

THE LAY OF THE LAND



It's 10 o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" If you are part of my mom's generation, you recognize that saying. You probably heard it each evening before you watched the nightly news. The idea was simple enough: parents ought to make sure their children are in the house at a decent hour. Who would argue with that (other than a teenager wanting to stay out late)?

Today the question should be asked this way: "Do you know where your children are *spiritually*?" Is little Johnny biblically literate? Does Sally know the difference between virginity and purity? Are your children on the road to responsible Christian adulthood, or are they part of an alarming new trend that has seen the overwhelming majority of so-called Christian children walk away from the faith?

As I was writing this book I had the privilege of preaching a series of sermons at Palm Beach Atlantic University. In the Thursday morning chapel service I preached a message on biblical manhood. I basically walked through Ephesians 5:25ff. and issued a challenge to the young men and women to live up to and expect nothing less than the biblical standard when considering marriage. It was a powerful experience. I knew I had hit a nerve.

After the message I had an opportunity to talk to a number of students who had never heard such a challenge. Even faculty and staff members walked up to me and said, "I wish my father had shared that with me twenty years ago." Several young ladies asked if they could

Family Driven Faith

speak with me privately. A number of young men remarked, “You really raised the bar.” The campus was buzzing.

One young woman who was obviously wrestling with what she had heard sat down next to me during lunch, took a deep breath, and began to share her heartbreaking story. She was a twenty-one-year-old junior who was wrestling with a serious relationship. She said that she loved a young man very much, but he was none of the things that the Bible clearly taught a prospective husband must be. She began to fight back tears as she asked, “What am I going to do?”

As I probed, I discovered that she had been seeing the young man for over two years. The two of them were “very serious,” and although she did not say so, I would be very surprised if they did not have a sexual relationship. She had obviously been agonizing over the future of this relationship long before my sermon, but what she heard that morning pushed her over the edge. However, the relationship was so serious and had lasted so long that she wondered if she needed a support group to help her get over it. I asked her if she knew any mature Christian women who could help her through this difficult time; she did not. I asked her if she was part of a Bible study or a small group; she was not. I asked if she was attending a church; she was not.

I spent half an hour with this young woman. At the end of that half hour I tried to think about her situation from the perspective of a father whose daughter is just a few years younger than this young lady. Immediately my heart began to break. This young woman to whom I was speaking had grown up in the church. She came from a good family. In fact, her family was so committed to her and to her future that they sent her off to an expensive, private, Christian university. However, just a few years after leaving home she was not attending church, had invested two years in a relationship with a young man who had also abandoned the church, and had developed a worldview that was anything but biblical.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. According to researchers, between 70 and 88 percent of Christian teens are leaving the church by their second year in college.¹ That’s right, modern American Christianity has a failure rate somewhere around eight

(almost nine) out of ten when it comes to raising children who continue in the faith. Imagine the alarm if nearly 90 percent of our children couldn't read when they left high school. There wouldn't be room enough at school board meetings to hold all of the irate parents.

While these numbers are astonishing, they should not be surprising. Over the past several years a number of researchers have discovered that the overwhelming majority of our teenagers who still attend church and identify themselves as Christians have belief systems that mitigate their claims. Researcher George Barna, for example, discovered that 85 percent of "born again teens" do not believe in the existence of absolute truth.² Over 60 percent agreed with the statement, "nothing can be known for sure except the things you experience in your own life."³ More than half of those surveyed believed that Jesus sinned during His earthly life!

Christian Smith and his research team at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill conducted the largest study of teen religion to date. Their research was published in a book called *Soul Searching*. The National Study of Youth and Religion discovered that while U.S. teens are very religious, their religion is largely ambiguous. This ambiguity is due in large part to the lack of time and attention devoted to spiritual matters compared to other activities. Smith notes:

Our research suggests that religious congregations *are* losing out to school and the media for the time and attention of youth. When it comes to the *formation* of the lives of youth, viewed sociologically, faith communities typically get a very small seat at the end of the table for a very limited period of time. The youth-formation table is dominated structurally by more powerful and vocal actors. Hence . . . most teens know details about television characters and pop stars, but many are quite vague about Moses and Jesus. Most youth are well versed about the dangers of drunk driving, AIDS, and drugs, but many haven't a clue about their own tradition's core ideas. Many parents also clearly prioritize homework and sports over church or youth group attendance.⁴

As a result, Smith and his research team found that "The majority of American teenagers appear to espouse rather inclusive, pluralistic, and individualistic views about religious truth, identity boundaries,

Family Driven Faith

and the need for religious congregation.”⁵ In other words, the culture of secular humanism appears to have co-opted America’s Christian teens.

