

The universe came to be as part of the eternal love story of the Father and the Son. Before the worlds began to be, the Father loved his Son and the Son loved the Father. In a mystery beyond description, this love occurred in the ‘bonds’ of the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity was the personal glue, the love (as Augustine said) that ever flowed within the triune being. Indeed, all things were made out of the overflow of this love between the Father and the Son in the Spirit.

More simply put, the universe came into being out of a great love story. In the virgin’s womb, this love touched down in the midst of our darkened, broken world. The incarnate God showed his sacred face in the infant Jesus so that we could now enter this love. He tasted the sorrow of this world so that we might be taken into the joy of the eternal love of the Father and the Son. (The Blessing Life: A Journey to Unexpected Joy, 92–93)

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

The eternal Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — existed forever in the communion of love before time began. But when the three Persons of the Trinity created the heavens and the earth, the story of the Trinity broke into human history and changed everything.

It became the story behind the story of creation and of God’s gracious mission in the world to expand his family by billions of children through his work of adoption. Suddenly, adoption has become infinitely greater than the universe itself for that reason alone.

THE WORD THAT ENVELOPS AND EMPOWERS

It’s this Story, the reality that changes everything. It
envelops the universe, dwarves it, in fact; but not only does it envelop the universe, it also empowers its inhabitants to participate within the mission of God.

And herein lies the problem. As T.F. Torrance understands it, “This is our trouble. Our minds are so taken up with mechanical and electrical and atomic power that we are apt to imagine that God’s power is of the same sort, and that God’s power operates in the same way” (The Apocalypse Today, 40). We seem to forget that God’s power in creation and redemption is exercised by his word — and his word is a superior power for by it all things were and are created and by it all things are upheld (John 1:1–3; Hebrews 1:1–3).

**HOW THE WORD EMPOWERS**

When Christians are unsure of the Father’s declarative word of delight over them, real Christian joy is absent; and passionate Christian living is lacking. Mobilizing Christians who are unsure of God’s delight in them to care for orphans over the long haul or to serve orphans (James 1:27) with unflappable confidence and joy is nearly impossible. But when Jesus was launching into his public ministry, his Father spoke this word over him: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). As Scripture makes clear, Jesus had been sent to fulfill the Father’s mission to redeem humanity and renew creation — which includes the removal of the word “orphan” from the human vocabulary. The Gospel writers tell us that the Father’s Son went forward with the mission of his Father in the strength and knowledge of his Father’s delight (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). Yes, the power of the Father’s word in that moment possessed the power to create a thousand worlds. But even more remarkable, it was a word that secured the unfathomable renewal of the heavens and the earth for the Father’s children. If the word “you are my beloved Son” was not spoken while Jesus was standing in the waters of the Jordan, the possibility of a renewed creation would have been less than a mere figment of our imagination. It would have been an inept ‘word of promise.”

**WHAT’S THIS HAVE TO DO WITH US?**

Dr. C.F.W. Walther, a pastor who lived in the 1800’s, wrote, “Every Christian may apply to himself the declaration of God: ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!’” As God’s children, we not only have the privilege of participating in his mission to redeem and renew creation, but we also do so in the strength, knowledge, and all-powerful word of our Father’s delight.

Amazingly, adoption both envelops the universe (for our good and God’s glory, Ephesians 1:3–6) and unfailingly empowers its inhabitants to participate and enjoy God’s mission.

**ENDNOTES**

1 This article originally appeared at DesiringGod.org. Used by permission.
We are fast becoming a pornographic society. Over the course of the last decade, explicitly sexual images have crept into advertising, marketing, and virtually every niche of American life. This ambient pornography is now almost everywhere, from the local shopping mall to prime-time television.

By some estimations, the production and sale of explicit pornography now represents the seventh-largest industry in America. New videos and internet pages are produced each week, with the digital revolution bringing a host of new delivery systems. Every new digital platform becomes a marketing opportunity for the pornography industry.

