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## EQUIPPING THE NEXT GENERATION

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### Synopsis

Current research reveals that we are realistically in danger of not passing on biblical Christianity to the next generation. Both an overexposure to worldly philosophy and an overdependence on church programs have caused us to fail in our task to hand off a vibrant, kingdom-focused faith. To counteract this dangerous direction, five pivotal factors are needed.

First, we need a clear definition of what we're looking for—do we want nice kids who don't get in trouble, or passionate followers of Christ? Second, we must adopt a multigenerational perspective, providing opportunities for those older and wiser in the faith to impart a spiritual legacy to the next generation. Third, following the Deuteronomy 6 model, parents must possess and pass their faith on to their children, making the most of teachable moments and everyday life. Fourth, dads must take the lead, recognizing that they are the spiritual thermostat of the home and are commanded to raise their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Finally, both the home and the church must educate in sound doctrine, equip in apologetics, and explain moral principles. Raising confident teens with a desire to make an impact for God's glory doesn't happen by itself. This requires eyes to see teachable moments and the determination to intentionally pass on our faith in daily living.

In the futuristic novel *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley portrays a society whose scientific advancements have produced complete stability and happiness, but only by eliminating virtue, truth, family, and religious belief. His closing chapters offer a fascinating dialogue between the Controller and John, who was raised outside of modern civilization. At one point John asks:

"How does [God] manifest himself now?"

"Well, he manifests himself as an absence; as though he weren't there at all."

"That's your fault."

"Call it the fault of civilization. God isn't compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness. You must make your choice. Our civilization has chosen machinery and medicine and happiness. That's why I have to keep these books locked up in the safe."<sup>1</sup>

Although written as fiction, Huxley's vision of a world blissfully ignorant of its religious heritage is actually not as odd as it used to be. Imagine a future church historian writing that "another generation grew up, who didn't know the Lord or what He had done for America." Too extreme? Or could we be in danger of losing an entire generation, as Israel did ([Judges 2:10](#))? The sobering statistics indicate that we are failing to pass on the essential beliefs and values of Christianity:

- Eighty-five percent of youth from Christian homes attending public schools do not hold a biblical worldview.<sup>2</sup>

- About *eight million* twentysomethings who were active churchgoers as teenagers will no longer be active in church by their thirtieth birthdays.<sup>3</sup>

The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), the most extensive research on the religious lives of U.S. teenagers to date, found:<sup>4</sup>

- The majority of teenagers are incredibly inarticulate about their faith and its meaning in their lives. They find it almost impossible to put basic beliefs into words.

- Teens are “functional deists”—they believe God exists, created the world, and set life in motion, but that He only becomes involved with them personally to make their lives happier or to solve problems.

- Many teens (including conservative Protestants) reject the essential doctrine of salvation by grace; three out of five believe people can earn a place in heaven if they are generally good, or do enough good things for others.

- When deciding right from wrong in difficult situations, only thirty-one percent of Southern Baptist teens said they turned to God or the Scriptures. Almost an identical percent said they decided based on whether it made them feel happy or helped them get ahead in life.

In light of these findings, Ken Hemphill wrote, “If we fail to hand to the next generation a vibrant, kingdom-focused faith, we could see the tragedy of churches that become a respected part of the landscape of American culture, a sort of historic relic of the past, but with little vitality or relevance for the modern-day America [sic].”<sup>5</sup>

Josh McDowell’s concern for today’s young people is so great that he wrote *The Last Christian Generation*, explaining his title: “I realize the title of this book may be shocking. But the decision to call this *The Last Christian Generation* was not made lightly nor was it done for sensationalism. I sincerely believe unless something is done now to change the spiritual state of our young people—you will become the last Christian generation!”<sup>6</sup>

Why are our youth, with seemingly all the tools needed to thrive, failing to filter their life choices through God’s Word? Why is there a disconnect between Christianity and the world they face every day? Hasn’t there been enough training on morality, worldviews, and evangelism to produce a stronger emerging generation?

## FUMBLER FAITH

In track and field, the four-person relay is centered on successfully passing a baton from one runner to the next. A handoff outside the passing zone disqualifies the team, while a fumbled baton leaves the team far behind in the race. The handoff of God’s truth to the next generation must also occur during a specific window of time and must not be dropped in the exchange. After working with youth and families for twenty years, I have observed two common causes for a fumbled faith: overexposure to worldly philosophy and overdependence on church programs.

### *Overexposure to Worldly Philosophy*

If teenagers’ perceptions of religion are primarily influenced by media, peers, and man-centered education, they will naturally have a distorted view of Christianity. When we don’t aggressively counter the lies of the world with biblical truth, youth are easily taken captive by deceptive philosophies ([Col. 2:8](#)). When teens are not equipped to combat false ideas with sound answers ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)), they are

dazzled and consumed by our godless culture. We reap what we sow. If our kids are saturated with humanistic ideas from entertainment and the Internet, we shouldn't expect a harvest of truth and righteousness ([Gal. 6:7-8](#)). Far too many parents watch their kids sow seeds of destruction, but then somehow hope for a crop of righteousness.