Thus we should not be surprised that young people are fleeing the church in droves. Why would anyone remain faithful to an organization with which they largely disagree? How could anyone remain faithful to a belief system that is relegated to the outskirts of their lives? The problem is not that these children are leaving Christianity. The problem is that most of them, by their own admission, are not Christian! Hence their leaving makes complete sense. The apostle John put it best when he wrote:

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:19)

I realize that I just opened a can of worms, but this can needs to be opened. What if Christian parents are going through life convinced that their children are regenerate when in fact they are not? What if our sons and daughters are merely going through the motions as they walk through life as goats among the sheep or tares among the wheat? What if that four- or five-year-old we baptized because he or she was able to look out at the congregation and parrot the words, “Jesus is in my heart” was just saying what he or she had been conditioned to say?

Unfortunately, this is far from unusual among Christians in our culture. Thom Rainer’s research among Southern Baptists (arguably the most “evangelistic” denomination in America) indicates that “nearly one-half of all church members may not be Christians.”⁶ This is not just disturbing for SBC churches—it is indicative of a much larger problem. Thousands, if not millions, of people have been manipulated into “repeat after me” prayers and “if you ever want to see that dearly departed loved one again . . .” altar calls without a trace of the Spirit’s regenerating power.

My goal here is not to get parents to doubt their children’s salvation. I am simply trying to sound a desperately needed alarm. It is as though Christian parents in America have been lulled to sleep while the thief has come in to steal, kill, and destroy our children right under

our noses (see John 10:10). I didn't write this book as an expert with all of the answers. I am just a minister who has seen this alarming trend over the past decade and a father with a desire to see his family characterized by multigenerational faithfulness.

Two Sides of Life

There are two sides to my life. One is personal, the other professional. On the one hand I am a preacher, a writer, an elder in a local church, and a professor. This side of my life is rich, full, and rewarding. This is the place where people call me doctor and reverend. It is this side of my life that has taken me all over the country preaching, teaching, and lecturing. This is the side of my life that puts food on the table and brings me before thousands. It would be easy for me to get caught up in the professional side of my life. However, there is another side of me, a far more important side.

The most important side of my life is the one where I bear my most cherished titles—husband and father. There is nothing in this world that means more to me than the fact that I am Bridget's husband and Asher, Jasmine, Trey, and Elijah's father. Whenever I say that, I can almost hear people thinking, "Shouldn't your relationship with Christ mean more to you than your family life?" I guess in an ultimate sense that is the case. However, my family is the primary place where my walk with Christ takes on flesh. It is one thing for me to have a personal relationship with Jesus. However, if I spend hours reading the Bible and praying and invest the lion's share of my time ministering to others while neglecting my role as husband and father, my relationship with Christ is out of balance or, worse, inauthentic.

It is my relationship with my wife and children that gives my walk with Christ legitimacy. Jesus made this point clear in Matthew's Gospel:

But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and

Family Driven Faith

foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (22:34-40)

If my wife doesn't qualify as my neighbor, who does? How could I possibly make an argument for the integrity of my walk with Christ if I can't love my closest neighbors?

John puts an even finer point on it when he writes:

The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:9-11)

Here again the Bible makes it clear that my earthly relationships are the proving ground for my heavenly one. If I love God, it will be evident in my love for my brothers and sisters (especially those who live under my roof).

In fact, my very status as a minister of the gospel is contingent upon how well I conduct myself as a husband and father. While there are many qualities a minister must possess, there are but two *skills* required of those who would serve in positions of pastoral leadership. First, one must be able to teach. Second, he must manage his household well (see 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5). In other words, if I am not a good husband, I am not qualified to lead God's people. Moreover, if I have not performed in an exemplary fashion as I strive to raise my children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, I have no business shepherding God's flock. "If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?" (1 Timothy 3:5).