To no one’s surprise, the vast majority of those who consume pornography are males. It is no trade secret that males are highly stimulated by visual images, whether still or video. That is not a new development, as ancient forms of pornography attest. What is new is all about access. Today’s men and boys are not looking at line pictures drawn on cave walls. They have almost instant access to countless forms of pornography in a myriad of formats.

But, even as technology has brought new avenues for the transmission of pornography, modern research also brings a new understanding of how pornography works in the male brain. While this research does nothing to reduce the moral culpability of males who consume pornography, it does help to explain how the habit becomes so addictive.

As William M. Struthers of Wheaton College explains, “Men seem to be wired in such a way that pornography hijacks the proper functioning of their brains and has a long-lasting effect on their thoughts and lives.”

Struthers is a psychologist with a background in neuroscience and a teaching concentration in the biological bases of human behavior. In *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*, Struthers presents key insights from neuroscience that go a long way toward explaining why pornography is such a temptation for the male mind.

“The simplest explanation for why men view pornography (or solicit prostitutes) is that they are driven to seek out sexual intimacy,” he explains. The urge for sexual intimacy is God-given and essential to the male, he acknowledges, but it is easily misdirected. Men are tempted to seek “a shortcut to sexual pleasure via pornography,” and now find this shortcut easily accessed.

In a fallen world, pornography becomes more than a distraction and a distortion of God’s intention for
human sexuality. It comes as an addictive poison. Struthers explains:

Viewing pornography is not an emotionally or physiologically neutral experience. It is fundamentally different from looking at black and white photos of the Lincoln Memorial or taking in a color map of the provinces of Canada. Men are reflexively drawn to the content of pornographic material. As such, pornography has wide-reaching effects to energize a man toward intimacy. It is not a neutral stimulus. It draws us in. Porn is vicarious and voyeuristic at its core, but it is also something more. Porn is a whispered promise. It promises more sex, better sex, endless sex, sex on demand, more intense orgasms, experiences of transcendence.

Pornography “acts as a polydrug,” Struthers explains. As Dr. Patrick Carnes asserts, pornography is “a pathological relationship with a mood-altering experience.” Boredom and curiosity lead many boys and men into experiences that become more like drug addiction than is often admitted.

Why men rather than women? As Struthers explains, the male and female brains are wired differently. “A man’s brain is a sexual mosaic influenced by hormone levels in the womb and in puberty and molded by his psychological experience.” Over time, exposure to pornography takes a man or boy deeper along “a one-way neurological superhighway where a man’s mental life is over-sexualized and narrowed. This superhighway has countless on-ramps but very few off-ramps.

Pornography is “visually magnetic” to the male brain. Struthers presents a fascinating review of the neurobiology involved, with pleasure hormones becoming linked to and released by the experience of a male viewing pornographic images. These experiences with pornography and pleasure hormones create new patterns in the brain’s wiring, and repeated experiences formalize the rewiring.

And then, enough is never enough. “If I take the same dose of a drug over and over and my body begins to tolerate it, I will need to take a higher dose of the drug in order for it to have the same effect that it did with a lower dose the first time,” Struthers reminds us. So, the experience of viewing pornography and acting out on it creates a demand in the brain for more and more, just to achieve the same level of pleasure in the brain.

While men are stimulated by the ambient sexual images around them, explicit pornography increases the effect. Struthers compares this to the difference between traditional television and the new high definition technologies. Everything is more clear, more explicit, and more stimulating.

Struthers explains this with compelling force:

Something about pornography pulls and pushes at the male soul. The pull is easy to identify. The naked female form can be hypnotizing. A woman’s willingness to participate in a sexual act or expose her nakedness is alluring to men. The awareness of one’s own sexuality, the longing to know, to experience something as good wells up from deep within. An image begins to pick up steam the longer we look upon it. It gains momentum and can reach a point where it feels like a tractor-trailer rolling downhill with no brakes.

*Wired for Intimacy* is a timely and important book. Struthers offers keen and strategic insights from neurobiology and psychology. But what makes this book truly helpful is the fact that Struthers neither leaves his argument to neuroscience, nor does he use the category of addiction to mitigate the sinfulness of viewing pornography.

