

A Short Guide To

FAITHFUL PARENTING



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Introduction

I see you picked up this booklet on parenting. So, why'd you do it? Are you a new parent looking for a quick introduction to raising kids? Maybe you've been parenting for some time, but you feel like you need a refresher. Perhaps your kids are parents themselves, and you want to give them some encouragement. Whatever the reason, I hope you'll read past this introduction, and be encouraged to parent faithfully.

A while back, my wife and I lived in Louisville, Kentucky. I was halfway through my seminary degree, studying one afternoon at home, when Deana delivered the news: she was pregnant with our first. Amazement and fear smacked me in the head like an errant hockey puck. In a few short months, if all went well, we'd have a baby to protect and provide for, to love and to lead.

I'll admit I was anxious, but I was also thankful. After all, the Bible says, "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them" (Psa. 127:4–5). To think God had begun the process of filling my quiver was pretty exciting, no matter how nervous I was.

None of us is ever ready for parenting. It doesn't matter how many tours of the hospital you take or how many classes on parenting you sit through. There is no way to be fully prepared for that feeling you get in your chest when the nurse rolls mom up to the car and tells you to buckle in your baby. I wanted to ask the nurse, "Are you sure you don't want to come home with us and help out for a few days?" But I knew it didn't work like that. So I thanked her, snapped the car seat in the back, made sure the straps were tight, and took Rachel home for the very first time.

My wife and I have also been blessed to become adoptive parents. It's been an amazing journey. Sometimes, God adds to your quiver in unexpected ways. There are definitely some unique challenges when adopting a child, but the basics of parenting are the same. If you have or plan to adopt, this booklet is for you too.

There is no such thing as a perfect parent, but we can be faithful. That's the key to raising your kids well. A good parent is faithful to feed his kids, to clothe them, to keep them warm and safe, and to point them to our gracious God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

That's really what this booklet is about: faithfulness. So whether you are an expecting, brand new, or experienced parent, I pray these words challenge you to be faithful. It's the only way we can parent without regret.

Parenting: The Basics

FIVE “MUSTS” FOR EVERY PARENT

When I was a young dad, I visited a small Baptist church where I’d been asked to lead a conference on evangelism. I got to know a deacon by the name of Bob. Bob is a large man with a very happy face and the gift of gab. As we talked between sessions, he inquired about my life and my family, and I probably showed him a picture of my two little kids. I appreciated his interest in my family. A few years prior, my wife and I joined a very young church. We were some of the oldest parents there, and we looked for parenting wisdom wherever we could find it. That day in May, I reached out to my new friend. “Bob, do you have any advice for me about parenting?”

Bob sure did. “More than anything,” he told me, “I want to be a predictable father. Be consistent.” I was sure that I had just struck parenting gold. Bob gave me the key ingredient of the secret sauce of faithful parenting: be consistent. Now all I needed to do was go home, tell Deana the good news, and we’d be all set. Perhaps we could even write a parenting book together.

Suffice it to say, this bit of sage counsel didn’t impress my wife. She rightly pointed out there isn’t much substance to it. After all, what if we are consistently *bad* parents. She appreciated Bob’s exhortation, but she wanted more.

As I write these words, we have four kids. Thankfully, over the years, we’ve learned a lot about parenting. We’ve been able to create some habits that are worth repeating. Don’t get me wrong—my wife and I have a long way to go. We don’t know everything about parenting and, frankly, we aren’t even as consistent as we should be. But, by God’s grace, we have taken to heart a few musts that we strive to live out in our home in our humble attempt to raise our children well.

As with all counsel, as Christians our touchstone of truth is Scripture. As you read what I'm calling, "Five Musts for Every Parent" be sure to ask yourself the question, "Does the Bible back up these imperatives?" If it does, I trust you will make every effort to put these musts into practice with your own family.

RECOGNIZE THAT CHILDREN ARE BORN WITH THE NEED FOR REDEEMING GRACE.

It is important for every believer to understand that sin isn't just something we did; it's who we were. Ever since our first parents rebelled against God in the Garden, each and every one of us is born with a rebellious nature. Through Adam's sin, we were all "made sinners"—we were born sinful (Rom. 5:19). Not only that, our sinful state has consequences. In Ephesians 2:3, Paul says we were "by nature children of wrath." This is not the narrative given to us by the culture. The world tells us we are all basically good. Clearly, Scripture disagrees. Jordan Kauflin in his hymn, "All I Have is Christ," puts it well:

*I once was lost in darkest night
Yet thought I knew the way
The sin that promised joy and life
Had led me to the grave
I had no hope that You would own
A rebel to Your will
And if You had not loved me first
I would refuse you still*

All of our children were born enemies of God (Rom. 3:10–11; Psa. 51:5). This truth dramatically changes our approach to parenting. Fundamentally, we need to see our children as sinners, born rebels against God and deserving of his wrath. What our kids need most of all is a new heart. They need God's love and grace to break into their lives and redeem them. Once redeemed, they are still sinners and need God's grace to increasingly transform them into the image of Christ "from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18).

When my first child was born, we let her watch the video *Baby Mozart*. Someone convinced us (and a few thousand other parents) that if our children watched colorful shapes floating around to the sound of classical music, they would be smarter than those kids raised by parents who deprived their children of such artistic wonder. The jury is still out, but I can hear the voice of the woman that started every episode with the words, “Our highest aspirations are reserved for our children.” As a dad, I know what she means. When you have a kid, you are concerned about his or her future even more than your own. Your highest aspirations are no longer reserved for yourself.