Unfortunately, this is a foreign concept to most Christians in our culture. Most pastoral search committees never even bother to meet a man's wife and children, let alone observe him at home or question those close enough to know how he teaches the Word to his family,

leads them in family worship, disciplines, instructs, and encourages his children, or loves his wife.

This may seem like a separate issue, but I assure you it is right on point. The fact that we no longer require exemplary family life from those who lead us is indicative of the fact that we have dropped the ball on this issue from the top down. In fact the term *preacher's kid* has become a euphemism for the poorly behaved, rebellious, oft-neglected sons and daughters of our leaders. If our leaders are failing as husbands and fathers, what hope is there for the rest of our families?

One Man's Journey

My wife, Bridget, and I were married my sophomore year in college. I had just turned twenty years old. In fact, I didn't even have a driver's license. I remember that because I had to go get one in order to apply for a marriage license. We were two youngsters setting out on an incredible journey. We had no idea how difficult things would be, nor did we realize how soon our difficulties would begin.

When the two of us set out on this journey, we knew we wouldn't have much help. Neither Bridget nor I come from ideal family backgrounds. In fact, over the past two generations on both sides of our family there have been twenty-five marriages and twenty-two divorces, a fact that is even more astonishing when you realize that our marriage is one of the three that hasn't ended in divorce. It didn't take long for us to realize that we were going to have to look elsewhere for role models.

Ultimately this book is about our journey. I have gone from a clueless twenty-year-old kid trying to figure out how to stay married, to a semi-clueless, battle-hardened thirty-eight-year-old veteran father of two teenagers, a toddler, and another one coming soon, and our family has been richly blessed in the process. I have seen the difference that observing the biblical model can make. I have watched God bring other young couples to our door seeking advice because of the evidence they see in our lives.

More importantly, I have seen God use us in our family as those around us have watched Him work. One of the greatest compliments I have ever received (twice) came from two of my younger female

Family Driven Faith

cousins. In two separate discussions about marriage and family they both said to me, “I don’t just want to get married—I want what you and Bridget have.” I was floored! When I look at our family, all I tend to see are the flaws, those places where we fall short and need to do better. However, God sometimes uses those around me to remind me how far He has brought us.

Bridget and I have spent years trying to figure out how to keep three commitments. First, we are committed to staying together and thriving as a couple. Second, we are committed to investing in our children with a view toward multigenerational faithfulness. Finally, we are committed to doing whatever we can to reproduce the first two commitments in the lives of others. This book is just a feeble effort to keep the third commitment.

A Wide-screen Family in a Full-screen World

My family and I love movies. We mark our calendars when a new family film is scheduled to be released and do our best to get to the theater on the day the movie comes out. We also love to watch movies at home. Our DVD library is quite extensive. In fact, we sometimes have friends come by to borrow movies from us instead of running down to the local video store. We also have several friends and family members who come by from time to time for a Movie Night.

Sometimes, however, we have a bit of a problem with our less media-savvy visitors. There are times when Movie Night turns into Fight Night as debates break out. I’m not talking about debates over whether to watch a comedy or a drama; our disagreements are far more fundamental than that. I’m talking about the dreaded wide-screen versus full-screen debate. You see, we are strictly a wide-screen family. In fact, we have taken movies back to the store after discovering that we mistakenly picked up the full-screen version. However, some of our friends and family are convinced that the black edges on the top and bottom of the screen are indications that they must be missing something.

The most intense and longest running wide-screen versus full-screen debate was the one between my brother-in-law and me. This

debate went on for years! Moreover, the debate persisted even after I had more than proven my point.

One day he and I were out with all of our children, and we decided to stop by our favorite electronics store. As usual, we went in for one thing and came out with twelve. However, while the kids and I were walking around the store, we lost track of Uncle Kevin. Eventually we found him standing in front of the big-screen plasma TVs watching the end of one of his favorite movies. We all stood there watching the marching band scene in the movie *Drumline*, and Kevin said two things that should have ended our debate forever.