Sinners naturally look for fig leaves to hide sin, and biological causation is often cited as a means of avoiding moral responsibility. Struthers does not allow this, and his view of pornography is both biblical and theologically grounded. He lays responsibility for the sin of viewing pornography at the feet of those who willingly consume explicit images. He knows his audience—after all, his classrooms are filled with young male college students. The addict is responsible for his addiction.

At the same time, any understanding of how sin works its deceitful evil is a help to us, and understanding how pornography works in the male mind is a powerful knowledge. Pornography is a sin that robs God of his glory in the gift of sex and sexuality. We have long known that sin takes hostages. We now know another dimension of how this particular sin hijacks the male brain. Knowledge, as they say, is power.

**ENDNOTES**

1 This article originally appeared at AlbertMohler.com. Used by permission.
The new narcotic. Morgan Bennett just published an article by this title. The thesis: Neurological research has revealed that the effect of internet pornography on the human brain is just as potent — if not more so — than addictive chemical substances such as cocaine or heroin.

To make matters worse, there are 1.9 million cocaine users, and 2 million heroin users, in the United States compared to 40 million regular users of online pornography.

Here’s why the addictive power of pornography can be worse:

Cocaine is considered a stimulant that increases dopamine levels in the brain. Dopamine is the primary neurotransmitter that most addictive substances release, as it causes a “high” and a subsequent craving for a repetition of the high, rather than a subsequent feeling of satisfaction by way of endorphins.

Heroin, on the other hand, is an opiate, which has a relaxing effect. Both drugs trigger chemical tolerance, which requires higher quantities of the drug to be used each time to achieve the same intensity of effect.

Pornography, by both arousing (the “high” effect via dopamine) and causing an orgasm (the “release” effect via opiates), is a type of polydrug that triggers both types of addictive brain chemicals in one punch, enhancing its addictive propensity.

But, Bennett says, “internet pornography does more than just spike the level of dopamine in the brain for a pleasure sensation. It literally changes the physical matter within the brain so that new neurological pathways require pornographic material in order to trigger the desired reward sensation.”

Think of the brain as a forest where trails are worn down by hikers who walk along the same path over and over again, day after day. The exposure to pornographic images creates similar neural pathways that, over time, become more and more “well-paved” as they are repeatedly traveled with each exposure to pornography. Those neurological pathways eventually become the trail in the brain’s forest by which sexual interactions are routed. Thus, a pornography user has “unknowingly created a neurological circuit” that makes his or her default perspective toward sexual matters ruled by the norms and expectations of pornography.

Not only do these addictive pathways cause us to filter all sexual stimulation through the pornographic fil-
ter; they awaken craving for “more novel pornographic content like more taboo sexual acts, child pornography, or sadomasochistic pornography.”

And it gets worse:

Another aspect of pornography addiction that surpasses the addictive and harmful characteristics of chemical substance abuse is its permanence. While substances can be metabolized out of the body, pornographic images cannot be metabolized out of the brain because pornographic images are stored in the brain’s memory.

“In sum,” Bennett writes, “brain research confirms the critical fact that pornography is a drug delivery system that has a distinct and powerful effect upon the human brain and nervous system.”

None of this takes God by surprise. He designed the interplay between the brain and the soul. Discoveries of physical dimensions to spiritual reality do not nullify spiritual reality.

When Jesus said, “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28), he saw with crystal clarity — the way a designer sees his invention — that the physical eye had profound effects on the spiritual “heart.”

And when the Old Testament wise man said in Proverbs 23:7, literally, “As he thinks in his soul, so is he,” he saw with similar clarity that soul acts create being. Thinking in the soul corresponds to “is.” And this “is” includes the body.

In other words, it goes both ways. Physical reality affects the heart. And the heart affects physical reality (the brain). Therefore, this horrific news from brain research about the enslaving power of pornography is not the last word. God has the last word. The Holy Spirit has the greatest power. We are not mere victims of our eyes and our brains. I know this both from Scripture and from experience.