

WHEN THEY
TURN AWAY

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DRAWING YOUR ADULT CHILD
BACK *to* CHRIST

Rob Rienow

 Kregel
Publications

*When They Turn Away: Drawing Your Adult Child
Back to Christ*

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*To my father,
Bill Rienow,
who taught me that
it is never too late
to turn to God.
I am eager to
see you in heaven.*

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PREFACE

“I HAVE NO GREATER joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4).

You are reading this book because you know that the opposite is also true. There is no greater sorrow for Christian parents than to know our children are not faithfully following Christ.

We desperately want our children to have deep faith and a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We want our families to have warm, close fellowship together throughout our lives. Most of all, we want to arrive safely home in heaven together with our children.

For many parents these seem like dreams that need to be abandoned. But there is hope, because God is still on His throne.

Before we begin, though, I need to address an elephant in the room. I do not have adult children yet. Amy and I have been blessed with six children ranging in age from one to thirteen years. So what am I doing writing a book about parenting adult children?

There are two reasons. First, I spent a decade of my pastoral life as a youth minister, working specifically with high school students and their families. I led a large youth ministry that had more than 350 active students involved each year. God did wonderful things in the lives of these young people. I’m thankful that my relationships with many of these students did not end after they left high school. I’ve lost track of the number of weddings I’ve performed for students who grew up in the youth group, and now many of them have children of their own.

It gives me great sorrow, however, that the majority of the students who seemed to be on track spiritually as juniors and seniors in high school are now no longer walking with the Lord. I used to believe that if a young person was following God faithfully at age eighteen, the spiritual cement had hardened and they were on track to follow God for a lifetime. I no longer believe that.

Show me young men and women following God at age twenty-five, however, and we find a much clearer picture as to how true and deep their faith is. So it naturally followed that ministering to high school students progressed into ministry for “twenty-somethings.” I was then in the position of trying to encourage faith in young adults who had grown up in the church, but who were in the far country, like the prodigal son. I was also deeply engaged with the parents of these young adults, and they were brokenhearted that their children had turned away from God and from the church.

My second reason for this book is that, a few years ago, God led Amy and me to begin a ministry called Visionary Parenting. It was birthed out of a time of deep repentance and brokenness, as I needed to confess that I was not putting my wife and children first in my life. I was not the spiritual leader of my home, and was doing nothing in an intentional way to pass on my faith to my own children. But the Lord changed my heart, my life, and our family.

When I began making presentations to parents at Visionary Parenting conferences, a clear pattern emerged. After I finished speaking, time after time, men and women would come up to me saying something like, “Rob, we really appreciated what you said . . . but our daughter is twenty-four. All the things you talked about apply to parents with children still in the home,” or “Our child is an adult . . . and he’s far from God.” These parents often asked through tears, “What do we do now?”

This cry was coming from all directions. God was filling my life not only with young adults who were struggling with faith, but with their parents as well. I knew my personal opinions weren’t going to offer the right direction, and pat answers were

useless. The Lord made it clear to me that I needed to search the Scriptures so I could answer the question, “What do we do now?”

My prayer is that God will use the words of this book to point you to the words in His Book. He has not left us alone to figure out for ourselves how to help our wayward children. God has given parents specific guidance and direction so that we might encourage faith in the hearts of our children—no matter how old they are.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I GIVE ALL THANKS to God who has forgiven my sin and saved me through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Next to salvation, the greatest gift God has given to me is my wife, Amy, and our six children. Amy, you have helped me in every way toward becoming the man God wants me to be.

Thanks to my mother, who raised me to know the Lord and love Him, and to my stepfather, Jack, who loves God and my mom. Both of you have put in countless hours of editorial work to make this book possible.

I'm grateful for the members of the Epaphroditus Adult Class at Wheaton Bible Church who encouraged me to pursue this project. Many of you know how much it hurts to have grown children far from God. Thank you for sharing your hearts and stories with me.

Thanks to all those who gave permission for me to share their stories in the pages ahead. Your names have been changed to protect your identity.

The Kregel team has been terrific. You've helped make the ministry of this book stronger every step of the way.

Last but not least, I'm grateful for my father, who is home in heaven with Jesus. He taught me that it's never too late to turn to God.

HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?

I FIRST MET MIKE when he was a high school student. He participated in our youth group's annual hiking trip on the Appalachian Trail. When you're hiking, there isn't much to do besides talk, and God provided me with an opportunity to share with him the message of the gospel. By God's grace, in the middle of the wilderness, Mike responded and put his faith and trust in Jesus. He came back and became very involved in the life of our church. He rose to be a leader in the youth group and after graduating came back and worked to mentor the younger students. I longed to see more young men like this one.

Fast-forward eight years. Mike had moved away to another part of the country. I was in my office and the phone rang. "Hi, Rob! It's Mike. Do you remember me? I'm engaged, am moving back to the area, and would like you to do our premarital counseling." I was thrilled to hear the news, and immediately arranged a time to reconnect with Mike and meet his fiancée.

Within the first few minutes of our meeting, it became apparent to me that Mike's fiancée was not a Christian. I began to gently probe into that issue by sharing with them how unity is at the core of a healthy marriage—two people becoming one—and I sensed that they might be in different places when it came to matters of faith and spirituality. It was an awkward but necessary conversation. My gentle approach didn't seem to be working, so I

turned up the volume and asked, “What happens if God blesses you with children? What would be your plan for their spiritual training?” At this point, Mike looked at me and said, “I guess we’re going to let our kids figure that stuff out on their own. There are a lot of different ways to God. I don’t think Jesus is the only way, and I don’t think that the Bible is the only holy book.”

I was stunned! I’d assumed that Mike was an active follower of Jesus Christ, and that he was about to marry someone who was not a believer. The truth was that Mike and his fiancée were in the same place spiritually. They were both completely adrift. I’m in no place to judge Mike’s salvation, but he’d come to the point in his life where there were few if any outward signs of his Christian faith. For me, the realization was deeply disturbing.

