

*[On November 2, 2011, Covenant Church hosted a gathering for parents of children of all ages, designed to encourage and equip them for their work of raising our sons and daughters in the faith. Following are comments shared by Pastor David.]*

## **Family as First Community: Catching the Vision**

**By David Henderson**

God has given Christian parents a task that is both an amazing privilege and a daunting responsibility: “to raise our children in the training and instruction of the Lord,” as Paul puts it in Ephesians 6.4.

Who is sufficient for such a task? Not one of us. I’m certainly not! I am painfully aware of the gap between the Gospel I preach and the Gospel I live. I need these reminders as much as anyone else.

Even so, flawed as we are, God means to use us for lasting good in the lives of our children, to help to form them in the Christian faith. As I think about that overwhelming responsibility, I love the bold promise of Philippians 4.19: “My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” What is beyond us to do is not beyond God to do *through* us.

And what greater gift could we give to our children?

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As I’ve thought about the call on Christian parents to cultivate the faith of their children, I’ve come up with an acrostic using the word “family” that I hope will be a helpful way to think about what this responsibility and privilege entails. As you’ll probably see as you read this, each step leads naturally into the next.

One of my favorite words in the New Testament is the Greek word *parakaleo*. It means “to call someone over to your side and speak into his ear a word meant just for him.” The word can cover a huge gamut of meanings, anything from a gentle word of encouragement and comfort to a strong word of challenge or even admonition. As you read through this article, I believe God intends to speak to you. He knows what you need to hear. Invite Him to speak. Read until you hear God speaking to you. Then stop and give yourself to work in that area before you go on to the next step.

May God richly encourage you as you seek to point your children past yourselves to Him!

## **First things first.**

*“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and with all your strength.”  
Deuteronomy 6.4*

This is the primary passage in all the Scriptures that speaks of our responsibility to raise our children in the faith. Interestingly, the first three verses don't say anything about our kids. Instead, they speak to *us*. You, parents – before you think about the faith of your kids, love God with everything *you* have, with the whole of your being. Loving God with heart, soul, and strength is three different ways of saying the same thing: Be single-minded in your devotion to Him, love Him with everything that you have.

When we think about raising our children in the faith, as Robert Murray M'Cheyne says, “Your own soul is your first and greatest care.” You remember the directions given by flight attendants in case the oxygen masks should ever deploy while you're in flight: “Put on your own oxygen mask before you help your child with his. “

During this past year our staff studied Kenda Creasy Dean's amazing book, *Almost Christian*, in which she analyzes the data from the largest sociological study ever conducted about the faith of our youth and children, which was carried out in 2003-2005.

This is how Kenda Dean summed up the most important finding from the study:

“The best way for youth to become more serious about their religious faith is for parents to become serious about theirs.” (page 111)

“Parents matter more than anything else in shaping the religious lives of their children.” (page 112)

Because of this, she asks hard and probing questions about what our children would conclude about the importance of the faith we profess.

“Would your children conclude, from looking at your faith, that God is worth following?” (page 70)

“It may simply be that Christianity as our children see us practice it does not merit a primary commitment.” (page 193)

Before we go any farther, Paul's admonition to the Corinthian church is one that is worth our taking to heart. “Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves.” (II Corinthians 13.5) We can't pass on to our children a faith that we don't have, right?

At Covenant we've sought to capture what the Scriptures lead us to expect to see in the life of a person whose “faith is genuine.”

It begins with our giving our lives over to Christ's leadership, and then beginning to grow as his follower. Scripture teaches that such a decision will impact every part of our lives; whole-life discipleship is the Biblical norm.

We can expect to see evidence of our following Jesus in five specific areas. At Covenant we call these areas the Five Discipleship Destinations. They provide for us a simple and tangible way of determining where we're growing and where our spiritual life might need some shoring up.