What aspirations do you have for your children? I think a lot of parents today are eager to see their kids graduate from the finest schools so that they can get the best jobs and support their own families. Academic and financial success is not a bad goal; we want our kids to do well. But if we care more about our children’s material well-being than their spiritual well-being, we have seriously underestimated the power and danger of sin. Sin is real and deadly, and it rules the hearts of the unredeemed. Earthly success won’t solve the sin problem. Therefore, our highest aspiration for our children must be their salvation.

If we recognize this, we will pray for our kids. If their problem is a rebellious heart, we will pray for redeeming grace. We can give our kids lots of things they need for this life: healthy food, a warm bed, and a shoulder to cry on. But we can’t give our kids what they need for the life-to-come. We can’t give them a new heart. We were born with hearts of stone, and we need God to give us hearts of flesh. This is the promise of Ezekiel 36:26: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

If this promise is real—and it is—faithful parents will pray for hearts of flesh. Pray like this: “Lord, I can’t give my child what he most needs, You! Please go to him, Lord. Give him a new heart. Give him life. Flood him with the redeeming grace that only You can send.” Do you believe your children are born with the need for redeeming grace?

CREATE A HOME WHERE THE WORD IS TREASURED AND TAUGHT.

Some of you may be ready to throw your hands up in the air and say, “If I can’t give my kids what they truly need, what good am I?” Don’t give up just yet. God has given parents real work to do. It is our job to create an environment in the home where the Word is cherished, treasured, and taught. God has ordained the end *and* the means. The end we pray for is their salvation. The means is the teaching of the Word. Though our children’s hearts are in the hands of the Lord, we have the real responsibility of speaking the life-giving Word of God to those hearts.

Remember Romans 10:13: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” We want our kids to call on the name of the Lord. But notice what else Paul says, in verse 17, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” For kids to call upon the name of the Lord, they need to hear the word of Christ. They should hear it from us regularly.

Timothy had saving faith. But do you recall who first taught him the Bible? Who taught him the Word of Christ? His grandmother, Lois, and mother, Eunice. Throughout the history of God’s people, the Lord has laid it in the laps of parents to pass along the truths of Scripture. Deuteronomy 6:6, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and 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.”

Sadly, many evangelical homes are spiritually starving for a lack of the Word of Christ. Is your home a place where the Word is treasured and taught? I believe there are a lot of moms and dads who want this to be true but are struggling.

What can you do if your home is not currently a place where the Word is regularly treasured and taught? First, get rid of those things that make it hard to treasure the Word. Minds overwhelmed by movies, television, and video games will be underwhelmed by the Word of

Christ. It is wise to set boundaries regarding screen time. If you don't, before you know, valuable time will be spent in the digital world that could be spent, together, looking at God's Word.

Second, make Scripture a natural part of everyday conversation. It should be normal in your home to talk about the Bible. We talk about what we care about: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45b). Share with your kids what you are reading and how you are being affected by the Bible. Dads should lead in this.

Third, carve out time for family Bible reading. You will be amazed to see how much kids love learning the Bible from mom and dad. Finally, husbands, pour the Word into your wives. Moms spend the most time with their kids. One way a husband can serve his children is by faithfully discipling his wife.

Is the Word of Christ treasured and taught in your home? If this hasn't been the pattern in your home, now is a great time to start. Even if your children are older, and you've never led in this way, be thankful you have a desire to begin. Apologize to your kids for the delay, and commit yourself afresh to creating a home where Christ is both treasured and taught.

DO THE HARD WORK OF DISCIPLINING YOUR CHILDREN.

Parents today have made parenting very complicated. We have books to read, conferences to attend, and the daily responsibility of getting to our children's heart. Long gone is the simple plan laid out by so many parents of a previous generation: "Go outside and try not to get hit by a car." This may not be the best counsel, but let's not overcomplicate parenting. A simple commitment to sound discipline will help you be a faithful mom or dad.

One of the most important duties you have as a parent is to discipline your child. In fact, it's your responsibility to expect and to enforce obedience. The key text is Hebrews 12:7-11:

7It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

The author of Hebrews is making the point that if you are truly a child of God, he disciplines you. He does this because he loves you, and he wants you to be holy. Look carefully at verse 11. The path to holiness is paved with “painful” discipline. God uses the pain, disappointment, and even the regret of everyday life to transform us into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. Discipline is more than good; it’s wonderful. “[I]t yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Amen.

Every good father disciplines his child (Heb. 12:7). Parents who truly love their children will discipline them. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” This is not a rock-solid guarantee that your discipline will lead to “the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” That’s in the hands of the Lord. But God regularly uses the faithful discipline of parents for the good of children.

The English pastor J. C. Ryle said we should train our children with tenderness and affection because they “are weak and tender and should be handled delicately.” Mom and dad, take this to heart. Too many parents have used the Bible as an excuse to abuse their children. Let this not be you. Handle your children with care. If you are prone to “fly of the handle” with your kids, seek out help. Don’t leave your children with memories of parents who didn’t know how to discipline with love and proper restraint.

Discipline must be done gently and compassionately, but it must be done. It is your duty, as a parent, to expect and enforce obedience. That's discipline.

How do we do it? I'd strongly encourage you to find some godly, more-experienced parents and ask them to walk you through what they did. Learn from them. Nonetheless, here are four tips you should keep in mind as you process how to appropriately discipline your kids.