At age eighteen, Jenny was a shining star. She had a sterling reputation in her school for being a young woman of character. At our church, she was viewed as a model for younger girls to emulate. She demonstrated a passion for serving others and spent time leading small-group Bible studies. If you had asked me, “Has Jenny been evangelized and discipled?” I would have answered with a resounding, “Yes!” I would have put a check mark next to her name as someone who has clearly and firmly set the course of her life toward following Jesus.

After graduating from high school, Jenny went to a secular college in Washington, DC. When she was a junior in college, she happened to come home on a weekend when I was preaching. That Sunday afternoon, she sent an e-mail to me expressing serious concerns about the content of my sermon. Her fundamental disagreement was that I kept referring to the Bible as “the Word of God.” She said that it was offensive to her when I kept using this phrase, as if the Scriptures were the only means of authoritative truth that we had. Again, I was stunned. After further interaction with her, I realized that in three short years she had gone from passionately following Christ to the point where she no longer believed that the Bible was the unique and authoritative Word of God.

Steven was the grandson of career missionaries to Southeast Asia. Not only were his grandparents missionaries, but his great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents were as well. He had a marvelous and rich spiritual heritage. Steven, however, was not a Christian. He didn't consider himself a religious person at all. When he was growing up, his family never, in fact, went to church. How could this happen? The answer is both simple and tragic.

Steven's mother, the daughter of the third-generation missionaries, rejected her parents' faith. She then raised her children in a nonreligious home. Three generations of men and women had a radical Christian commitment on the mission field, and yet just two short generations later all signs of Christian faith had vanished.

THE CURRENT FAITH-CRISIS

Stories like these are replicating themselves millions of times over in our culture. George Barna's research from 2006 indicates that 80 percent of young adults in their twenties are disconnected from church. Three out of four of these young people *were* connected in church as teenagers but drifted away. Barna surveyed not only church connections for young adults, but also their faith convictions. He set out to discover what percentage of adults in their twenties and thirties expressed a strong commitment to faith in Christ and belief in the Bible. He wanted to determine specifically how many people

Eighty percent of young adults are disconnected from church.

- have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ;
- view their commitment to Christ as very important in their lives today;
- believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior;
- believe that God wants them to share their faith;
- believe that Satan exists;

- believe that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works;
- believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth;
- assert that the Bible is accurate in all it teaches;
- describe God as the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator who is actively involved in all things.

Take a moment and reread the list above. Does that list describe you? Barna found these basic benchmarks of biblical Christianity in only 6 percent of young adults in their twenties and thirties.¹

Researcher Thom Rainer, from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, affirms this heartbreaking reality. He led a study to determine what percentage of Americans claimed to be Christians based upon having put their faith in Christ. In other words, what percentage of Americans identify themselves as Christians and understand that being a Christian means putting one's faith in Christ alone for salvation? Here's what he found. Among Americans born before 1946, 65 percent identified themselves as Christians and were able to articulate the basics of the gospel. For those born between 1946 and 1964, the number dropped to 35 percent. For those born between 1965 and 1976, it fell to a scant 15 percent. Finally, among Americans born between 1974 and 1994, only 4 percent of the population identified themselves as Christians and had trusted Christ alone for salvation.²

Evangelism and discipleship are in dire crisis, and *it is a generational crisis*. We're losing more of our own children to the world than we are winning adult converts to faith in Christ. As a result, the percentage of Bible-believing Christians in the United States is in steady decline. The United States is, in fact, following in the misguided footsteps of Western Europe. The lands that birthed the Reformation are now overwhelmingly secular, with Bible-believing Christians making up just 1 percent of the population in some countries.³

How could this have happened? There are many reasons, and we need to understand the past if we hope to lead our children toward a different future. In the remainder of this chapter, we'll

explore some of the cataclysmic changes that have rocked Western culture, and how those changes have had an impact on the souls of our sons and daughters.

PHILOSOPHICAL REVOLUTION

The past century has seen a radical and destructive shift in how people think. The shift progressed with each generation, and two key words capture this thought revolution—pluralism and relativism. Pluralism, put simply, is the reality that people have many choices about what they believe. Pluralism has existed since the garden of Eden and is the consequence of living in a world with good and evil. Today, our world is filled with a *plurality* of religions and values from which to choose. Each has its attractions. There are sides. There are differences. But there is truth and there are lies. We're free to choose what we will believe, and God will hold us responsible for those choices.

Today's young people are saturated with pluralism, which has become unfortunately intertwined with relativism. The philosophy of relativism suggests that all statements of fact depend upon one's perspective. In other words, all statements of truth depend upon your point of view, and are relative in comparison to the point of view of others. If we tell someone that we believe Christianity is *true*, we frequently hear the response, "I'm glad that you've found something that works for you. Christianity is true for you, and my beliefs are true for me."

Consider the basic premise of relativism: "All statements of fact are relative." Look carefully at this declaration. There's an immediate problem—if all statements of fact are relative, then no statement of fact is absolutely true. If nothing is absolutely true, then the statement, "All statements of fact are relative," cannot be true either. That statement itself is a pronouncement of fact. Thus, the philosophy of relativism is thoroughly self-defeating. Its basic premise teaches that you cannot accept a basic premise. It is philosophically and logically dead before it even begins, and yet this lie has penetrated the hearts and minds of millions of people around the world.

If you were to dialogue with someone who embraces a relativistic view of the world, it may not be long before he or she brings up the famous parable from India about the blind men and the elephant. Maybe you've heard this one before. A group of three blind men are helping each other feel their way down a path. One of them bumps into an object that is blocking their way. An elephant is standing in middle of the path. The blind men then began to argue with one another about what stands before them. One man has his hand on the side of the elephant and explains that someone built a wall across the path. Another man reaches out and touches the tail. He argues that they're being blocked by a thicket of sticks and branches. The third blind man reaches out and touches the legs. He tries to persuade his friends that they're being blocked by a row of thick trees. Who is correct? This parable is repeated over and over again as an example of how truth depends on our perspective. Each blind man touched a part of the elephant, and from each man's perspective, his report was accurate.