*Abiding*: cultivating a deeper relationship with God through worship and prayer

*Learning*: studying the Bible and integrating its teaching into your life

*Relating*: building close relationships of mutual support and encouragement with other followers

*Serving*: identifying and using your God-given abilities and resources to serve others in ministry in the church

*Reaching*: building relationships with those outside the church and sharing the love of Jesus through word and deed in mission to the world

I encourage you to look at your life in the light of these marks of a growing follower, and listen for what God is saying to you. If you are up for it, try asking your spouse which of these characteristics he or she sees in your life. To make it even more interesting, consider asking your children.

So, first things first. Where are you in your own faith?

### **Ask for God's help.**

*"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." Hebrews 12.2*

The next important step is for us to be clear about what is – and what is not – ours to do when it comes to bringing up our children in the training and instruction of the Lord.

As is clear from the passage above, forming faith is not our work; it is the work of God. Remember, as Paul says in Philippians 2.13, "It is God who is at work in you to want to do, and then to be able to do, what pleases him." We can't make a child believe in God. Instead, modeling faith and creating a climate conducive to faith is our work. And we can't make our children godly. We're just called to show our kids what godly looks like.

So, alongside looking after our own growth in the faith, prayer becomes the most important thing we can do to form the faith of our kids. Ask God to do what you can't do. Pray for your children to come to faith.

Pray too for God to lead you as the pastors of your family. The early church fathers often thought of parents in their home as the pastors of their own small congregation.

Chrysostom said, “Make of your home a church.” And Augustine wrote, “And each of you, in your home, if you are the head of it, should regard yourself as having the functions of the pastor.” They recognized that, while we are incapable of bringing about belief in our kids, we still have a considerable influence on the spiritual formation of our children.

Dr. Tom Ascol put it in a much more contemporary way: “The primary responsibility for teaching your children about God is yours, dear parent. It is not the Sunday school’s, the church’s, or the pastor’s. God has entrusted this important work to you.”

God has given us as parents both the privilege and the authority to lead our kids spiritually. In Romans 1.5 Paul describes his calling to share the Good News with men and women beyond the Jewish world. Modifying just two words, the verse becomes a wonderful expression of our own calling as parents:

“Through Christ, God has given us the privilege and authority as [parents] to tell [our children] what God has done for them, so that they will believe and obey him, bringing glory to his name.”

A word about the goal of our shepherding of our kids:

The goal of forming our children spiritually is not to get them to act like Christians. Christianity is not about being a good person or living a moral life. That is a by-product of Christian faith, not the essence of it. Christianity is about a relationship with God based on his grace and our faith, not on our effort and his reward, in which we live our lives for Him.

So our goal is to help our kids see their need for God, and to turn to him for the help that only He can provide. Invite Christian faith from the inside out; don’t impose Christian behavior from the outside in. Focus on the heart and soul, not on external behavior. Don’t try to get your kids to act like Christians; help them see their need for God and look to him for help, for forgiveness, for new life.

Jeff VanVonderen has written what I think is the single best book on forming the faith of our kids. Called *Families Where Grace is in Place*, it covers some of these crucial ideas and is well worth your getting and reading.

### **Mirror the love of God for your kids.**

*“Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children.” Ephesians 5.1*

Before a single word comes out of your mouth, show your children what God looks like.

Obviously we can’t do this perfectly, but when Paul calls us to love others, he invariably encourages us to mirror for others the manner of God’s dealings with us. Think about how He has dealt with you:

“Live a life filled with **love**, following the example of Christ, [for] he loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us.” Ephesians 5.1-2

“Be kind to each other, tenderhearted, **forgiving** one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.” Ephesians 4.32

“**Accept** each other just as Christ has accepted you.” Romans 15.7

Because parents base their view of God on their view of their parents, the most important spiritual message of our lives is the one we speak before we open our mouths.

A word about teens in particular. Our culture has profoundly misled us in our thinking about the teen years, teaching us that our teenagers are some sort of alien species and that the best thing we can hope for during the teen years is to get through to the other side without killing each other. You may have seen, for instance, that the Fox Network has just aired a new show called “I Hate My Teenage Daughter.”