First, decide where to draw the line. In other words, figure out what you expect from your children. Every family is different. Expectations change with the age of your kids. Constant conversations between mom and dad are needed. Let godly friends chime in. Some lines to enforce are obvious: "You don't hit other people." Some lines are not-so-obvious: "You can't have dessert unless you eat all your peas." Different parents may have different lines. There is room for disagreement. But each parent should carefully decide what will be encouraged and discouraged in the home.

Second, once you know where the line is, demand your children obey, and punish them when they disobey. In other words, expect and enforce obedience. The worst thing you can do is teach your children that disobedience isn't costly. We've all given instructions and not followed through. But parents should strive to be consistent. Always be gentle and compassionate, but be firm. As my friend Deacon Bob made clear, kids thrive when they know what the expectations are. Children feel safe when they know the expectations will be enforced.

Third, realize that this kind of discipline is hard work. As parents, we need to be working on discipline as long as our kids are awake. It's going to be tiring and strenuous, especially when the kids are very young. It's easy to yell at your kids, but hard to calmly, patiently, and lovingly discipline them. Nonetheless, do the hard work of helping your children understand how they disobeyed. Gently punish them for disobeying. Then carefully restore them into a right relationship with you by explaining they've been forgiven, hugging them, and reassuring them of your love.

Why is all this so important? Because God gives parents to children for their protection and prosperity. Your commands are for their good. You discipline them because you want to see them succeed and flourish.

Even more importantly, children who understand what it means to obey a parent are beginning to understand what it means to obey God. Believe it or not, when you discipline well, you are clarifying the gospel in your child's mind. They begun to understand not only that God is a God of wrath, but that he is a God of grace, too. He loves to forgive. He demands obedience but is eager for reconciliation. If your words are weighty in their lives, they can begin to see how weighty God's Word should be in their lives, too

Don't forget that discipline is an opportunity to share the gospel. Communicate points like this:

- We all disobey.
- We all deserve punishment.
- Sin has consequences.
- We all need Jesus.
- Only he can take away our sin. Only he can bear our punishment.
- God loves to forgive.

Every time you discipline your child, you have the chance to help them see that disobedience is costly, and that's why we all need a Savior. Do you discipline your children?

Fourth, set a good example for your children to follow. I want to give my kids an example worth following. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." He noted in 2 Timothy 3:10, "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings." Examples are hugely valuable.

It's important that I live in such a way that my kids can follow my words and my life. Ryle said, "To give children good instruction, and a bad example, is but beckoning to them with the head to show them the way to heaven, while we take them by the hand and lead them in the way to hell." These are serious words. What kind of example are you

setting for your children? Do they see you treasuring the Word of God? Do they see you evangelizing your neighbors? Do they see you loving the local church? Don't underestimate the importance of a godly example. In his book, *Faith That Lasts*, John Neilson makes the excellent point that an example is worth a thousand words:

It may indeed be helpful and powerful for a father to read the Bible to the family after dinner; however, I would argue that it can be even more powerful—in the way of modeling for children—to wake up early in the morning to find their father bent over his Bible, or spending a few quiet minutes in prayer before beginning his day.

Dads and moms, do your kids ever see you “bent over” your Bible? Of course, your whole life should be a pattern worth imitating. Obviously, our kids won't see perfection in any of us. Only Christ is perfect. But they don't need to witness perfection in us; they need to see humility and repentance. Show them what to do when someone falls short. Give them memories of humility and faith in action.

Once, when I was preparing a sermon on parenting, I asked my kids, “Do you remember a time when I said I'm sorry?” They couldn't remember a particular instance, but they did remember it happening. I asked them how they felt hearing me say, “I'm sorry.” Some said they were relieved to know they weren't in the wrong. All of them said that my sin had made them angry. By being short with them, raising my voice, and wrongly accusing them, I disobeyed Ephesians 6:4. I provoked my kids to anger. It's important that I practice self-control. I should never lose my patience with my kids. But it is just as important that I apologize to them when I do. They need to observe holiness at work in humility.

If you think your example is unimportant, think again. A friend of mine, who is now a pastor, told me about the way the Lord used his grandfather to save him. Let this be an encouragement to you, whether you are a mom or dad, grandmother or grandfather, uncle, aunt, or friend. Children are watching you, and your example may very well be part of the puzzle used by the Lord to lead them to saving faith.

My grandfather was a faithful Christian whose main goal in life was to raise a family that believed in and lived for Christ. I observed him attend church faithfully, teach Sunday School every week, and lead his church as a deacon. In addition to this, I saw him establish relationships in his community for evangelism and once witnessed him not charge an elderly woman for four new tires. He constantly spoke about the gospel. All four grandchildren rebelled and ignored his counsel, including me. A letter he wrote to me in my early high school days, but ignored and forgot about until I was in college, was a key instrument God used to bring me back to himself. The letter pointed me to Christ and explained to me what true wisdom from Christ looks like and how sin would destroy me. This letter spoke truth into my life and helped me to see my sin and need for Christ. It had a great effectiveness because it matched his life.

Do you set a good example for your children?

MAKE CHRIST, NOT YOUR CHILDREN, YOUR LIFE.