First, he said, "I never knew what the formation was." As he watched the band on the field during their climactic performance, he could finally see that their formation made the number 2001. Second, he said, "Now I see what you mean when you say I've been missing a third of the movie." Finally! After all these years I had finally convinced my brother-in-law that wide-screen movies only appear to cut off part of the film, when in reality it is the full-screen version that cheats viewers. It was then that he said the words that continue to resonate in my mind. In a moment of complete honesty, he looked at me and said, "I still can't stand those black bars."

In other words, even though he was now completely aware of the benefits of wide-screen movies, he was not willing to leave the full-screen world. At that point all I could do was shake my head and walk away. Eventually he gave in, and I am proud to say that he now enjoys wide-screen films. While this was a rather silly argument between two very opinionated men, it illustrates the power of perception and the danger of failing to question the status quo.

In June 2004 Bill O'Reilly interviewed the author of a new book, *Home Invasion*. The author, Rebecca Hagelin, was a mother of three who had very strict views on her children's consumption of media and entertainment. Mr. O'Reilly asked the woman if her seventeen-year-old son watched MTV. To his astonishment, the woman said no. Furthermore, she explained that as a result of the moral foundation she and her husband laid in their children's lives, her son had no desire to consume such things. At this point O'Reilly was completely taken aback. He made several tongue-in-cheek statements, but his basic mes-

Family Driven Faith

sage was, “You’re lucky to have children who are willing to stand for such nonsense.” At one point he said, “I would have run away.”

I am not arguing that Bill O’Reilly is the standard-bearer for parenting. However, his view is very consistent with the views I have heard expressed by many Christian parents. I can’t tell you how many times my wife and I have been told that we are stifling our children because they are only allowed to watch four hours of television per week (the national average has been stated as four and a half to five hours per day) or because my fifteen-year-old daughter is not allowed to date. Inevitably we hear the standard cop-out argument, “When they get to college, they’re going to go crazy!” Interestingly, though, none of the “wild ones” I remember from my college days were rookies. None of them went off the deep end into immorality after leading chaste lives at home. Most of them simply walked farther into the debauchery with which they were allowed to experiment earlier on.

There is a larger issue at stake here. The question is not whether or not our children sin later in life. The question is, *do we have a biblical obligation to train them before they leave home?* Is there any biblical validity to the idea that Christian parents should allow their children to experiment with ungodliness?

Many families have been lulled into what I like to call a full-screen view of parenting. We look at the biblical mandate and compare it to societal norms, and there appears to be something missing. We believe that somehow we are depriving our children of experiences that will make them more liked, more respected, more normal. Hence we trade in the biblical standard for a cultural norm that hovers just below mediocrity. All of a sudden our desires for our children change. Now all we want for our kids is what “every other parent” wants for their children.

The result is a generation about whom Christian Smith has written, “Religion seems to become rather compartmentalized and backgrounded in the lives and experiences of most U.S. teenagers.”⁷ This compartmentalization is completely understandable in light of the minimal weight given to spiritual matters. Smith explains:

The Lay of the Land

This is not surprising. It simply reflects the fact that there is very little built-in religious content or connection in the structure of most U.S. adolescents' daily schedules and routines. Most U.S. teenagers' lives are dominated by school and homework.⁸

He continues:

Many are involved in sports and other clubs besides. Most teens also spend lots of time with their friends just hanging out or doing things like going to the mall or bowling. In addition, most teens devote a great deal of life to watching television and movies, e-mailing or instant messaging friends, listening to music, and consuming other electronic media. Boyfriends and girlfriends sometimes consume a lot of teenage time and attention as well.⁹

It seems there are a few things that we deem more important for our children than growing in grace. Let's consider three of them.

Making the Grade

Ask parents what they want most for their children, and you will likely get the same answer whether they are Christians or garden-variety unbelievers. They will likely say, "I want my children to get a good education." In fact, that's exactly what George Barna found when he interviewed Christian and non-Christian parents. The number one goal they had for their children was that they would get a good education.¹⁰

I'm not suggesting there is anything wrong with emphasizing education for our children. On the contrary, my wife and I are fanatics when it comes to our children's education. However, our children's education is not our primary goal. Our primary goal for our children is that they walk with the Lord. Unfortunately, the aforementioned study found that only half as many parents (whether Christian or not) considered their children's having a relationship with Christ as important as their child's education.¹¹

This is a prime example of a full-screen view of parenting. The world's limited view of life says that the most important thing we can do is get good grades, go to a good (read: reputable, high-pro-

Family Driven Faith

file) college, get out of school, and get a good job so we can make more money than our mom and dad did. What a limited view of what's really important! There is more to life than making the grade.

