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MOTHERHOOD AND THE LIFE OF THE MIND

by Melissa Cain Travis

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The question came without warning, prompted perhaps by the multitude of smiling vegetables in various Bible story tableaux. Dozens of *Veggie Tales* DVDs were strewn about the living room. Colorful discs and empty plastic cases littered the carpet. A leaky sippy cup and overturned bowl of goldfish crackers added to the scene, and I marveled over the destruction one toddler could create in a few minutes' time. I appealed to my seven-year-old son to "be sweet and help mommy straighten up brother's mess." We began sorting through the jumble together when the moment came, and he looked up at me and asked his world-tilting question.

There was no skepticism in his voice, only genuine curiosity about what separates reality from make-believe. I was stunned by the maturity of his thoughts and a bit thrilled by this opportunity to use my developing apologetics skills with one of my own children. By that time, I was well into my graduate studies in scientific apologetics, yet never had I imagined that I'd be using that knowledge in conversation with my sons before the middle school years. I praised him for his insightful question and proceeded to explain the cosmological argument for the existence of God in language that he could understand. He not only grasped the argument, he was also excited to know that we have good reasons for belief in God. The exchange taught me never to underestimate the mind of a child, and it highlighted the importance of parents having intelligent answers to the big questions that inevitably arise.

I often wonder to what degree that conversation shaped the trajectory of my son's thinking about the truth of the Christian faith. He has grown into a no-less-inquisitive twelve-year-old who loves to discuss apologetics, theology, and philosophy. Was he influenced by the readiness of my response to his questions about God? Did

that demonstrate to him the great value I place on knowing *why* I believe something to be true? I think so. Merely saying, “Because the Bible says so” would have been a circular answer that dishonored him on an intellectual level. It was a precious teachable moment, and I was prepared to teach.

One objective of my ministry has become communicating to parents the significance of developing a well-reasoned faith so that they have sound answers to the more common challenges brought against the truth claims of Christianity. The stories I sometimes hear from mothers of adult children have reinforced my conviction about the importance of this. A couple of years ago, a lovely grandmother in my home church approached me one evening after I finished teaching a session of a women’s apologetics study. She confided that her son had abandoned his faith for atheism as a young adult, married a nonbeliever, and was raising his preteen children in a secular home environment. “My grandkids are spending a month with me this summer,” she said, a note of hopefulness in her voice. “Could you recommend some good books I could have on hand for them?” I gave her a few suggestions, and my heart went out to her, a mother who had discovered the need for a well-grounded faith through such painful circumstances.

MAKING DISCIPLES

The importance of the home as an environment for making authentic disciples cannot be overestimated. Parents should recognize the value of cultivating an exceptional Christian mind in obedience to the Great Commandment and in fulfilling the Great Commission—beginning with their own children.¹ Becoming and making disciples who are prepared to encounter the false ideas that pervade our increasingly secular and pluralistic culture involves hard work, no doubt, but it is essential. As C. S. Lewis argued, God desires “every bit of intelligence we have to be alert at its job, and in first-class fighting trim.”² In addition to being competent disciples themselves, parents are charged with two central tasks in discipling their children: first, to teach them the doctrines of Christianity—the “whats” of the faith; second, to instruct them in how to love God with their affections, their will, *and their intellect*, that they may thrive as confident believers who go on to impact the world.

A mother, often the primary caregiver, is uniquely positioned to be an enormous influence on her children’s intellectual formation. When she becomes a dedicated learner, she is better prepared to initiate spontaneous conversations in the home about theological, philosophical, and apologetic issues—conversations that will inspire her children to think more carefully about Christianity. By posing thoughtful questions to them, praising them for asking their own tough ones, and being committed to providing them with solid answers, she can steer them away from borrowed faith and encourage them toward a faith of their own, one they understand thoroughly and know to be objectively true.³ This doesn’t entail being an expert in any discipline, but it does

require foundational knowledge in multiple areas.

MAPPING A STRATEGY

The thought of undertaking serious study—formal or self-guided—may be daunting, especially if a mother is presently consumed with the exhausting responsibility of small children. Physical and emotional requirements dominate the infant and toddler stages, but the fact remains that the spiritual and intellectual needs of children arise earlier than many expect. A realistic yet comprehensive learning plan is key to preventing quick burnout or feeling overwhelmed to the point of never actually beginning the learning journey.

Carving out dedicated learning time is the first major hurdle, but starting out with short, basic educational activities is a step in the right direction. This could include working through a quality podcast series while going about the daily routine (folding laundry, commuting to work) or replacing a half-hour of television with focused reading. Mothers are often surprised by how much learning they're able to integrate into their weekly schedule without feeling that they've done so at the expense of their husband or children. Furthermore, they experience the spiritual benefits of deeper study that spill over into other areas of family life.