Do you remember that rich young man from Mark 10? Jesus said he had to leave what he valued most. He wouldn't. Then Peter pointed out, perhaps with some pride, that *he* had left everything behind to follow him. Jesus didn't correct Peter. He was right, we must leave all behind: homes, mother, father, brothers, sisters, and children (Mark 10:29). We leave it all behind because to be a Christian is to care more about Jesus than anything.

This takes us to the heart of the gospel. When God came into the world, he left honor behind, took upon himself human flesh, and then went to a cross where he died in the place of sinners like us. You could say that Jesus left everything behind to save us. He loved his Father, and he loved us more than his own life. If we are going to follow him, we have to love him more than anything too.

We can't parent well without this gospel. The best parents make Christ, not children, their life. If you make your children your life, you may be too indulgent—spoiling them all the time and never saying “no” to them. Why? Because you've made an idol out of your kids' approval. You care more about what your kids think of you than about what's best for them.

Still others who make their children their life, will be too strict—constantly pushing them to do better. Why? Because you've made an idol out of their success. You care more about what your children do than who they are. You care more about their performance than their heart. Either way, you are following your kids, not Jesus. You've made your kids your life, not Christ.

Most of us have made some serious parenting mistakes, mistakes you can't really fix. But there is hope. The gospel is bigger than your parenting sins. If Christ is your life, you can rest in him even in the midst of failed parenting. Take your sins, even your parenting-sins to Christ, ask for his forgiveness, and pray for him to be at work in the lives of your kids.

It is a real privilege to be at a church with so many children and to be able to share life with so many brothers and sisters working so hard to be godly parents. Take these “musts” to heart, and don't worry. God has given everything you need in his Word and Spirit to equip you to be a parent after his own heart.

Parenting: The Church

What's the most important piece of furniture in your house? Is it the end table? Probably not, though it is a nice place to put a lamp. What about the loveseat? Again, this is a great piece of furniture, and a fine place to relax, but if you could keep just one piece of furniture, it wouldn't be this. In my home, the dining room table gets center stage. This is where meals, Bible studies, and games take place. Our family probably spends the most time around that table. You might say my family life is organized around that particular piece of furniture.

If the church were a piece of furniture, how would it rank in your spiritual life? Is it more like an end table or the dining room table? Is the church merely helpful in your life, or do you actually seek to organize your life around the church? As we think about parenting, this is a vital question to consider.

I'm convinced that the local church is central to my role as a husband and father. The local church is where I'm spiritually fed, so I can walk with the Lord. The local church is where I'm held accountable, so I won't fall away from the Lord. The local church is where I'm encouraged through times of trial and distress to persevere with the Lord. The fact of the matter is I can't think of parenting or anything else in my life without reference to the local church.

Sadly, many Christians do not think rightly about how the church relates to their parenting. Some parents outsource the evangelism and discipleship of their children to the church. They shirk their biblical responsibility to be the primary spiritual influence in the lives of their children. Still other parents make no real attempt to involve their children in the life of the church. They neglect the great gift a church body can be to their family.

Parenting is hard work, but God designed that labor to take place in the context of a gospel-centered congregation. One of the most important ways a church can be involved in parents' lives is by

equipping parents to lead their children well. The most important thing the body of Christ can do to serve parents is to help them see the importance of taking the lead in providing spiritual formation for their kids.

Back to the furniture: If the church is just an end table in your life, what you're about to read won't make much sense to you. But if the church is central to your life, you will be very interested in the question, "How can I parent in light of the church?" I want to draw your attention to that particular question and offer four answers.

PARENTS SHOULD BE THE PRIMARY SPIRITUAL CAREGIVERS FOR THEIR CHILDREN.

It would be better to say parents *are* the primary spiritual caregivers for their kids. After all, they'll spend maybe two–three hours at church each week but at least 50 hours at home—most of those hours with a parent. So whether a mom or dad gives good or bad spiritual counsel, they are the ones primarily guiding their children.

Parents should embrace this fact and make every effort to pour gospel truth into the heads and hearts of their kids. We should not leave it merely to the church to spiritually educate our children. Unfortunately, this idea is counterintuitive to modern minds. We live in a culture that outsources everything. Most all of us live in houses we didn't build, eat food we didn't grow, and wear clothes we didn't make. Thus it seems natural for many parents to outsource the evangelism and discipleship of their kids. But that's not the way it's supposed to be.

The pattern we find in Scripture is one of parents caring for the souls of their children. Moses exhorted parents to teach their children the Word of God, "when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6:4). Clearly all of life was to be given over to helping children make much of the Lord.

Paul singled out dads when he told them to bring up their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Fathers have a special responsibility to be sure their families are growing in the

wisdom and knowledge of God. Parents clearly have a sobering, sacred responsibility to influence their children spiritually in the home.

What role does the church play in this? We want to do everything we can as a church to recognize the responsibility of parents, and we want to do all we can to equip parents to faithfully raise their children. This includes providing quality teaching from the pulpit, excellent resources in the bookstall, and age-appropriate studies parents can talk about with their kids.

I know that some kids don't have parents who care about God or the church. I was like that. When I was in high school and started going to church, my parents weren't interested. I went by myself. I couldn't rely on my parents to teach me about Jesus. Thankfully, God was at work in my life. As a church, we want to be sensitive to those children whose parents, for whatever reason, don't want to be involved in their children's spiritual lives.

But for those parents who *do* take an interest, they need to embrace the God-given responsibility to shepherd their children. What are some practical implications for those parents who see this already?