Our world has deceived us terribly! The teen years can be a wonderful time with our kids. Our teens are so gifted, so insightful, so worth our knowing and loving.

Love your gawky, goofy, belligerent, pimple-covered, braces-toothed, unresponsive child. Embrace the teen years with expectancy. See the teen years as the workshop years: ground your kids in the faith, send them out into the world, gather them back in, process what they’ve experienced and the choices they’ve made, encourage them, pray for them, and send them back out again.

Don’t misread their unresponsiveness for disrespect or lack of engagement. Teens go deep inside with deep things, which means sometimes their faces can look blank when their minds and hearts are hard at work. Teens are facial ventriloquists, throwing their faces far from what is going on deep inside. Don’t believe appearances with your teens. Trust God is at work in them.

Also, teens are still learning how to relate externally at the same time they are processing internally, which can lead to some awkward communication dynamics. It can feel more awkward interacting with a teen than with most anyone else, but don’t let that put you off. Keep leaning into the conversation, keep showing love and interest, and trust that it is seeping in even if nothing comes back to you that suggests it is so.

Don’t take your teens personally. But do take them seriously. Don’t lower yourself to the level of your teens at their worst. Don’t act like a teenager yourself.

If you’ve allowed things to deteriorate a bit with your teens, then tend to what needs tending before you go on. Free up some margin in your schedule and start making up some lost ground. Work hard to create a climate of love, acceptance, mutual honor and respect, forgiveness, good communication, and healthy conflict.

If that's not where you are, then get some help. There are lots of great places to turn: our Parents of Teens class, our pastors, our counselors who can meet with you and your teen and help you out, and great books like Paul Tripp's *Age of Opportunity*, which I think is the single best book on parenting during the teen years.

### **Initiate spiritual conversations.**

*"Commit yourself wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you get up." Deuteronomy 6.7*

Now we get to actually talking about spiritual things with our kids. The Hebrew word in the above passage for "repeat" is the same word that is used in modern Hebrew for Velcro. Keep applying the Bible to the lives of your kids, keep exposing your children to the great truths of Scripture, the great stories of the faith, and the great works of God, and eventually it will stick.

I love how the psalmist puts this in Psalm 78.1-8: "We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done."

There are two dimensions to talking with our kids about spiritual things. It is crucial that we spend intentional time around our dinner tables in the more formal work of studying the Bible and memorizing its words. The capacity of kids to memorize Scripture is amazing, and we need to make use of that unique gift of childhood. But Moses reminds us there's also a more informal dimension to spiritual instruction to which we are called as well.

Let the presence and reality of God penetrate every sphere of your life together: time, money, work, studies, relationships. These are the teaching opportunities that show up in the course of daily life – some people call them "teachable moments" -- when we are sitting on the sidelines or driving home from school or processing a hurt feeling or waiting at the doctor's office or sharing a meal or crossing the country or watching a sunset, and we bring God's perspective into our conversation. Depending on the situation, it could look something like this:

Where will you look for my worth and value in this situation?  
What would forgiveness look like?  
What would it mean to make a God honoring choice in that situation?  
What do you think God might want us to do with this unexpected money that he provided for us?  
Are life circumstances the basis of your happiness?  
How does God's love for you make a difference in this situation?

As Marjorie Thompson said, "God's love and his covenant demands should be the central and absorbing interest of our lives. It should keep coming up again and again." Her book, *Family: The Forming Center*, has some wonderful things to share on this idea.

At the heart of effective spiritual formation is *intentionality*. Kenda Dean writes:

“Religious formation is not an accident. Teenagers reporting high degrees of religious devotion did not get that way on their own.” (page 194)

As I’ve thought about how we’ve tried to be intentional to initiate spiritual conversations with our kids, it seems to me that there are three tools we use: share, ask, and reflect.