I have yet to fully understand why this parable is used so frequently to defend pluralism and relativism. The moral of this story is not that truth is subjective and depends on each man's perspective. The moral is that each man was objectively wrong. The men were blocked by something in the path. It was not a wall, a thicket, or trees. It was an elephant.

Pluralism and relativism are most deadly when they come together in matters of faith. A few years ago, I met weekly with a group of high school students at a local restaurant. None of them were Christians, and it would be an understatement to say that the group was diverse. All together, they had pierced every pierceable body part, and had every shade of color in their hair. We had a great time every Friday afternoon talking about issues of faith, God, and the Bible. One day I asked them, "Who do you think God is?" A young man with wild hair said, "I think God is kind of like my granddad in Florida. He's there, but I never really see him." Another quickly chimed in, "God is an evil being who's out to punish us and make our lives a living hell."

The third took the opposite tact: “I don’t think God exists at all,” she said. What would I hear next? “I believe God is everywhere and in everything,” said another teen. “He’s the rocks. He’s the trees. The universe is God. I am God, too.” At that point there was an uncomfortable pause. Finally, another student offered his opinion in a thoughtful tone. “You know what? You’re all right. You all see God in a way that’s true for you, and it works for you.”

I expected the other students to either fall out of their seats laughing or find some way to tell this young man that his conclusion was silly. Each student said things that were totally antithetical to one another. One said that God is an evil being who wants to hurt us, another said that there is no God, and still another that *he* is God. But rather than respond with incredulity, everyone around the circle nodded their heads and said, “Yeah. You know what? You’re right. We’re all right. Each one of us sees the world from our own perspective, and we each have our own truth.”

Pluralism offers us every imaginable set of concepts and faith systems. Relativism persuades us that all concepts and systems are equally true and equally valid—all at the same time. This insidious combination has proved to be a devastating philosophical one-two punch in the hearts and minds of our sons and daughters. It’s also become a destructive institution in Western culture. The public schools that you likely attended as a child are nothing like the public schools of today. Only a few decades ago, prayer was encouraged in public schools, the Bible could be read comfortably in class, and songs were sung about Jesus the Messiah at the Christmas program. Your children, however, had a dramatically different experience, and you’d likely shudder if you knew what your grandchildren are being exposed to. Today, the curriculum is built upon the principles of pluralism, relativism, atheism, and evolution. Many wonderful Christian teachers and administrators work in our schools today, but it’s the curriculum that is shaping the hearts and minds of this generation. Today our curriculum is not neutral toward Christianity—it is diametrically opposed to it.⁴

Science curriculum is built upon the theory of atheistic evolution. To stand up in a public-school science classroom and say, “I believe that God created the world and that human beings are a unique and special creation separate from the animals,” is an invitation to ridicule. A second grader in my neighborhood was asked to tell the class who his hero was. He said, “My hero is Jesus.” The teacher immediately and sternly announced, “No one is allowed to say that name in this classroom!” The student was both scared and devastated. The teacher, of course, was wrongly applying the laws related to the first amendment of the constitution. Students are allowed to talk freely about their religion in the classroom. It is *teachers* who are restricted from proselytizing. In this case, the parents let the principal know what happened, and the teacher was corrected—but the damage was done.

In the last twenty years, even our youngest students have been pressed upon to reject God’s truth and embrace the values of this world. In 1992, Charles Colson called the nation’s attention to books that were being given to first graders around the country. *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy’s Roommate* were written to celebrate homosexual relationships and normalize homosexual parenting.⁵

Your children have grown up in a culture steeped in moral pluralism and relativism.

Today, all Americans hear these views espoused from the President of the United States. On September 28, 2009, President Obama gave his Family Day Proclamation, in which he declared, “Whether children are raised by two parents, a single parent, grandparents, a same-sex couple, or a guardian, families encourage us to do our best.”⁶ When the elected leader of our nation casts aside a fundamental moral principle, we should not be surprised at the chaos that rules our day.

DECAY IN THE CHURCH

Your children, then, have grown up in a culture steeped in moral pluralism and relativism. This philosophical revolution is now wreaking havoc even in our churches. Some Christians are

skilled at bashing the secular culture around us, but often turn a blind eye to the destructive forces at work in our churches. Many pockets of the Christian church quietly followed society on a parallel track of decay, and now the seeds that were planted are bearing fruit—the fruit of millions of our children and grandchildren far from God.

How has the church been infected by the philosophical revolution? We've largely abandoned our belief in the sufficiency of Scripture. The Protestant Reformation was built on the “five solas”:

- *Sola fide*—only faith. We are not saved by our good works, but through faith.
- *Sola gratia*—only grace. We do not deserve salvation; it is by the grace of God.
- *Solus Christus*—only Christ. Only through the work of Christ can we be saved.
- *Soli Deo Gloria*—only for the glory of God. The glory of God is the purpose of all things.
- *Sola Scriptura*—only Scripture. The Bible alone is a sufficient guide for all matters of faith and practice.

I recently had lunch with Don Cole, who has served as a pastor on Moody Radio for many years. I asked him how he would define *sola Scriptura*. He said, “In the Bible we have everything we *need* to know. God has given us everything important, about everything important. In it we find everything that matters, about everything that matters.”

Is the Bible a comprehensive guide about science? No. But everything we *need* to know about science is there. God created the universe, for instance. Chance had nothing to do with it. Human beings were created as special and unique, totally distinct from the animals. Everything that matters . . . about everything that matters.

I recently spoke at a Christian high school weekend retreat. They asked me to preach on John 15, the passage where Jesus

teaches about the vine and the branches. Jesus' primary call to His disciples in that passage is that they "remain in me." Jesus begins to explain what this means in verse 7 when He says, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you..." Then in verse 10 He makes it plain, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love." We spent the weekend talking about the importance of giving our best to obeying God's Word—the Bible.

At the end of the weekend we had a question-and-answer session. A young man asked me a great question: "Can you be a Christian and not go to church? I don't like going to church." A group of students around this young man seemed to share his sentiments. I began my answer this way: "If a person claims to be a follower of Jesus, and is not faithfully involved in the local church, then he or she is a disobedient Christian. I can't comment on anyone's salvation, but in Hebrews 10:25 God says that we should 'not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.'"

The young man responded, "I get that, but we don't like our church. Here's what we want to do. We're going to meet at our friend's house every Friday night, sing some songs, pray, and talk about Jesus. Our youth pastor told us that church was all about encouraging each other spiritually, so that's what we want to do. What do you think about that?"

I replied, "Wow! I love what you're talking about. You're committing to meet every Friday night with your friends to focus on spiritual growth together? That's terrific. I do have a couple questions for you. First, will there be preaching of the Bible when you meet?"

"No."

"Will you have baptisms?"

"No."

"Will you have communion?"

"No."

"Will you have multiple, biblically qualified elders there?"

"No."

“Again, I don’t have anything negative to say about your meeting every week like you described. It sounds wonderful. But... it’s not a church. Church is not man’s idea. We didn’t think it up. Church is God’s idea. He’s the one who instituted it, and He is the one who gave us, in the Scriptures, the patterns and practices that He wants for it.”

“Well, Pastor Rob, where does it say in the Bible that you have to have elders?”

At this point, I confess... I got lucky. I likely wouldn’t have known the answer to that question off the top of my head. But God knew that this question would come my way this weekend, and so a few days earlier I “just happened” to be reading in the book of Titus. So I replied, “In Titus 1:5, Paul instructs the church that the first thing they were to do is appoint elders in every town.”

At that moment, the young man responded with a question I’ll never forget. He said, “How about another one?” In other words, do you have *another* Bible passage that supports what you’re saying?

My heart fell inside of me, and I quietly said, “I didn’t know I needed more than one.” This was a retreat with students who professed faith in Christ. I realized in that moment that this young man and I were not having a disagreement about the nature of church—but rather a disagreement about the nature of the Bible. This young man, like many of his Christian peers, did not view the Bible as a *sufficient* guide for life—in this case, the particular nature and function of the church. He’d asked me a question. I answered his question with a plain Scripture. It wasn’t enough to change his mind, nor the minds of many around him. The Bible alone was not enough. Yet, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

I frequently ask groups of Christian youth and young adults the following four questions. First, “Do you believe the Bible is God’s Word?” All the hands go up. Second, “Do you believe it

is completely true?” Again, all the hands show. Now things get dicey. The third question, “Are you willing to submit all your thoughts and opinions on every matter to what it says?” A few hands rise from the crowd. Finally, “Are you willing to do what it says, even if you don’t want to?” Again, only a few hands go up. In regard to this last question, I’m not talking about the willful disobedience that we struggle with on a daily basis. On many occasions we know exactly what we’re doing, that it’s against God’s Word, and we choose to do it anyway. Rather, I’m talking about the Christian who says, “I know the Bible says that this isn’t right, but I don’t think the Bible is completely relevant on this topic.”

The twentieth century saw what Francis Schaeffer called a new kind of Christian—a person who claims to be a follower of Jesus Christ, someone who “loves Jesus,” but who does not believe the Bible. Millions of young people grew up on an anemic diet of Sunday school Bible stories, and the end result, as they moved into adulthood, was that the Bible remained a nice story with some valuable wisdom. They were neither taught, nor did they embrace the central Christian doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture for all matters of faith and life. When young people distance their hearts and minds from not only the inerrancy of Scripture but its sufficiency, spiritual deterioration is inevitable.

Pluralism and relativism are no longer found just “out there” in the culture around us; they can frequently be found in the halls and sanctuaries of our churches. But we can easily slip into a mode of blaming the list of outside forces that robbed faith from our children. We bring to mind the non-Christian friends they spent time with, the atheistic professors at college, or the youth pastors that didn’t do enough to help. All these influences may be at work, but we must face even deeper issues if we want to embrace the mission of pointing the hearts of our children to Christ.

In this chapter we’ve considered changes in our culture and in our churches. In the next chapter, we turn our attention to the issues in our own homes.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. What words would you use, positive or negative, to describe your children's generation?
2. Do you believe your children's generation thinks differently than yours? How?
3. In your opinion, what changes have occurred in our public schools from the time you were growing up to today?⁷
4. Can you identify specific issues over which Christians have lost their conviction about the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture?

THE PERFECT STORM

A FEW YEARS AGO a movie was released called *The Perfect Storm*. It told the heroic tale of a ship that encountered a once-in-a-lifetime storm—a perfect storm—that resulted in tragedy. Unbeknownst to the captain of the ship, three separate storms were brewing on the Atlantic, and he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. All three weather systems collided at a single point, creating some of the most violent seas ever recorded.

In the previous chapter we looked at two storms that have been raging in our culture—the philosophy of relativism and the acceptance of pluralism. Within the church, these have contributed to the decline of conviction regarding the sufficiency of Scripture. Now we turn our attention to a third storm that has proven to be the strongest of all—the fragmentation of the family.

THE LOSS OF FAMILY-CENTERED LIFE

During the last one hundred years we've seen a dramatic shift away from an integrated, family-centered style of life to a fragmented, individual-centered lifestyle. This fragmentation now characterizes many neighborhoods, churches, and extended families.

Fragmented Neighborhoods

Many of us grew up in a neighborhood surrounded by people we knew and people who knew us. I knew every one of the twenty

families on the street where I was raised. We weren't close friends with all of them, but at age ten I could tell you the name of each family on the block, and I knew them at least well enough to greet them. How many of us live in a neighborhood like that now? Our culture has changed. Many of us barely know the people next door. I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I can stand on my front porch and see houses whose owners I've never even met.

Fragmented Churches

Families have also become fragmented at church. Some churches today are lamenting how the generations in the congregation are segregated from one another into their life-stage ministries. The teens meet with the teens. The senior adults meet with the senior adults. The singles meet with the singles. In some congregations, as soon as a family walks through the front door they scatter to their so-called "age-appropriate" locations. This is neither the biblical nor the historic model for how God's people worship together. Eric Wallace writes,

The church should be the champion of the family since it is the institution designed by God to nurture and care for families. Despite its many well-intentioned efforts, modern ministry has done very little to help strengthen families. In fact, much ministry has had the opposite effect. . . . Perhaps we can best measure how the church has failed by looking at the future generation. Are youth today ready to take over leadership in the church tomorrow?¹

In some cases, church leaders respond to this relational and spiritual fragmentation by initiating multigenerational programming. Church programs are not, however, the root of fragmentation, and therefore they're not the solution. Our local churches merely reflect the generational disconnection of our families. Teens are frequently not close to their own grandparents, so can we expect them to build meaningful relation-

ships with senior adults in their churches? If we want to see multigenerational relationships thrive in the church, we must begin by calling families to live with multigenerational relationships at home.

Fragmented Extended Families

“The stronger the family, the stronger the church; the stronger the church, the more blessed the nation. But have Christian leaders effectively strengthened the vehicle needed to pass along a Christian heritage?”²

Research has demonstrated that faith is more likely to thrive in young people when they grow up in the context of integrated family-centered relationships. The most expensive and expansive survey of teenagers and religion was completed in 2005 by Christian Smith. In his book *Soul Searching*, he concludes,

Those teenagers for whom religious faith and practice are important tend to have religious lives constructed relationally and institutionally to intersect and overlap with other important aspects of their lives. For example, church, family, school, friendships, and volunteer and social activities hang together in an integrated whole.³

Families are disconnected from neighbors, fragmented in our churches, and worst of all, separated from one another. Many in your generation grew up with aunts, uncles, and multiple grandparents living nearby. Family gatherings and extended family connections (for better or worse) were seen as a healthy and essential part of family life. Today, family members are often scattered around the country, separated physically, and often emotionally and spiritually as well.

One genealogy Web site, www.ellisland.org, where you can find the connections to your family history, had twelve billion hits from 2001 to 2008.⁴ God built the family to be connected. When it’s not, something inside of us longs for it.

When it comes to family fragmentation, older members of the family frequently suffer the most. The message to senior adults in our culture today is, “Your time has passed! It’s time for you to move on to a retirement community, and let the next generation take things from here.”⁵ How far we’ve fallen from the biblical patriarchal view of family, in which our elders sit in the places of honor and influence. I refuse to believe that it’s God’s plan for men and women to go through the blessings and trials of life, to learn through painful experiences, to walk with Jesus and know Him in a passionate and personal way, and just when they get to the point of being able to offer some true wisdom and perspectives on life, we tell them their time has passed.

On the other side of the coin, Satan has crafted a second deceptive strategy. He wages his war indirectly, but with firm

resolve. He loves for empty-nest parents to believe, “This is my time. I raised my kids. I worked hard. I’m done!” With all due respect to those who have raised their children to adulthood, God’s Word calls older

Our responsibilities to lead our families increase—not decrease—when grandchildren come.

men and women to a unique, necessary, and powerful season of ministry and impact. Our responsibilities to lead our families increase—not decrease—when grandchildren come. We may not be changing as many diapers, doing laundry all day, and helping with homework, but if God blesses us with grandchildren, then He has chosen to put more immortal souls under our care and influence—and that is a serious calling from God.

We must all push back against the lie that we no longer have influence in the lives of our children. They may live on the other side of the country and, even worse, their hearts may be very far from us, but the mission of parenting does not end when our kids leave the house. No matter what has happened in our relationships with our sons or daughters, God still has a plan to use us to point their hearts toward Christ.

THE DECLINE OF FAMILY WORSHIP

Did you grow up in a home that practiced family devotions? I've asked audiences this question at conferences around the country, and the response is always the same . . . less than 20 percent of the hands go up. For the current generation of parents in the church, the situation is even worse. Less than one in twenty Christian families have a regular time of worship together at home (Bible reading and prayer together as a family).⁶

If we had asked this question a hundred years ago, we would have found the vast majority of Christian families regularly spent time together reading God's Word, praying with and for one another, and even singing together. For centuries, the Christian church was radically committed to building and nurturing the ultimate discipleship small group—the Christian family. Why was family worship so important and so central to the life of committed believers? Because it was understood that the responsibility for passing the faith to the next generation lay with mom and dad with the help of grandma and grandpa. Believing parents would not have expected the church, a Sunday school teacher, or a youth pastor to be the leader in teaching the Bible to their children. It never crossed their minds that they should try to find a “student small group” or “accountability partner” for their children. They understood, and the church leaders up until that time taught it clearly, that the responsibility for impressing a love for God on the hearts of the next generation rested on the family.

Yet during that era, seeds were planted for what we're reaping today—the modern age of delegation parenting. Our culture has trained my generation that great parents are great at delegating. If I want my kids to learn to play piano, I find a piano teacher. If I want them to learn basketball, I get them a coach. If I want them to learn Jesus, I take them to Sunday school or youth group. My job as the parent is to drive the minivan and make sure that my children are in the best environments to learn all these valuable things. Even church leaders in the last century, rather

than inspire and equip parents to lead family worship at home, frequently taught that the most important thing parents could do for their children was to have them involved in church programs. Perhaps you heard this very message from your church as you raised your children.

There's obviously nothing wrong with piano lessons and basketball practice. Neither am I putting down children's workers and youth pastors; after all I was a youth pastor for over a decade and currently oversee all of the children's and youth ministries at our church.⁷

*God created parents to lead,
and the church to support,
not the other way around.*

The point is, the spiritual training of our children and grandchildren is not something that can or should be delegated. God created parents to

lead, and the church to support, not the other way around. As I mentioned earlier, however, the decline of family worship is a relatively new development in the Christian community.

Family Worship in History

Up until the late 1800s, family worship was commonly practiced and specifically encouraged by the church. After the Reformation, for example, the Presbyterian church in Scotland made family worship a priority. A 1647 Presbyterian document called "The Directory for Family Worship" says,

The assembly requires and appoints ministers to make diligent search and inquiry, whether there be among them a family or families which neglect the duty of family worship. If such a family is found, the head of the family is to be admonished privately to amend his fault; and in case of his continuing therein, he is to be gravely and sadly reprov'd by the session; after which reproof, if he is found still to neglect family worship, let him be, for his obstinacy in such an offense, suspended and debarred from the Lord's supper, until he amend.⁸

For these believers, the practice of family worship was so important that it was an issue of church discipline. They understood that if the church was to be serious about making disciples, it had to start with their own children, and that meant parents needed to take the lead at home.

Jonathan Edwards frequently taught on the biblical doctrines of family life. In his 1750 farewell sermon, he wrote,

We have had great disputes [about] how the church ought to be regulated; and indeed the subject of these disputes was of great importance: but the due regulation of your families is of no less, and, in some respects, of much greater importance. Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church, consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by his rules. And family education and order are some of the chief means of grace. If these fail, all other means are likely to prove ineffectual. If these are duly maintained, all the means of grace will be likely to prosper and be successful.⁹

Charles Spurgeon was writing and preaching in the late 1800s when the steep decline in family worship began. In “The Kind of Revival We Need,” he wrote,

We deeply want a revival of family religion. The Christian family was the bulwark of godliness in the days of the puritans, but in these evil times hundreds of families of so-called Christians have no family worship, no restraint upon growing sons, and no wholesome instruction or discipline. How can we hope to see the kingdom of our Lord advance when His own disciples do not teach His gospel to their own children? Oh, Christian men and women, be thorough in what you do and know and teach! Let your families be trained in the fear of God and be yourselves “holiness unto the Lord”; so shall you stand like a rock amid the surging waves of error and ungodliness which rage around us.¹⁰

Spurgeon’s message is desperately needed today. Godly men and women in growing churches receive the constant call to get involved in ministry. This call is usually a plea for volunteers to help with programs at church. It’s a grave mistake, however, to think of ministry as something that we do only outside our homes. My prayer is that God will use your journey through this book to turn your heart toward your most important ministry—doing all in your power to help your children love God with all their hearts!

The Priority of Family Worship at Home

Many Scriptures encourage family worship—the regular gathering of the family for prayer, sharing, and Scripture reading. The primary Scripture is found in Deuteronomy 6, where we find what Jesus in Matthew 22:38 calls, “the first and greatest commandment”: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts” (Deut. 6:5–6).

What would you say if someone asked you, “How are you going to obey the Great Commandment tomorrow?” I know for me there would likely be an awkward pause because this command to love God is a global, all-encompassing, abstract command. Yet in the next few verses God tells us where to start.

Consider verse 7: “Impress them on your children.” Here we find the first practical action-point of the Great Commandment. God calls us to do all in our power to impress the hearts of our children with a love for God. You wouldn’t be reading this book if that was not the desire of your heart. But how are parents supposed to do this? How can a broken, sinful man like me possibly impress the hearts of my children with a love for God? God tells us where to start as verse 7 continues: “Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

So what can parents possibly do to pass faith to our children? Talk! To be more specific, parents are called to talk about the things of God with our children when we sit at home. Consider

this section of Scripture as a whole. God begins with the greatest commandment, which is to love Him with all our hearts, and then calls us to a concrete, practical action step—worshipping Him at home with our families.

When God was turning my heart to my family in 2004, I saw this Scripture from Deuteronomy, and I told God in prayer that I didn't have time for family worship because of my busy ministry schedule. Ridiculous, I know! I sensed the conviction of the Holy Spirit, "Rob, the schedule that you have chosen for yourself is causing you to sin by being disobedient to the first thing I have asked you to do as a Christian man—lead Christian worship in your home." It was true.

MY STORY OF REPENTANCE

The summer of 2004 was a dark chapter in my life. My wife, Amy, and I had been blessed with four children. (We now have six.) I'd been serving as a youth minister for over a decade. If you had asked me at that time what my priorities in life were as a Christian man, I would have responded quickly and with conviction, "My first priority in life is my personal relationship with God, followed by my love relationship with my wife. My kids come next, and my fourth priority is my ministry in the church." God, spouse, kids, others. Not only did I preach about this prioritized Christian life, I lived it. If the phone rang and my boss was on the line with a crisis, and at the same time the other phone rang and Amy was on the line with a crisis, where would I go? How would I respond? I would go home. In a crisis, I would not put my work ahead of my wife.

Over the course of that summer, the Holy Spirit began to press me with a difficult question: "What are your priorities if there is no crisis?" During a normal week, where did I give the best of my heart, passion, energy, leadership, and vision? When I considered my life in light of that question, I didn't like what I saw. I preached the Christian life priorities of God, spouse, kids, and others, but in my everyday life, the order was completely backward—others, kids, Amy, God.

It sounds so horrible to say it this way, but my heart was at my job. When I was at work, I was thinking about work. When I was at home, I was thinking about work. My ministry at church was truly my first love.

This was followed by my relationship with my children. I was not an absent father, physically or emotionally. I tried to spend time with them and connect with them personally. But I had no plan whatsoever to pass my faith on to my children. As a youth pastor, I had tremendous strategic plans to pass my faith on to everyone else's children! But with the immortal souls that God had entrusted to my care . . . I was just showing up. I gave them my spiritual leftovers after I had poured myself out at work.

My next priority was my marriage to Amy. After I gave my best at work and gave the leftovers to the kids, Amy got what few scraps were left. This is not to say that I didn't try to spend time with her and do what I could to help around the house, but my heart was not with her first and foremost. I was seen as a strong spiritual leader at my church while at home I was providing virtually no spiritual encouragement for my wife.

Because my life was totally upside-down and backward, I was also far from God . . . and I didn't even know it.

It was a dark summer because I had to admit that the life I thought I was living was a mirage. I was not a man who put my ministry to my wife and children first. God brought me to a place of deep brokenness and repentance. I confessed and acknowledged the broken state of my life to God and repented to my wife and children. Then God began to graciously rebuild my family on the firm foundation of His Word and His grand purpose for our lives. I began to lead my family spiritually and began the practice of family worship together at home. It was not too late for me to turn my heart to my family, and it's not too late for you.

NEVER TOO LATE

In the previous two chapters we've looked at some of the changes that have taken place in our culture, churches, and even our

families during the last hundred years. As a result, Christian parents of adult children who are struggling with faith are the rule rather than the exception. Millions of other young men and women have taken the same path, or at least ended up in the same place—living a life far from God. But there is good news. God is on His throne! He cares about us, our children, and the generations to come. We are not alone, and it is never too late for God to use us to impress the hearts of our children with a love for Jesus. Our children have one of the greatest blessings in the world—a Christian parent. Our families are not perfect. Our relationships are filled with problems and pain, but we are still family, and God has created the family with transformational power. Consider the words from the nineteenth-century writer Jacob Abbott:

God has grouped men in families, having laid the foundation of this institution so deep in the very constitution of man that there has been no nation, no age, scarcely even a single savage tribe that has not been drawn to the result which He intended. For thousands of years, this institution has been assailed by every power that could shake it by violence from without, or undermine it by treachery from within. Lust and passion have risen in rebellion against it. Atheism has again and again advanced to the attack, but the Christian family unit stands unmoved. It has been indebted to no human power for its defense. It has needed no defense. The family stands on the firm, sure, and enduring foundation that God has made for it. Wars, famine, pestilence, and revolutions have swept over the face of society carrying confusion, terror, and distress to social structures. Time has undermined and destroyed everything that it could touch, and all human institutions have thus been altered or destroyed in the lapse of ages. But the family lives on; it stands firm and unshaken. It survives every shock, and rises again unharmed after every tempest that blows over the social sky. God created marriage to bless His creatures and to advance His purposes in the

earth, and He has laid its foundations too deep and strong to be removed.¹¹

It is now time to turn our attention in the next chapter to the hope we have in Christ, and to the principles in Scripture that can give us encouragement and guidance for the journey ahead.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. In what ways do you see the fragmenting of extended families in our culture today?
2. Do you perceive that your role and influence in your family is growing or decreasing as you age?
3. Did you grow up in a home that practiced family worship? If so, describe the experience. Did you practice family worship when your children lived at home?
4. Why do you think your child is struggling with faith?

HOPE

CASE STUDY I: DREAMS OF PARENTHOOD

Michael and Jenny fell in love at the tender age of twenty. One of their favorite topics of conversation was the dreams they both shared about children and raising a family. They married a few months after their first date. The day after the wedding, Michael left on a battleship, deployed for service in the war. Two months later, Jenny sent word to her new husband that she was expecting. He was overwhelmed that God had blessed them with a child, but at the same time he was despairing that he wouldn't be home when the baby was born.

Jenny began to develop complications seven months into her pregnancy, and after weeks of bed rest the baby's due date finally came. The delivery went well, but it was soon learned that their precious daughter had a rare genetic condition... one that would take her life after only twenty-four hours. The parents went through their grieving thousands of miles apart.

A year later, Michael was finally able to return home. God again blessed them with a new baby growing inside Jenny. This pregnancy went more smoothly than the first, and there was prayerful anticipation of the blessing to come. This time, they were together in the hospital when the baby came. To their dismay, this child was also ill... and lived only six days.

The shock was overwhelming, and the pain rarely discussed. After some months went by, they felt the Lord leading them to build a family through adoption. God provided them with the opportunity to raise both a daughter and a son—Julie and Jeff. The dream of parenthood had become reality. But as Jeff entered high school, their dream family began to fall apart at the seams. The rift began with Jeff's little lies about where he was going, then some money came up missing from Dad's bedroom drawer. The situation escalated into their son using drugs and, at times, staying away from home for days at a time. Today, their son is in his thirties and is in federal prison, having been convicted of sex crimes against a child.

Julie lives one state away and has children of her own. She and her parents have a pleasant relationship . . . unless Michael or Jenny try to talk about their faith in Christ. Julie has strongly proclaimed herself to be agnostic, and has made it clear that she is not comfortable talking with her parents about all that “religious stuff.”

As I listened to this couple tell me their story, I fully expected it to come to an awkward and hopeless ending. But by God's grace, Michael and Jenny have continued to pursue the hearts and souls of their children. They faithfully write to their son in prison, and he now writes back. In almost every letter they receive from him, he writes things like, “I love you.” “I'm sorry for the choices I made.” “Thanks for loving me.” He is now attending Bible studies and is on his own journey toward Christ.

While their daughter expresses no interest in faith conversations, they continue to pursue a relationship with her, and especially with her three children. When their grandchildren are with them, they talk openly about their faith, about the Bible, and the goodness of God.

God is on the move in this precious family. Despite a difficult past, it was not too late for God to use Michael and Jenny to encourage faith in their grown children, and now in their grandchildren.

CASE STUDY 2: THE PREACHER'S KID

When I was nineteen, I decided I'd be honest and stop saying I was a Christian. At first I pretended that my reasoning was high-minded and philosophical. But really I just wanted to drink gallons of cheap sangria and sleep around. Four years of this, and I was strung out, stupefied, and generally pretty low. Especially when I was sober or alone.

My parents—strong believers who raised their kids as well as any parents I've ever seen—were brokenhearted and baffled. I'm sure they wondered why the child they tried to raise right was such a ridiculous screw-up now. But God was in control.

One morning, before eight o'clock, I went to the library to check my e-mail. I had a message from a girl I'd met a few weeks before. Her e-mail mentioned a verse in Romans. I went down to the Circle K and bought a forty-ounce can of Miller High Life. Then I went back to where I was staying, rolled a few cigarettes, cracked open my drink and started reading Romans. I wanted to read the verse from the e-mail, but I couldn't remember what it was, so I started at the beginning of the book. By the time I got to chapter 10, the beer was gone, the ashtray needed emptying and I was a Christian.

The best way I know to describe what happened to me that morning is that God made it possible for me to love Jesus. When He makes this possible and at the same time gives you a glimpse of the true wonder of Jesus, it's impossible to resist his call.¹

This is the story of Abraham Piper, son of Pastor John Piper. He was the prodigal son, now safely home.

OUR JOURNEY AHEAD

Three messages will be repeated throughout this book. Each of them is vital for the calling that God has given to us, which is to do all in our power to encourage faith in our children.

First, if your child is among those who are wayward, you are not alone. Millions of your brothers and sisters in Christ know the same pain, despair, and fear that you have experienced. You know the discouragement, guilt, and sleepless nights that come when one of your own children or grandchildren is far from God. If the statistics are accurate, the majority of empty-nest Christian parents have at least one child who is not a believer,

or who is not walking with the Lord. Through the surveys I've conducted at Wheaton Bible Church and at our Never Too Late conferences, we've discovered that two out of every three of our empty-nest parents are in this situation.

No matter what has happened in our relationships with our sons or daughters, how we were raised, or the choices we made as parents—it's never too late for God to use us to point our children to Christ.

Therefore, many others in your church likely share the same pain, confusion, anger, and helplessness. Most parents, though, suffer in silence. For some, the pain is too great to share. Some feel ashamed to admit that they

have a wayward child. For others, it's just easier to live their lives as best they can, trying not to think about the eternal consequences for their children. They "don't go there." I pray that you'll share the journey of this book with your friends. You're going to need a lot of prayer and support, and I'm confident that you have friends who are in the same situation. You need each other.

The second message is, it's never too late. As long as you and your son or daughter still has breath, God can use your relationship with your child to point him or her toward a saving faith and life-transforming relationship with Christ. No matter what has happened in our relationships with our sons or daughters, how we were raised, or the choices we made as parents—it's never too late for God to use us to point our children to Christ. God loves our families, and He loves our children. May His truth inspire our hearts, fill us with hope, give us courage, and prepare us for action.

Third, hold fast to the goal. One of the enemy's primary objectives in the lives of Christians is to distract us from the things that matter most. He always seeks to pull our hearts away from the Lord, and away from approaching our lives with an eternal perspective. It's essential for us to be clear about what we want, or better yet what God wants. Here's my best expression of the goal that we need to keep before us:

Our children loving God with all of their hearts, putting their full faith and trust in Jesus for their present and their future, and arriving safely home together with us in heaven.

Take a moment right now and write the name of your child on the line below. After you do that, read this short prayer to the Lord:

Lord, it is my dream and prayer that _____ would love you wholeheartedly, trust Jesus for his/her present and future, and that we would arrive together, safely home in heaven.

THE SHORTEST DISTANCE

How could this dream ever become reality? For many of you, even putting these words together in the form of a prayer may seem impossible. And, indeed, this dream would be impossible if we sought to accomplish it in our own strength. This dream can only come to pass if God's grace and power work in our hearts, and in the hearts of our children. That is exactly what we're going to ask Him, in faith, to do. Prayer plays a central role in encouraging faith in our children.

God's Word calls us to more, however, than prayer. That sounds very unspiritual, I know. In no way do I want to minimize the importance or power of prayer, but the Scriptures give us not only a *prayer* plan, but an *action* plan to reach the hearts of our children. Praying for them without actively and personally seeking to point their hearts to Christ is like praying for God to

give us the money to pay the bills, without our ever going out to look for work. Only God's grace and power can bring a child to salvation, and for that purpose God has ordained mothers and fathers as His primary instruments.

I'm convinced that the shortest distance between the heart of your child and faith in Christ is you. Is it possible that God will lead your child to a vibrant faith in Christ apart from you? Yes. Could it be that the Lord has a plan to bring someone else into your child's life who will encourage him or her to trust Christ? Certainly. Should we be praying for the Lord to use anyone and everyone to help our children follow God? Absolutely. But the way that God designed for children to come to Him is through their relationships with their parents. It's the easiest and shortest route. No matter how strained, broken, or distant our relationships with our children, God has the power to use us and our unique roles as mothers or fathers to help them arrive safely home.

FOUR BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

In the previous chapter, we saw how confidence and belief in the Bible has eroded and how that erosion has had a tragic effect on younger generations. We don't want to make the mistake, then, of neglecting Scripture when trying to reach our wayward children. In the coming chapters, you won't find the latest tips, tricks, and research on effective strategies for parenting an adult child. If the Bible gives us everything important about everything important, then we want to go to the pages of Scripture with this pressing question: How can we as parents encourage faith in our children? We can give thanks that God gives us clear and compelling answers to this question. We're not left on our own to figure it out. I believe that we can summarize God's call to parents with four principles:

- *Offer your heart to the Lord.* God leads us to begin this journey in our own hearts and in our personal relation-

ships with Him. We'll talk about our struggle with guilt, the power of prayer, and our need for repentance.

- *Turn your heart to your child.* When we draw near to the Lord, He increasingly turns our hearts to our children. He awakens in us an overwhelming sense of mission and calling to encourage faith in them. We'll talk about our need to pray for a spirit of compassion for our children, and how we may need to forgive our children for ways they've hurt us.
- *Draw your child's heart to yours.* If the shortest distance between your child's heart and Christ is your relationship with your son or daughter, then you want to rebuild and restore your "heart-connection" with your child. We'll explore how to restore honesty, openness, and trust with our sons and daughters.
- *Point your child's heart to Christ.* As God restores and rebuilds our relationships, we increasingly have opportunities to have spiritual conversations and interactions. We'll address specific ways to approach talking about faith in ways that invite engagement, rather than cause division.

These biblical principles pave our path ahead. We'll look to the Scriptures to understand God's direction, and then talk about how to apply it in our own relationships with Him and with our children. Is this a magic formula? Not at all. I wish there was one. There are no guarantees. Our children are on spiritual journeys, and the last miles have not yet been travelled.

What we can say for sure is that our calling and mission is not to sit idly by and wait to see what happens. God calls us to personally engage and to do all in our power to help our children know God, love Him, and arrive safely home. This is our most important mission in this life. We can be thankful that we don't need to come up with a creative strategy. God has already gone before us and given us clear principles in Scripture. So let's trust Him and start with the directions He has given us.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. If so many empty-nest parents in the church today have adult children who are far from God, why are so few people talking about it?
2. When did you first see indications that your son or daughter was struggling with faith?
3. Is it hard for you to believe that the shortest distance between your child's heart and Christ is you? Why or why not?