First, pray for God's help in this gargantuan task. If you are overwhelmed, that's a good place to start. Be humble and dependent upon the Lord. God will give you the wisdom and strength you need to lead your child. Plead with him daily for help.

Second, take a spiritual inventory of your family's spiritual health. Moms and dads, devote some time to working through the following questions: How is the Word central in the life of our family? How is the church central in the life of our family? How are our kids growing in their knowledge of the Lord? How can we do a better job of pointing our kids to the gospel every day?

Third, take advantage of the teaching of the church. Every Sunday and Wednesday, there are opportunities to grow as a parent. Here are a few ideas:

- Use your Sunday School handouts as a guide to lead your family through a book of the Bible.
- Go over application from a morning sermon to lead your family to think more about Scripture.
- Incorporate the “Bringing the Sermon Home” section of our weekly email to revisit the sermon with your kids.
- Take advantage of special classes on parenting or evangelism or discipleship.
- Drop by the bookstall and see what books are on sale for parents.
- Check out the Children’s Ministry Library. One of the best ways we serve kids is by encouraging parents to be godly adults.

In a sense, you could think of the church as a parenting program! Every week there are new ways to expose your children to the Word of God and to help them apply the Word of God to the nitty-gritty details of their lives. As a church, we aim to partner with parents to teach, befriend, evangelize and, Lord willing, disciple our kids. Use what is already being taught to become a better parent.

Fourth, seek help from brothers and sisters further along the parenting path. Take advantage of the fact that you are surrounded by new parents and empty-nesters, grandparents and even great-grandparents. Find parents you respect and ask them questions. Talk to them about your struggles, and pursue godly counsel.

I’m trying to impress upon you the importance of seeing yourself as the primary, spiritual caregiver for your child. In many ways, I’m swimming against the stream as I make this point. Over the past two or three decades pastors have sought to make churches fun places for kids. They have invested hundreds of millions of dollars renovating their children’s halls to resemble Disneyland. The motive is good: they are eager to help kids want to be at church. This may work for a few years—what child doesn’t want to be in a place that looks like the Magic Kingdom? But as time goes on, kids will see through the glitter and look for the substance.

If you want to make a life-long impact on your kids, take ownership of their spiritual formation. Take time to walk them through the Bible at

home, in the car, and along the way. Remember, you really are your child's primary spiritual caregiver.

PARENTS SHOULD PLACE THEIR CHILDREN IN THE REGULAR FLOW OF A LOCAL CHURCH.

One of the most helpful things a parent can do to encourage spiritual growth in a child is to make sure that child is folded into the life of a church. This means time with kids and adults, time gathering with peers, and time gathering with parents. God has designed the church to be multi-generational and that means the generations need to mix.

Many Christians today grew up in churches with a "segmented" ministry, where people were divided up by age and stage of life. This meant the children were in one room, youth in another, singles in one class, young marrieds next door, and so on. It's easy to assume it's always been this way.

But it hasn't. This kind of segmented ministry is a relatively recent phenomenon. What we call "Sunday School" began in the nineteenth century as a noble attempt to provide education to wayward youth. Faithful adults wanted to get kids from non-Christian families to church, so they offered "school" on Sunday. That has morphed into the children's Sunday School classes we still have today.

But the rise of youth ministry goes back only to the mid-twentieth century. Historian Thomas E. Bergler explains just how this happened. Between 1930 and 1950, parents grew increasingly afraid that the crises of the twentieth century would topple the faith of their kids. They asked, "Where is God in the midst of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War?" These thoughtful parents went on the offensive. They began to market the church to teenagers. The goal was to fill churches with young people. For the first time in human history, entertainment was seen as a legitimate way to draw youth to church. As a result, youth were taken out of the regular flow of the church's life and kept together for their own classes and services. Segmented ministry was born.

It's a ministry that persists today. Bergler argues that the cost of this shift was high. Instead of helping adolescents mature into spiritual adults, it ended up making adults who were spiritual adolescents.

We should not discard everything associated with segmented ministry. It's helpful to have Sunday School classes for kids and youth. As I type these words, we are making plans for the youth to go on an overnight retreat to think together about the attributes of God. Age-appropriate teaching can be a special part of the church's life. Moreover, we want to create an environment where, in such a fragmented society, children and youth can meet, talk about the gospel, and become friends.

However, the local church must be intergenerational. The lives of the old and the young should overlap. We find ways to fold our children into the regular flow of church life. How does this desire affect our parenting at MVBC?

We want quality, gospel-centered, age-appropriate teaching for children and youth. We have Sunday School for kids and youth, and on Wednesdays, we usually have special classes. It's wise to raise up godly teachers who can reinforce what mom and dad are teaching at home. These classes are also good ways to welcome kids from non-Christian families.

We want parents to learn and worship and serve with their children. When your children are old enough, it is valuable to give them opportunities to see you engaged in Bible study and corporate worship. They can see you asking questions, singing hymns, and even praying on Sunday evening. And throughout the week, your kids have a front-row seat to your spiritual life. They get to see you being hospitable and evangelizing. No one has a greater influence on your child than you. Jesus said that a student, when fully trained, will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). How much more will a child, when fully grown, be like his parent?

We want children to see other godly adults. When kids are part of the regular flow of the church, they get to see God at work in the lives of adults. David Kinnamen, in *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are*

Leaving the Church, says one of the worst things we can do is relegate our youth to a large-group meeting. We should strategize to provide opportunities for them to spend time with godly adults. Kinnamen put it this way: “It is much easier to put on events for large groups of kids than it is to mentor each and every one of them into a mature and holistic walk with God. If our churches are too big to provide that level of life-on-life focus, can we grow the next generation of Jesus’s disciples?”