### **Share**

Children learn to articulate their faith by hearing their parents articulate theirs. By describing, in manifold ways, our experience that God is real and He is at work right now, we help our kids see the same thing. And by talking about what God is doing in our lives we give our children an example and a vocabulary to do the same.

Share your:

- awe and wonder about the God-given beauty, order and design of creation
- gratitude for God’s provision, protection, etc.
- conviction regarding your failures and experiences of God’s forgiveness
- experiences of ways God has shown Himself at work in your life
- ways God has led you, spoken to you from His word, taught you, or challenged you
- ways you see God working in the lives of others

Talking about what *you* believe and sharing stories of how God is working in *your* life and the lives of others is one of the most important ways to grow the faith of your children.

### **Ask**

Be purposeful to ask open-ended questions around the dinner table, or in the car, or as you pray with your child at the end of the day. An open-ended question is one that can’t be answered with a simple yes or no, and it has no right or wrong answer. It is a question that invites deeper reflecting and connecting.

Here are some examples:

- Where have you seen God working lately?
- What is God doing in your life? How did God meet you today?
- What is a way you are grateful to God?
- What questions do you have about God? Doubts?
- Where has God been growing you lately?
- What is a way you sense God is challenging you?
- What is something God has been saying to you in His word?
- What is making it hard for you to follow God right now?
- What is something you are especially grateful for?
- What is hardest about being a follower of Jesus at school?
- What is a way God is using you in someone else’s life?

What do you see God doing in the lives of your friends?  
How did God speak to you during the message this morning?

When you ask a question, it is important that you stop and give your child time to reflect and then try to put words on an answer. Be patient and listen. Before you move on to sharing something, or to your next question, take the time to stay with the one you've just asked. Follow up. Ask your child to clarify, or elaborate, or give an example,

### **Reflect**

Becoming a follower of Christ does not only affect the way we feel and act; it also affects the way we see and make sense of the world -- adopting God's view of the way things are. It is crucial that we help foster in our children a Christian worldview: a coherent picture of how all things hang together in Christ.

Effective faith formation includes listening for and critiquing the culture's messages in songs, commercials, music videos, movies, television, and video games, and contrasting those with the messages of the Bible.

Watch and listen to contemporary entertainment media together with your children or teens, and ask:

Theme: What is this about?

Message: What does it say about what it is about?

Truth: How does that square with what the Bible says about the same thing?

Reflect on such things as: our culture's definition of love, why it says other people are important, how we make decisions, the role of our feelings and desires, how society defines success and the good life. Notice how these messages come through and help your kids think about the validity of what they communicate.

We live in a world that compartmentalizes spiritual things. But rightly understood, all subjects lead back to God and His place in our lives and the lives of our kids. Be intentional to help your kids make those connections, so they can see how God is relevant to all of life.

### **Let God forgive you for your failures and keep starting over.**

*"If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." II Timothy 2.13*

What if you've blown it? What if you've neglected your kid's spiritual growth, or your own? Or what if you've been too heavy handed and pushy, and you've turned your kids away?

Do you remember that verse that says, "It's too late. Forget about it. It's not worth trying any more."? If you can't remember it, that's because it isn't anywhere in the Bible. When God is in the equation, nothing that has already passed is ever lost, and it is *never* too late to start again. God loves to redeem past failures and losses. As God promises in His word, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten" (Joel 2.25)

God is in charge of the spiritual growth of our kids. He is the One forming their faith. That means we can have confidence that God will work:

- *in spite of* our weaknesses and failures (see Exodus 3 and 4)
- *through* our weakness and failure (see II Corinthians 12.1-10)

What do you do if you've blown it? Sit your kids down and . . .

- Admit your mistakes
  - “I feel like I've blown it.”
  - “I realize my life was saying one thing and my words were saying another.”
- Ask and receive forgiveness from God
- Ask and receive forgiveness from your kids
- Acknowledge the awkwardness of beginning to wade into this area again, or for the first time
- Resolve to go forward differently

Let God be the only perfect person in your child's life.