Making the Team

Another full-screen issue is found in the ever-so-popular arena of sports. Not long ago I had the privilege of sharing my views on biblical parenting with several classes at one of the world's largest seminaries. One of the things the students found most intriguing was the fact that my wife and I homeschool our children (more about that later). Several students asked me the same question: "What about sports?" Their curiosity was piqued even more when I responded, "Who cares?" They didn't know if I was being provocative or if I had simply taken leave of my senses. Inevitably they would follow up with something like, "How do your kids learn teamwork and sportsmanship?" Or "How do your children learn to be competitive?" At this point I answered their question with another question. "How did Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, or George Washington learn those things?" Better yet, since Jesus is our ultimate model of Christian manhood, how did He learn those things? Was Jesus in Little League?

I'm not trying to say that it is necessarily wrong for children to play organized sports. My point is simply this: Being a member of an organized traveling baseball squad at age ten doesn't add a single day to one's life. In fact, many of these activities get in the way of much loftier pursuits. People turned boys into men and girls into women for most of recorded history without dragging them around town with their tongues hanging out in an effort to keep up with their overachieving, undereducated, theologically illiterate peers as they try to win trophies that will eventually gather dust in a basement somewhere.

If I teach my son to keep his eye on the ball but fail to teach him to keep his eyes on Christ, I have failed as a father. We must refuse to allow trivial, temporal pursuits to interfere with the main thing. Making the team is a tremendous achievement; however, it must be put in its proper perspective. No sports endeavor will ever be as important as becoming a man or woman of God.

Making Time

One Monday evening several years ago I was scheduled to meet at a large gathering at a prominent Houston church. I had preached at this church several times before, so I was no stranger to the members of the congregation. As I entered the building, a gentleman walked up behind me and asked if I needed any help carrying some books and tapes I had brought with me. I was grateful for his kindness and gladly accepted his offer.

As the man grabbed a box under my arms, he handed it to a strapping young lad who he introduced as his “future son-in-law.” I was immediately struck by this young man’s boyish appearance. As it turned out, the young man was fifteen years old. Moments later a thirteen-year-old girl walked up, and he introduced her as his daughter and the young man’s “girlfriend.” It took every ounce of restraint I had not to shout, “What are you thinking?” I wanted to ask this man if he had any idea what it meant for a father to protect his daughter’s purity. I wanted to ask him if he had any idea how much pressure he was putting on these two teenagers by going around talking about their impending marriage. Moreover, I wanted to put him in a headlock and . . . but I digress.

Modern American dating is no more than glorified divorce practice. Young people are learning how to give themselves away in exclusive, romantic, highly committed (at times sexual) relationships, only to break up and do it all over again. God never intended for His kids to live like this. And instead of stepping in and doing something, many Christian parents simply view these types of relationships as a normal and necessary part of growing up. Unless your child is wiser than Solomon, stronger than Samson, and more godly than David (all of whom sinned sexually), they are susceptible to sexual sin, and these premature relationships serve as open invitations.

I want my children to grow up and find mates. I can’t wait to walk my daughter down the aisle. I can’t wait to see my sons go out and buy rings for that special someone. However, at this point there are more important things in life. Besides, being involved in such exclusive relationships before you are ready to be married is like going shopping

Family Driven Faith

without any money; either you will leave frustrated, or you will take something that doesn't belong to you.

Making the team, making the grade, making time—all of these are fine in their proper context. The problem is, they have replaced more important pursuits. Instead of striving for godliness and multigenerational faithfulness, many Christians have settled for just getting by. Unfortunately, our children are paying the price. There is, however, a better way. God's Word has given us a road map to follow.