If our kids are part of the regular flow of the church’s life, you’ll see them. Please don’t ignore the kids when they walk by. Ask them their names. Get to know them. Ask what they’ve been learning. Take an interest. They’ll know you care, and that’s important.

PARENTS AND CHURCHES SHOULD EXERCISE CAUTION BEFORE ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TOWARD BAPTISM AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

A godly parent should long for the day his child is baptized into the membership of a local church. Baptism does not save, but it’s a meaningful event. It’s a church’s public affirmation of an individual’s profession of faith.

The Bible is clear that baptism is for believers. In Colossians 2:11–12, Paul links baptism and faith. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus says *disciples* are to be baptized. A disciple is someone who has been saved by God. Therefore, being a disciple is a prerequisite for baptism.

But other than asserting that baptism is for believers, the Bible gives little guidance regarding the appropriate *age* for baptism. We need to give this careful thought and attention. A couple passages of Scripture are helpful, and on the basis of texts like these, parents and churches should exercise caution before encouraging children toward baptism and church membership.

In Mark 4, we find the Parable of the Sower. Whenever the gospel is shared, gospel seed is sown. Lots of people hear the Word, and many respond immediately. But as time goes on, the world, the flesh, and the devil attack. As a result, some people decide that following Jesus just

isn't worth it; they fall away. As Jesus put it, "The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" (Mark 4:19). Again, some people respond immediately and positively when they hear the gospel, but they don't persevere because they didn't *truly* believe. They weren't genuinely saved.

So what's an implication of this parable? Jesus is telling us to be cautious before affirming a new profession of faith. God alone knows who is truly a Christian, but before we baptize, we need to test the evidence. The evidence we should be looking for is fruit that lasts.

In Mark 10, the disciples rebuke parents for bringing their kids to be held by Jesus. But Jesus rebukes the disciples, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it," (Mark 10:14-15).

Some use this passage to defend the baptism of babies or of very young children. But I think the opposite point is being made. Notice to whom Jesus is speaking. He is speaking to adults, to his disciples. And notice what he is commending. He is commending child-like faith. "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God *like a child* shall not enter it." The point here is not that children receive the kingdom of God, but that those who do receive the kingdom have faith "like a child." Jesus is talking to adults and telling them to be like children.

That begs the question, what are children like? The answer is simple: they tend to believe their parents. Generally speaking, they trust mom and dad. If mom says Santa Claus is coming, they ask, "When?"

Jesus knows this, and in Mark 10 he takes the presence of these children as an opportunity to teach the disciples what their attitude toward the kingdom of God should be like. Their faith, their trust should be child-like. Jesus is not telling us to check our brains at the door. He is saying, *Trust the King. Even when all your questions cannot be answered, trust the King.*

So, Mark 10 isn't about baptism at all. However, it's teaching should caution us against baptizing our children too young. We should wait until our children are able to naturally think independently of their parents.

One survey about baptisms performed in Southern Baptist churches reported nearly half of the baptisms in the time-period studied were so-called "rebaptisms"—adults who had been baptized so young they weren't sure if they really understood what they were doing. They opted to be baptized again.

How does this happen? Clearly kids often have a hard time discerning between the faith of their parents and their own faith. This isn't true for all kids, but it is true for many. In most cases, the older a child gets, the easier it is for him or her to naturally perceive the difference between being baptized out of peer pressure or to please a parent, and being baptized out of obedience to the Lord. The survey calls into question the validity of so many child baptisms.

But this raises a very practical question: When should we encourage our children who profess faith toward baptism, membership, and the Lord's Supper? On the basis of the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4, it would be wise to hold off until the child has a track record of resisting the world, the flesh, and the devil. And on the basis of Mark 10, we should encourage baptism when they have learned to think independently of mom and dad.

However, this still doesn't fully answer the question. How long does the track record need to be? When do kids think independently? In short, what age should our children be before we encourage baptism?

Scripture is silent on the issue, so I can't give a fixed age. However, my encouragement to you is to hold off at least until your kids are in their mid-to-late teenage years and are turning into young adults. This allows the time for both testing and independent thought—two things we want to see in every disciple.

I've been talking to parents about this question for many years. They have a lot of questions about practically how to lead their children in discussions about salvation. So here is how I would encourage you to lead your children toward baptism:

First, teach and model the gospel daily. Never take your influence for granted. Your model won't save your children. Only God saves. But what you say and how you live matters. The best Sunday School class and the most engaging summer camp are no substitute for the faithful words and witness of a Christian parent.

Tell your kids they need salvation. Pastor Jonathan Edwards recorded a conversation he had with one of his sons. A friend of his son's had died recently, and Edwards took that death as an opportunity to point his son to Christ. The famous American pastor reminded him that he, too, would one day die. Then Edwards exhorted his son that he was old enough to put his faith in Christ. Putting off baptism does not mean putting off evangelism. Tell your kids they need Christ. Assure them that God saves sinners of every age.

Call your children to repentance and faith daily. I often hear of parents or teachers urging children to "make a decision" or "pray a prayer." Once their kids have done that, the adults often back off, resting in the fact that the child decided to follow Jesus, and assuming that this decision is a guarantee of that child's salvation. The kids have "closed the deal," so-to-speak. There is, however, a better way. Though it is fine to encourage children to make a decision to follow Jesus, beware of emphasizing the significance of a one-time decision. This tempts children to base the assurance of their salvation on that decision and not on the cross.