### **Yield up everything else to your first love.**

*“I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.” Philippians 3.8*

CS Lewis once said, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.” God desires that we as parents, and that we as families, live lives of complete surrender to His holy and loving purposes. Everything else should come behind our allegiance to Jesus Christ. Everything.

In II Corinthians 2.14 Paul writes, “Thank God! He has made us his captives and continues to lead us along in Christ's triumphal procession, and he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere.” You may remember that the triumphal procession was the event in which the triumphant Emperor paraded his captives through the streets of Rome.

What is the single most effective way for us to spread our faith to the lives of our children? Surrender. For our lives to be fully yielded to Him. For our children to see evidence of His having conquered us.

More persuasive than our intellectual arguments for the truth of the Gospel, more persuasive than our emotions and our being moved by what God has done for us, is our captive will, our being conquered by Christ, our kids seeing us yield up our lives to Him.

Take a look at your own life from across the room. What do your kids see? Think about practical things like:

- Movies you watch
- Websites you go to
- Magazines you look at
- Language you use
- How you choose to spend your free time, or your discretionary income
- What are the “non-negotiables” in your house? What are the “alwayeses and nevers” of your family? Such as: “In our family, we never miss a Purdue game” or “We never get a scratch on dad’s car” or “We never have someone in our house unless it looks perfect” or “We never miss a travel soccer game, even if it means we miss church.”

Truly to put Jesus first, you and your family may be called to:

- change your priorities, putting first things first
- scale back on activity, making time for the things that matter most
- back down on accumulation and spending
- be inconvenienced for the Lord’s sake
- practice hospitality
- have the family share in decisions about how time and money is spent

There have been times when, in the interest of our first allegiance, our kids have gotten upset with us, and our kids’ friends have gotten upset with them and with us, because of our telling them we are having family time, or that they couldn’t take part in an activity. And we have continued to insist on family time even as our kids came into the teen and college years.

Christian parenting will require numerous countercultural decisions. This will necessarily be so, because the purpose of the family and the goal of parenting is so different.

The purpose of the family, according to the world:

- satisfy our needs through the lives of our children
- teach them self-reliance, to go from dependence on us to independence from us
- equip them with career and life skills for success in the world, which is defined by accomplishment, acclaim, and accumulation

God’s understanding of the purpose of the family:

- form the souls and characters of our children as they pass through our lives on the way to theirs
- teach them God-dependence, to go from dependence on us to dependence on God
- anchor them in the faith, and equip them for meaningful engagement in the world

Christianity is inherently counter-cultural . We need to prepare our kids, as they put Jesus first in their lives, not to be understood, or approved of, by peers who live according to different beliefs and values.

We need to let our family be strange in the eyes of the world. In our home, we often use the expression, “In our family . . .” The sentence ends with things like: we eat meals together. We support one another in our different activities. We put faith things ahead of other things. We honor and support one another. We openly show affection to one another. We are kind and respectful to one another. Not long ago, one of our kids said, “You know, our family is really different. Sometimes our family even seems strange. But I like the way we are different.”

Kenda Dean writes:

“The Christian faith deforms adolescents for success in the dominant culture.”  
(page 183)

The gospel ‘makes strange’ the society we live in.” (page 190)

To whom or what is your life yielded? What do your children see comes before all else in your life?

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I love this line from Patrick Henry’s will: “My most cherished possession I wish I could leave you is my faith in Jesus Christ, for with him and nothing else you can be happy, but without him and with all else you’ll never be happy.” Doesn’t that express the longing of your heart as a Christian mom or a dad?

What is God saying to you? What might He have you do this week in response to these things?

God’s grace to you as together we seek to raise our children in the training and instruction of the Lord. May God use us to lay hold of the hearts of our kids, draw them to Himself, equip them for a life of faith, and send them with joy and purpose out into this world, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen!