

# FAITH THAT LASTS

RAISING KIDS THAT DON'T LEAVE THE CHURCH

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# 1

## Panic Attack

Surf around the Christian blogosphere often enough and before long you'll find the latest study about young people leaving the church. The reports vary, but they all seem to paint a very bleak picture.

- The Southern Baptist (SB) Convention found that eighty-eight percent of young people growing up in SB churches walk away from their faith.<sup>1</sup>
- LifeWay, 2007, found that seventy percent of “Christian” young people chuck their faith as adults.<sup>2</sup>
- A Barna study from 2006 identified that sixty-one percent of young people no longer attended church after their teenage years).<sup>3</sup>

What should Christian parents think? Is it time to panic?

Perhaps, yes—in a sense. Those of us who lead churches should be driven to our knees if even one young person who was taught the Word of the living God, proclaimed the one true Savior, lived out genuine Christian love, while caring for

others with humility and grace says at the age of twenty-one, “No, I don’t want that.” Why would a young person who has been brought up with faithful Bible teaching, and surrounded by genuine Christian fellowship and love, suddenly throw that all out the window?

## Soul-Searching

No matter which percentage is correct, none of the recent studies on young people staying in church has been overwhelmingly positive. Eighty-eight percent is bad; sixty-one percent is still pretty bad. Christian parents now, as always, should take time to do some soul-searching.

- What have we *failed* to teach our children in our homes?
- How have our churches *fallen short* of presenting and living out the true gospel of Jesus Christ?
- In what ways can young parents seek to *faithfully and effectively* pass on the gospel of Jesus Christ to their children so that they nurture a faith that lasts?

These questions have fueled the writing of this book. Almost every adult Christian knows someone who has been personally affected by the departure of a child from the church and the Christian faith as well.

For some of us, this hits very close to home. So many people are currently grieving and praying fervently for an adult son or daughter who no longer professes faith in Jesus Christ. Many reading this book are right in the middle of parenting and long to gain clear biblical principles that give guidance in raising children toward a Christian faith that “sticks.” Those types of biblical principles are offered in this book.

## Thinking Retroactively

I am not an expert on parenting. While we have three children of our own, my wife and I are still very much in the midst of Christian parenting with all of its struggles, frustrations and confusions. Although we certainly pray and seek to guide them to Christ as best we can, it remains to be seen whether or not our children will give themselves earnestly to repentance of sin and a personal and genuine faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I am no expert. I'm learning as I go, seeking to submit to God's Word at every step and often eagerly looking to the Christian parents around me for counsel.

This book speaks from experience, research, interviews, anecdotal evidence and, most fundamentally, the truths of God's Word about some of the distinctive elements in Christian parenting that set some families apart. I have ten years of student ministry leadership behind me. I have taught, disciplined, counseled, mentored and interacted with hundreds of Christian young people in the context of the local church.

I have also seen many of these young people grow into adulthood, and have even married some of them. Many of them are still in our church, while others have relocated and are involved in other churches. Sadly, some young members have become statistics, having walked away from the church, and from Jesus Christ himself.

Here's what I have found helpful for both myself, and for parents around me: thinking *retroactively*. In other words, we start with the "finished product," by looking back at what the parents did in a child's life that may have contributed to the present state of their child's faith in Christ and their involvement in the local church.

- We will look at those who have walked away from the faith, trying to see what their parents did (or failed to do) during their growing-up years.
- We will look at those who love Jesus as adults even more than they did as teenagers and try to see what their parents had in common as they raised and trained them.

Thinking retroactively means seeking to find some common traits (we'll call them principles) of young people who were raised in the church and grew up to embrace vibrant and joyful faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as well to serve His church during their adult years.

## **Room for the Holy Spirit**

Let me say something right at the beginning of this book: Christian parenting is NOT a formula. Although we will be laying out what I believe to be biblical and effective principles in the coming chapters, these five principles are not a “guarantee” for raising “perfect” Christian kids.

This isn't like a recipe—mix the ingredients together and you'll always get the same thing! Why is this the case? This is the case because the fundamental teaching of the Bible regarding the salvation of human souls is a miraculous work of God that takes place through the marvelous and powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart. The salvation of any person, regardless of background and upbringing, is a miracle. It doesn't matter where you were born or what kind of family you grew up in.

You and I were born into sin. We entered this world with blind eyes and a natural “bent” toward rebellion against God and disobedience of His commandments. All of us who are

Christians, even those raised in godly Christian families, experienced a moment when God miraculously opened the eyes of our hearts to believe the gospel, discern the truth of Scripture, repent from sin and put faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Good parenting is certainly used by God because the life-giving gospel is often proclaimed to children through godly parents. It is God, though, who opens blind eyes and softens hard hearts. This is a work of the Holy Spirit, and this is precisely why Christian parenting must never be considered a formula.

On the (sad) flip side of this, some children are raised in godly Christian homes and grow up hearing the true gospel of Jesus Christ faithfully proclaimed to them, but they never believe it. They choose to reject the truth of God's Word and live as their own "gods," rather than submitting to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Although no parent is perfect, faithful Christian parents will need to stop placing blame on themselves at times and simply keep pleading with God to call wayward children to Himself by the power of His Holy Spirit. It's just not a formula; salvation is a miracle . . . for all of us!

## **Discerning Patterns**

The purpose of this book is to discern patterns that I have observed in the lives and upbringing of young people who grew up in the church, stayed in the church, and went on to love Jesus and serve the church for many years.

We're not trying to find the parents who have done *everything* right! We are seeking to ask some basic questions and find some answers about what parents of young people with lasting and vibrant faith in Jesus Christ have in common.

Here are some of the questions that have led to this book:

- What do some parents do better than others that helps their children feel positively, rather than negatively, about church life, service and involvement?
- What characteristics can we identify in parents of Christian kids who have never gone through a “rebellious” period, or a time of great cynicism or disdain towards the church?
- What can we learn from Christian parents whose kids are even more vibrantly engaged with Jesus and His church in adulthood than during their high school years?

I’m answering these questions from both a pastoral and parenting perspective. I’ve watched young people grow up in our church, go to college, and walk away from the Christian faith completely. I’ve also watched people grow up in the same church, go to college, absolutely blossom in faith and witness for Christ and take leadership in churches around the world. I’m trying to get at what sets this second group of people apart from the first group, what patterns are distinct in them.

These patterns will serve to define the themes that will make up the bulk of this book. Again, these principles are not meant to be read as “promises” (i.e., do these five things, and your kid will love Jesus forever no matter what!). They are meant to serve as key foundation points for the way that we parents raise our kids to know and love Jesus Christ and to serve and love his church for a lifetime.

Here are some of the basic principles we have come up with after several years of observations in student ministry in



the local church:

- **Balance.** The parents who most often raise children who grow up to love Jesus and love the church are those parents who find a way, intentionally or unintentionally, to strike that right balance between “helicopter” parent and “do whatever you want” parent. In other words, these are the parents who are involved in their children’s lives, but somehow avoid causing and exacerbating some of the frustrations (and often rebellion) that results from a meddling parent who is overbearing and controlling. These parents are usually especially adept at working gospel-centered and biblical conversations into the fabric of everyday life without seeming “preachy” and heavy-handed with their spiritual instruction. This balance will be discussed at length in chapter 3.
- **Modeling.** One trend that we are seeing more and more with every rising generation is the violent and fierce reaction from students toward anything or anyone that has even a hint of a lack of authenticity! Young people do not want anything fake, and they absolutely despise anything resembling hypocrisy. This is precisely why parents who preach a certain gospel but then live differently from that gospel in their home are often very much in danger of losing their kids to a rejection of the Christian faith.

We will delve much more into this topic in chapter 4, but this can be seen in the contrast between a gentle and polite tone in public settings, contrasted with yelling

and screaming in the context of the home. It can even show up in the cynicism that develops in the heart and mind of the young person toward a parent's "prayer voice," which only comes out in corporate worship! In contrast, the absolute best way to demonstrate the truth of the gospel to a young person is to seek to live authentically and consistently—in every setting and context of life. Sadly, far too many parents go through a serious shift—often without even realizing it, when they walk in the doors of their home after having been with their church friends.

- **Gospel.** The word "gospel," as central as it is to the Christian faith, can get over-used, especially with the return to gospel centrality in so many Christian circles in recent years! We cannot neglect to mention the important distinction between a home of "Christian morality" and a home that is truly formed around the "Christian gospel." Many homes, even homes run by parents who don't have a personal relationships with Jesus, seek to maintain themselves by living according to a basic set of Judeo-Christian values. Sadly, many Christian parents establish their homes on little more than these bare, naked values themselves.

Of course, morality matters too! Christians are called to be holy followers of Jesus Christ who obey the Bible. What must not be missed, however, is the life-giving grace and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ that actually *empowers* obedience and holiness. Christian parents, in other words, are not just out to form "good" kids. They are after the participation in their reception, by faith, of

Jesus Christ as Lord. Only through faith in Jesus Christ can young people be transformed by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and actually be equipped to obey the Word of God. Chapter 5 of this book will focus extensively on what a gospel-centered home should look like in contrast to a merely moralistic home.

- **Sharing.** “Sharing” in the context of this book will refer to the open-handed approach of Christian parents toward their children. In other words, the joyful sharing of their formation and teaching with other like-minded believers in the context of the church. Christian parents, according to my observations, whose kids have grown up loving Jesus and the church into their adult years benefited from knowing lots of godly people of various ages and diverse backgrounds. These adults spoke truth into their lives at many stages along the way. The parents of these children didn’t “cling” tightly to their kids, insisting that their voices be the only voices that they heard as they grew up.

On the contrary, they invited people into their kids’ lives (godly people, of course!) who could partner with them in the overall purpose of discipleship of their children as followers of Jesus Christ. These are the parents who hold their kids loosely, entrusting them to God first and then to the wider body of the church second. We’ll discuss what this can look like in chapter 6.

- **Friendship.** Finally, the somewhat slippery issue that we’ll try to wrap our minds around in chapter 7 is the all-important one of friendship with our children. After

all, my observations have forced me to conclude that the kids who grew up with a healthy view of the church and a vibrant love for Jesus more often than not enjoyed a solid and healthy friendship with their parents.

It's not that the role of authority and leadership was removed; it's simply that these kids have grown up with parents with whom they have consistently heard this message (verbally or non-verbally): "I *like* you." Not just "I love you," but "I like being around you; I think you're fun!"

There is something about a fun-loving and joyful connection with our kids that lays the groundwork for deeply serious spiritual engagement, discussions, and even requests for advice and counsel as the years go on. The reality is that good Christian parents *do* find a way to be friends with their kids, even as they lead and discipline them when necessary, while preserving a role of leadership and authority.

### **Principles . . . Not Rules!**

I will discuss this more in chapter 3, but what you will find here are not rules, but principles. These principles seek to expand and fill out the nature of a parent/child relationship that best enables genuine growth in Christ, and a lasting commitment to his church.

I will also address some ways churches in our country may better serve, engage with and equip the college and career-aged men and women in our midst. By God's grace, my prayer is that these principles and suggestions will be beneficial to Christian families and Christian churches, even as they continue to look to the Almighty God as the only One

who can birth saving faith in the souls of sinful men and women of all ages.

### **Panic and Passivity**

So, is it time for Christian parents everywhere to panic? No, not quite. In the next chapter, we'll discuss key points of evidence that actually show us that many young people who are genuinely *Christian* do indeed grow up to continue loving Jesus and actively participating in local churches. There is hope for Christian parents who commit their children to God's care and embrace some of the basic biblical principles that are put forward in this book.

However, not panicking is not the same thing as remaining passive. This book urges parents to put some time, sweat, and hard work into raising kids. These principles with which we'll engage are not just going to "happen." It will take work to get to know our kids, battle strains of hypocrisy in our lives, engage other Christians in our kids' lives and bring the truths of the gospel into the everyday lives of our families. This isn't easy stuff!

So, no, we don't have to panic when we see the latest statistics. But don't be passive either! This calling to be Christian parents is a weighty and God-given calling. It is not to be taken lightly!

We need to work at this together—with our sweat, our prayers and our hearts.

### **The Power of God in Parenting**

A friend of mine who is a new parent recently told me something that his father told him as parenting advice. His

father said: “Son, it’s really easy to be a bad parent . . . you just make the easiest choice in every situation!” My friend’s father went on to say: “It’s really, really, difficult to be a good parent.” Isn’t that true? Our sinfulness shows up in the way we’re tempted to parent. It is almost always the easiest choice, with regard to our kids, that is the wrong one.

Don’t discipline them; just let them off the hook.

Don’t take the time to ask probing questions; just assume that everything is okay.

Don’t say no when you know it’s going to make them angry; just assume that it’s okay just this once. See what I mean? We need to constantly fight the sinful tendency as parents to take the easy way out!

Friends, after reading and hopefully applying this book, let’s take some time to commit to parenting prayerfully to God during these days. Let’s ask the Savior to identify areas in our parenting styles and decisions that have not been earnestly and intentionally gospel-centered or biblically minded.

Let’s plead with God to give us energy and joy, by the power of His Holy Spirit within us, to work, sweat and fight lovingly for the hearts and souls of our kids. Perhaps it’s time for us to commit to working harder to know, love and disciple our kids!

For the “strivers,” we also must not forget that we never engage in Christian parenting alone. Our God and Savior loves our children more than we could ever hope to love them. My wife and I constantly have to remind ourselves of this amazing fact! As we work, sweat, teach, discipline and talk, my prayer is that the principles of this book point us consistently toward the God who alone can save the lost hearts of sinners. He saved us. He can grow miraculous saving faith within the

hearts of our children as we faithfully bear witness to His Son. Remember that we are not raising our kids alone. Christ, the living Savior, is with us!