After establishing a realistic time-management strategy comes planning out topics and gathering reliable resources. A natural starting point is to become well-versed in the essentials of Christian doctrine, which sharpens a mother's ability to articulate clearly the central tenets of the faith to her children. An excellent text that approaches this systematically is Thomas Oden's *Classic Christianity*. The basics of church history are a nice companion study; as children grow and become aware of different denominations, it is good to help them understand how the different branches of Christendom emerged. An interesting and accessible text is Bruce Shelley's *Church History in Plain Language*.

The next phase is to go beyond *what* Christians believe to a better understanding of why these beliefs are reasonable. Douglas Groothuis's book *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* is a great choice for a broad introductory study of apologetics and can be studied one short section at a time. For those who need to wade in more slowly, *Keeping Your Kids on God's Side: 40 Conversations to Help Them Build a Lasting Faith* (Harvest House, forthcoming 2016) by Natasha Crain conveniently encapsulates key apologetic issues and offers tips for incorporating them into conversations with children. Some basic instruction in philosophy is necessary as well; for example, an understanding of the rules of logic is central to evaluating ideas and analyzing the competing truth claims children will inevitably be bombarded with. *The Fallacy Detective* by Hans and Nathaniel Bluedorn and *Learning Logic* by William Lane Craig are resources suitable for middle school students up to adults and could be used for a parent/child study.

Literary apologetics should not be overlooked, as engaging the imagination with Christian images and themes supports and enriches evidence-based, historical, and philosophical approaches. In fact, story often has potency where logic and evidence fail to persuade. C. S. Lewis's Narnia chronicles, for example, will appeal to the imagination of children while presenting profoundly Christian themes. Based on my experience with my own sons, I have come to prize conversational learning, and great Christian literature provides excellent, entertaining inspiration. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Lewis's Ransom trilogy are wonderful selections to introduce during the teenage years, when children are ready to explore faith on a more advanced level.

Conversion memoirs are helpful for gaining insight about sharing faith with nonbelievers in our lives in a respectful manner, a skill that could prove invaluable to mothers training their teen children in evangelism or those seeking to reach their adult children who have walked away from the faith. Jennifer Fulwiler's *Something Other than God* is a beautiful account that emphasizes the importance of reason and evidence; Holly Ordway's *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms* illustrates the role Christian literature can have in the journey to faith; and C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy* is a fine example of how God can capture the heart of even the most reluctant individual and then go on to use him in mighty ways.

SUPPORTING MOTHERS IN THEIR MISSION

The evangelical church, broadly speaking, is doing a commendable job of addressing many of the emotional and spiritual needs of women, offering quality Bible study resources and conferences. Typical women's events feature speakers gifted in the art of inspirational storytelling and Christian encouragement. The enormous deficiency is the lack of pointed exhortation to women to expand their intellect as an act of worshipful obedience and for the discipleship of their children. There are very few appealing opportunities for women to gather for in-depth training in doctrine and apologetics. While it is true that classes and conferences that offer such education are not male-specific, many women need the encouragement that stems from learning alongside sisters in Christ. Furthermore, the widespread perception that theology, philosophy, and apologetics are predominately "men's" disciplines is diminished when women have the opportunity to gather together and learn from female scholars in these fields.

Substantial practical support is crucial, particularly for mothers of very small children, single mothers, mothers working outside the home, or those who have taken on the added responsibility of homeschooling. Husbands must be on board, but the support of other family members may be indispensable. Domestic assistance in the form of childcare or housekeeping may help make dedicated learning time a reality for many mothers. Even if lightening their load involves a modest financial cost, such as a part-time sitter, this is more than justified in light of the significant investment being made. The church can partner with families by making childcare readily available when

lectures and conferences are held. Unfortunately, fathers often attend such events alone, while mothers remain at home to care for the children. The church can and should help remedy this.

KEY AMBASSADORS

When mothers seek to love and glorify God with all the capacities He has instilled within them, they are better able to contribute to the spiritual flourishing of their children—and even their grandchildren. Remember the grandmother who wanted to prepare for her grandchildren’s summer visit? She approached me several months later to let me know that her granddaughter had accepted Christ soon after reading one of the books I had recommended. Moreover, the young lady’s conversion inspired a noticeable softening in her parents, who have begun attending church.

Mothers have an ideal opportunity to guide their children toward an intellectually robust faith by fostering conversations that promote critical thinking and providing credible answers to tough questions. They need ongoing encouragement, a realistic learning strategy, practical support, and a church community that is proactive in facilitating the excellent education of women. Mothers are among the most influential ambassadors the church has at its disposal, and helping them realize their potential as disciples and disciple-makers should be a top priority. After all, the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that can do spectacular work for the Kingdom of God.

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NOTES

- 1 See Matthew 22:37 and 28:19–20.
- 2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 77.
- 3 William Wilberforce, in his *Real Christianity* (1829 American edition), denounced “hereditary” Christianity and urged parents to instruct their children in both the principles of the faith and arguments for its defense.