For this reason, I avoid the one-time, "sinners' prayer" with my kids and, instead, I call them to repentance and faith daily. As I pray with my kids, I'll almost always say something like, *Dear Lord, thank you for my daughter. Thank you for making her and putting her in a Christian home. Father, I pray that today she would repent and believe the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.* This is a daily prayer in my household, a prayer that they would turn from sin, turn to Christ, and trust in Him

continually for salvation. My wife and I discuss these ideas regularly with our kids to try to see what the Lord may be doing in their hearts.

My goal is to teach them not only that they must repent and believe to become a Christian, but that repentance and faith are a daily part of being a Christian.

Clarify the marks of a true believer. Make sure your kids know what a Christian looks like. A Christian is convicted of sin. A Christian believes Jesus is Savior and Lord. A Christian loves God and neighbor. A Christian pursues holiness. We want our kids growing up with the knowledge that though we are saved by faith alone, saving faith is never alone; good works always accompany it. A careful reading of 1 John is very helpful here.

Lead them in the spiritual disciplines. Sometimes, I'll hear parents wondering if they should lead their kids to pray and read the Bible if they aren't sure they're Christians. Absolutely! One of the privileges of growing up in a Christian home is having parents who can direct you to meet God through the Word and prayer. Yes, by all means, exhort your kids to pursue the Lord this way. These are the means God uses to save us.

Encourage them when you see what appear to be signs of spiritual fruit. You don't want to give your children the sense that you are constantly skeptical God is at work in them. It's one thing to be slow to pursue baptism. But it is another thing to discourage them when there are signs of the Spirit's work in their lives. Be careful not to assume they are a Christian, but don't assume they aren't.

Explain that baptism, membership, and the Lord's Supper are best reserved for those approaching adulthood. Kids understand that there are things they have to wait for: college, a driver's permit, the right to vote. Many parents aren't yet old enough to run for a Senate seat or be president of the United States. It's normal in life to wait for things. It will not shock kids to be told they need to wait to be baptized.

I know that this is a very delicate issue for a lot of parents. We all desire to see our children take steps that show they love the Lord and want to follow him for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, many parents are afraid that if their kids don't follow Jesus in baptism early on, they never will. But this, of course, is not true! Baptism does not save; it is simply a sign of God's saving work. So we should encourage our kids to repent and believe the moment they can understand those words, but we should hold off on baptism and church membership until they are old enough to display a track-record of repentance and independent thought.

For all these reasons, we should be cautious about encouraging children toward baptism and membership. How should you encourage your child if he or she is old enough and ready to pursue baptism?

- Meet with him or her personally. Mom and dad should hear his story, ask her questions, and give him feedback and counsel. You are in a good position to tell your child if he is walking in the truth of the gospel.
- Encourage him or her to meet with an elder. Let a pastor into the picture. This is a wonderful opportunity to get some encouragement and direction from a leader in the church.
- Have your child attend the church's membership class. Every member of the church has real responsibilities. Baptism is the entrance into church membership. This is a great place to get a sense of what it looks like to follow Jesus in the context of a local church.
- Finally, when all this has been done, ask your child to setup a membership interview. This is an opportunity for a couple of elders to hear their testimony, ask some questions, and discern whether it's appropriate to recommend them for membership to the church as a whole.

Exercising caution does not mean discouraging kids who want to be baptized. What a joy it is to know your child desires baptism, membership, and the Lord's Supper. As a church, we want to come alongside you and your child and shepherd him or her through this process.

OUR FAILURES AS PARENTS SHOULD POINT US TO OUR HEAVENLY FATHER.

The topic of parenting can be a hard one for many of us. Not only might we be sad because we weren't or aren't the parents we want to be, but many of us are wounded because we didn't come from homes filled with love and peace and the gospel.

As a foster parent, I've heard stories that would make you sick about parents who abused, neglected, and abandoned their children. These are not good parents. We live in a world where parents fail. You may not be like these parents. You may be a really faithful parent. Still, you need to know, even the best parents fail their kids. All of us, at one point or another, have failed our kids.

Maybe you had really bad parents. It's important for you to understand that the most important family we can ever belong to is a spiritual family with God the Father seated at the head of the table. He is the giver of life, the sustainer of souls, the founder of joy. He turns our mourning into gladness; he lifts our sorrow. If you feel lost, or hurt, or abandoned, or neglected, or unloved, you can find a Father in him. All those who turn away from their sins and trust in Christ are given God as a Father, and he will never let you down.

If you are a parent now, the best thing you can do is point your kids to a heavenly Father. Not long before Jonathan Edwards died, he wrote a letter to his children, pointing them to a better Dad:

You are now to be left fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you to seek a father who will never fail you.

That's the best parenting counsel I know to give. We will all fail our kids. The best thing we can do as parents and as a church is point each other—kids included—to a heavenly Father.

If you are a mom or dad, God has given you a special gift in your children. Be grateful, and do everything you can to point those kids to Christ. But even if you aren't a parent, you get to be part of the church

of the living God. He has given you brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and children to love and serve in this body. Don't take those relationships for granted.

Join me in the great task of being a church that equips parents to raise their children well and takes every opportunity to make the gospel known to young and old alike.