The Anti-Marriage Culture

Another area where we tend to have a full-screen attitude is marriage. The January 2005 issue of *Time* magazine featured an article on the extension of adolescence in our culture. Young adults in America are acting more and more like children every day. They leave home for college only to return after graduation, and often without jobs. They are also getting married later in life.

R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, set off a firestorm in August 2005 when he told a radio audience: "The sin that I think besets this generation . . . is the sin of delaying marriage as a lifestyle option among those who intend some day to get married but they just haven't yet."¹² Numerous media outlets picked up on Mohler's comments, which apparently enraged many Christians. However, I believe Mohler is on to something.

As I travel across the country, I am amazed at the number of intelligent, Jesus-loving, Bible-toting, ministry-minded young men who absolutely refuse to grow up and take a wife! It is as though there was a new book of the Bible discovered (I call it 2 Hesitations) that reads, "Thou shalt not marry prior to graduate school, or at least until you have a middle-class income and a 401(k)." The only thing worse is looking into the eyes of the scores of young women who ask me what they have to do to get these guys to man up and marry them.

Perhaps it's the skyrocketing divorce rate that has young men and women backing away from marriage. Or maybe it is the bad marriages they witnessed growing up. Then again it could be that the cost of living has soared so high that one needs significantly more income to support a wife. However, if you ask me I believe the answer is none of

the above. The young men and women I meet actually believe there is something out there that they need to experience before they dive into the deep, dark, oppressive world of marriage. For some it is traveling to Europe or Africa. Others want to spend time on the mission field first. Still others believe there is some magic age at which one automatically becomes “ready” for marriage. Whatever the case may be, it is a far cry from the biblical admonition, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD” (Proverbs 18:22).

The Anti-Child Culture

I often have the privilege of preaching to college students. I say privilege because I absolutely love the challenge and potential inherent in every one of these encounters. I am excited by the potential of God using me to speak into the life of a young man or woman whose situation in life affords him or her the freedom to say, “Sure, Lord, why not?” Where else can a preacher give a message on missions and have someone walk up at the end and say, “I needed to hear that” or “I have been wondering whether or not I should go to Eastern Europe next year, and I think I have my answer”? However, I have discovered one challenge that today’s Christian college students are often unwilling to embrace—the challenge of parenting.

One passage I love to share with college students is Acts 1:6-8. The outline of my message is simple: God has a purpose that is larger than you—God has a plan that includes you—God has a place that suits you. The response is usually very positive. That is, until I begin to apply the last point.

I direct the students’ attention to verse 8 where Jesus says, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” I point out that not everyone who heard Jesus made it to the remotest parts of the earth. In fact, many of them never made it to Samaria. The point, of course, is that not every person is called to the same type or place of ministry. I go on to apply this truth to the lives of the students by suggesting that each of them has a place of ministry that fits them to a T and that finding that

Family Driven Faith

place should be the passionate pursuit of their lives. Sounds harmless enough, right?

Several months ago I was teaching this at a retreat for a church tucked away securely in the Bible Belt. During that retreat I suggested that for some of those college students the application of this biblical principle might mean earning a linguistics degree and translating the Bible into the languages of unreached people groups. As I looked across the room at the approving wide eyes and nodding heads, I added, “Others of you, however, may be called to have large families and train your five or six kids in righteousness so that they will in turn impact the world for Christ.” You could have cut the tension with a proverbial knife. This room full of approving, eager young men and women turned into a convention of Martians hearing English spoken for the first time. They looked at me as if to say, “That was a good one. When are you going to say, ‘Just kidding?’”

I took that opportunity to make an important observation. I pointed out the obvious discomfort in the room and asked, “When did we begin to hate children?” Suddenly the attitude in the room changed. These young people were being forced to examine a cultural assumption that has been allowed to trump biblical truth for far too long in our culture. Again Mohler places his finger firmly on the pulse of the culture when he writes, “Christians must recognize that this rebellion against parenthood represents nothing less than an absolute revolt against God’s design.”¹³

The idea that motherhood, fatherhood, and family are not as honorable as high-income careers or highly visible ministry positions is biblically uninformed at best and grossly heretical at worst. This attitude has been manifested in numerous ways in recent years both inside and outside the church. In fact, it was this attitude that led me and my wife to the most painful decision of our lives.

Bridget and I had our first baby ten months after we got married. Our next child came along three years later. During those three years we heard from every person in our life at the time that having our first child so soon was a mistake (thus the three-year gap). We were also

informed that if our second child was a boy (our firstborn is a girl), we would have “the perfect *little* family.”

After Bridget became pregnant with our son, the pressure was on. Countless well-meaning people were whispering in Bridget’s ear. Some warned, “Girl, you’d better not get stuck with a bunch of kids.” Others tried to be more diplomatic and simply pointed out how much the cost of college tuition had risen, or the price of groceries. Unfortunately, the voices in our ear trumped the voice of God. When Trey was born, we hired a doctor to speak to God on our behalf. He took his scalpel and sutures and told God, “The Bauchams hereby declare that they no longer trust, nor welcome you in this area of their lives.”

Several years later my wife knelt before me with tears in her eyes and asked me two things. First, she asked if I would forgive her for closing her womb. Second, she asked me if it would be all right if she got the procedure reversed. I was floored. I couldn’t hold back the tears as I told her how wrong I was to sit back and let it happen and how happy I would be to make it right.

We went to a specialist the next week. Unfortunately, we discovered that what the doctors had done could not be reversed. I wanted to crawl under a rock. I wanted to go back in time and grab my twenty-three-year-old self by the collar and say, “Don’t you dare let this happen!” It was at that moment that we decided to extend our family through adoption. As I write, we have one adopted child and are on call for baby number four at any moment. We cannot go back and undo what we did. However, we can shout from the rooftops until all who hear us know that children are a blessing and that God opens and closes the womb. We must receive children with joy instead of bemoaning their birth.

You Have How Many Children?

The Johnsons are a loving, committed Christian couple in their thirties. They are active in their church and community. They are also very serious about their responsibility as parents. Their children are among the most thoughtful and well-behaved you will ever meet. However, one day the Johnsons found themselves embroiled in a

Family Driven Faith

church controversy. What had this godly Christian couple done? They got pregnant . . . *again!*

The Johnsons had five small children when they joined the young marrieds Sunday school class. At first they paid little attention to their fellow class members' snide remarks. Like any couple with five small children, they were used to the typical, "Don't you guys have a TV?" and "Haven't you figured out how to stop that?" In fact, they just chalked it up to innocent fun. However, when they announced that they were pregnant again—and this time with twins—the comments turned ugly.

Suddenly people in their Sunday school class began to question their wisdom, their responsibility, and their sanity. The problem got so far out of hand that one of the pastors had to be brought in to address the situation. When pressed for a biblical basis for their outrage over the size of the Johnsons' family, the offended members of the class could only say, "If God wanted us to have that many children, he wouldn't have given us birth control." Another gentleman in the class asked, "How are they going to afford to send that many kids to college?" A young lady in the class, looking at the situation through the eyes of a busy mother of two, added, "I know how much work motherhood is, and I just think it's inconsiderate of him to pile that much on her plate."

The size of our families has become a matter of income and convenience. Our attitude toward children is, "A boy for me and a girl for you, then praise the Lord, we're finally through!" I am amazed at the number of people I meet who live in two-thousand-square-foot homes with two cars parked outside and argue that they can only "afford" to have one or two children. Amazing! Our forebears successfully raised houses full of children in homes that we would now consider meager at best, but we can't afford it.

Before you throw this book down (or have a heart attack), I am not suggesting that everyone has to have seven children. I think there are legitimate reasons to limit family size. However, I have only met a handful of people whose family size was limited for any of those legitimate reasons. I usually meet people who stopped having kids because they got their boy and their girl, so they're "the perfect 'little' family."

Or I meet people who have calculated (and extrapolated) the cost of their children's college education, their annual vacation, and their early retirement and determined that 1.9 children is their break-even point. I also meet people whose children are undisciplined, untrained, and out of control, so they find it too stressful to have more kids. Rare is the couple who left the doctor's office with a legitimate warning against further pregnancies.

A New Lesson from an Old Source

God has not left us to wander aimlessly in the wilderness as we raise our children. He has given us a blueprint for multigenerational faithfulness. That blueprint is expressed throughout the Bible, but there is one place where it reads like a how-to manual. That place is Deuteronomy 6.

I must admit that I haven't always liked the book of Deuteronomy. In fact, the first time I read it, I didn't like it at all. It seemed as though the God whom I had come to know and love in the Gospels and epistles of the New Testament was absent in the book of Deuteronomy. I remember my astonishment the first time I realized that the Mosaic Law unapologetically called for stoning in cases of disobedience and lawbreaking. I was also put off by what I considered archaic laws and regulations.

That all changed when I learned how pivotal the book of Deuteronomy is in the overall structure of the Bible. Moreover, I was amazed at the frequency with which Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy and its companion, Leviticus. Eventually I came to love this book of the Law. I have also grown to appreciate its relevance in my everyday life. That's right, I said Deuteronomy is relevant today! Much of its relevance, however, is lost on those of us who have been unwilling to press forward in our attempts to read, understand, and appreciate the Old Testament.

Think about it—Moses sits down and examines the situation. Israel is on the threshold of a monumental occasion. They are about to possess “the Promised Land.” They had an opportunity forty years earlier but were unwilling to trust God to defeat the inhabitants of Canaan. Two lone voices, Joshua and Caleb, stood out in the crowd as

Family Driven Faith

Caleb said, “We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it” (Numbers 13:30). However, the people sided with the naysayers and did not go forward.

Now, forty years later, Israel once again stands on the verge of possessing the Promised Land, and Moses, the great leader that he was, decided to give them a few final instructions. Thus he stood before the people to give the law again. Thus the book bears the name Deuteronomy (*deutero* = repeat; *nomos* = law), a restating of the Law.

What would you say to a group of believers about to enter a land occupied by pagans? What would you say to the faithful if you knew their faith would be challenged at every turn? What would you say to a group of people upon whom the burden of carrying and representing the covenant message of God rested? Moses knew exactly what to say. He gave them God’s word. That word echoes through the halls of history and still resonates today.

You and I desperately need the words of Moses’ challenge. You and I are living in an age and in a culture that is tearing at the very fabric of the Christian community. How many of us look at our teen-aged sons and daughters and know they are not with us? How many of us lay our heads on the pillow at night and know that as soon as our kids leave the house they are probably going to leave the faith as well? All of the statistics point to children leaving when they get to college, but my experience and my conversations with Christian parents leads me to believe that the problem manifests itself much earlier.

I am often stopped after a sermon by a mother fighting back tears as she asks, “What can I do?” These women want to know what they can do to intervene in the life of their teenagers who are on the way out. I am often stopped by fathers who shake their heads as they say, “I wish I had heard this twenty years ago.” I try to offer comfort as I encourage them to try to make an investment in their grandchildren.

Not long ago a father stopped me after I shared a message on multigenerational faithfulness and said, “Wait right here.” He gathered up his whole family, admitted his failure to live according to the biblical mandate, and asked me to pray for him right then and there. Another

gentleman came up to me after a message, grabbed my shoulders, and sobbed as he pleaded, “Tell me it’s not too late.” On another occasion the mother of a rebellious teenaged daughter who had grown up in the church grabbed my hands and said, “Please pray for my daughter; she has left home, and I don’t know where she is.” Over and over I am reminded of how high the stakes are in this battle. We are not talking about children getting bad grades or even getting in trouble with the law. We are talking about young men and women turning their backs on the faith of their fathers, and worse, on God Himself.

I don’t know that this book will answer all of your questions or address all of your issues, but I will promise you this: I am going to show you how to get into the fight. Something simply must be done. We cannot stand idly by while our children leave the faith in droves. We cannot simply shake our heads and accept defeat. We must fight for our sons and daughters.

The other day I looked at my teenaged daughter while we were walking through the mall. Suddenly I found myself choked up as I thought about how much time was behind us compared to the amount of time ahead. I just cried out to God and prayed, *Lord, help me make the most of the time.*

There are many worthwhile pursuits in this world, but few of them rise to the level of training our children to follow the Lord and keep His commandments. I desperately want my sons and daughters to walk with God, and I am willing to do whatever it takes, whatever the Bible says I must do in order to be used by God as a means to that end. My prayer for you is that God would awaken in you that same passion. Something tells me He already has.