Conclusion

Faithfulness. That's what this booklet is all about. At the end of your life, you want your kids to be able to say that for all your faults, you were a faithful parent. In these pages, I've encouraged you to take the spiritual state of your kids seriously, to teach and model the gospel consistently, and to discipline your children for their good and God's glory. In a world where so many parents outsource the spiritual instruction of their kids to the church, I've argued that parents are called by God to be their children's primary spiritual caregivers. The church exists to partner with parents.

Part of the reason for this little booklet is to say you aren't alone. The church is full of people eager to share the burden of parenting with you. If you are confused about what to do or discouraged about what you are doing, please know the body of Christ is God's gift to you. We want to come alongside you and aid you in the wonderful work of raising the next generation.

This booklet is small. Thankfully, there is much more reading you can do that may help you grow as a faithful parent. Here are just a few ideas:

Martha Peace and Stuart Scott, *The Faithful Parent: A Biblical Guide to Raising a Family*. Peace and Scott drive home the point that God expects faithfulness, not perfection in parenting. This is a very full and very practical resource.

J. C. Ryle, *The Duties of Parents*. Many of the ideas I've given you in this booklet are wonderfully presented by this faithful pastor.

Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* and *Instructing a Child's Heart*. Tripp has helped numerous parents think carefully about leading kids to think about sin and, in turn, the Savior.

Joel Beeke, *Family Worship* and *The Family at Church*. These short books urge parents to think about bring biblical instruction to them and about bringing kids to the gathered church.

Paul Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*. When kids get older many things get easier, but some get harder. Tripp has written a call to parent teenagers well.

Dan Cruver, ed., *Reclaiming Adoption*. If you are an adoptive parent or are thinking about adopting, this collection of essay will help you see how the gospel is unusually on display in the adoption of orphaned children.

Appendix

PARENTING IN THE PEW

Edited by Kyle Gross

Special thanks to Carolyn Roberts and Deana Menikoff (Mount Vernon Baptist Church). Deepak Reju “10 ways to Make the Sermon Much Less Boring” (Capitol Hill Baptist Church). “8 Tips for helping Your Child Worship” (Children Desiring God).

At Mount Vernon, we welcome and encourage children to participate in our Sunday morning and evening services. We love having kids in the worship service. This guide is intended to help you understand why we encourage children to participate in the worship service with their parents and to provide you with guidance as you seek to train your children to participate and engage with you each Sunday.

WHY PARENTING IN THE PEW?

“So that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.” – Psalm 78:7

- It trains our children to do the most important thing they are called to do—to worship God!
- It teaches our children discipline. Sitting still and listening attentively for over an hour is a discipline!
- It allows our children to soak in God’s word and the truths of the gospel, because we believe that children can understand more than we give them credit for.
- It allows our children to watch the people of God and learn from their example as they worship God together.
- It gives our children a sense of awe of God.

If you are new to parenting in the pew, the thought of teaching your children to sit through an hour and a half service may be overwhelming. It isn’t easy, but it is possible. And as we’ve already seen, it’s worth it! So how do we set our children up for success?

AT HOME

1. **Have regular times of family worship.** This will help your children get accustomed to coming to church to worship. Family worship is as easy as reading the Bible, singing a hymn, and praying about what you read in the Bible.
2. **Read the sermon text with your children before Sunday.** Use the church card to know what text of Scripture will be preached each Sunday and prepare your family to hear God's Word.
3. **Be prepared for Sunday!** Sunday morning should start Saturday night—lay out clothes, pack the children's bags, and set expectations for the next day.
4. **Have a good breakfast.** Don't come to church on an empty stomach!

AT CHURCH

1. **Use the restroom.** Take a trip to the restroom before the service starts so you can prevent your children from squirming due to a full bladder or asking to use the restroom during the service.
2. **Find a good seat.** Depending on the age of your children, sit in a place you feel appropriate for your children's age and conducive to the level of attention they need. Don't be afraid to sit on the ends close to the front or back if you need to exit with your children during the service.
3. **Use the bulletin.** We provide a children's bulletin to help younger children participate in the service. Older children can use the regular bulletin to take notes. The key is to teach your children to *participate and engage* rather than to distract them in order to keep them silent.
4. **Model participation and engagement to your children.** Your children will follow your lead. Sing loud, say "Amen!", and take notes. Let your children see what it looks like to be engaged in worship.

AFTER CHURCH

1. **Talk about the service with your children.** Discuss the songs we sang, the missionaries and churches we prayed for, and the

sermon. Encourage your children to ask you questions about the service.

2. **Pray for your children.** Continue to pray that the Lord will work in the hearts of your children as they join you for the worship service each week.

Parenting in the pew isn't easy and there is no guarantee that every worship service will be easy and smooth for your family. Consistency is key and prayer is essential! Over time our children can learn to participate and engage in all parts of the service. Our prayer is that you will be blessed to see how the Lord can use the weekly worship service to work in the lives of your children.

"Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." – Galatians 6:9

TOP RESOURCES

Books

Family Worship by Donald S. Whitney

Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship by Robbie Castleman.

Bibles

The Jesus Storybook Bible by Sally Lloyd Jones

The Gospel Story Bible by Marty Machowski

ESV Holy Bible for Kids

Articles

"The Family: Together in God's Presence" by John and Noel Piper. (DesiringGod.com)

"5 Reasons You Should Prioritize Family Worship" by Donald S. Whitney. (TheGospelCoalition.com)

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