### *Overdependence on Church Programs*

Even in the twenty-first century, parents are the single most important influence on the spiritual lives of adolescents, not church leaders or programs.<sup>7</sup> When asked who or what shapes their attitudes and actions, seventy-eight percent of teens named their parents.<sup>8</sup> The NSYR explained that "many teenagers use the youth group more as a source of social gatherings rather than spiritual growth...Once the teenager graduates and moves beyond the social 'bubble' of the youth group, his or her attitude about religion likely will swing back toward the basic values of his [sic] elders."<sup>9</sup>

Parents must embrace the fact that the home is where actual learning occurs and that their faith is essential for a successful handoff. Children don't want to just hear what mom and dad think about Christianity; they want to see that these beliefs make a difference in daily living within the context of a heart-level relationship. When a parent's faith is not lived out at all times, it is perceived as merely a hobby unrelated to reality. This inconsistency causes kids to compartmentalize their spiritual lives and eventually outgrow beliefs they have never seen modeled.

## **BUILDING NEXT-GENERATION CHRISTIANS**

Five pivotal factors are needed to counteract the dangerous direction of the next generation:

**1. A clear definition of what we're looking for.** While this might sound obvious, we must honestly ask, "What constitutes a healthy Christian teenager?" Too often we define such teens as those who believe in God, act nicely, and aren't pregnant, on drugs, or in jail. Tim Kimmel defines *true greatness* as "a passionate love for Jesus Christ that shows itself in an unquenchable love and concern for others."<sup>10</sup> The question is, do we truly communicate this? What we spend our energy, time, and money on is our *actual* message. Are we as concerned with Scripture memorization as we are about academics? As fired up about Christ as about sporting events? Do our children know that no accomplishment would be more meaningful to us than seeing them make an impact for God's kingdom? We must communicate that sports, the arts, and academics are all avenues to minister and be salt and light.

A clear vision for our children's future faith is critical because secular philosophers and professors have their own agenda for families. Atheist Richard Dawkins openly challenges a parent's right to raise a child from a religious viewpoint: "It's one thing to say people should be free to believe whatever they like, but should they be free to impose their beliefs on their children? Is there something to be said for society stepping in?"<sup>11</sup> In his book, *What's So Great About Christianity?* Dinesh D'Souza cites philosopher Richard Rorty's message to parents about the role of professors: "We are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable."<sup>12</sup> Do Christian parents have as detailed a plan for their children's faith as the secular humanists?

**2. A multigenerational perspective.** A friend recently commented to me about his grandfather, saying, "His prayer is that all of his descendants until Jesus returns will become Christians." *I immediately thought, nobody uses the word "descendants" anymore. We don't think like that. But we should.* [Psalms 78:1-8](#) describes fathers and grandfathers making a successful handoff to succeeding generations by declaring God's praiseworthy deeds and ensuring that His moral principles are followed.

This leads to some important questions: If we grow wise by walking with the wise ([Prov. 13:20](#)), do our churches provide opportunities for those older and wiser in the faith to pass a spiritual legacy to the next generation? Are we intentionally surrounding teens with Bible-saturated saints? How often do

we arrange structured activities for the entire family? While Scripture often shows families worshiping and studying God's Word together ([Exod. 10:8–11](#); [Deut. 29:10–13](#); [31:12–13](#); [Josh. 8:35](#); [2 Kings 23:2](#); [2 Chron. 20:13](#); [Neh. 8:2–3](#); [12:43](#)), virtually every church program splits up families.

A radical yet needed step is to rethink the way we view young people and youth ministry. Our modern concepts of adolescence are based on humanistic philosophy. Since the beginning of history until about one hundred years ago, teenagers were always regarded as *adults* in the early years of adulthood, not *children* in the final phase of childhood. In the early 1900s, Dr. G. Stanley Hall, an avid Darwinist, implemented evolutionary concepts into his field of psychology, believing that humans continue to follow evolutionary development after birth and that the adolescent years were the final step in the process of becoming fully human, moving evolution to the next stage. Therefore, teenagers should be separated from other age groups and, since each generation is superior to the previous, rebellion is their destiny.

As this idea of isolating adolescents caught on in schools and churches, we essentially created a new class of people: teenagers. Note that this method of splitting up by age was an application of *evolutionary* principles, not the biblical pattern of younger generations gleaned from older. Youth groups sometimes even detract from maturity because the emphasis is mostly on fun, reinforcing the mindset that they are still children and feeding an attitude of self-indulgence during these supposed limbo years. We must therefore diligently build into our young people the understanding that they are called to make an impact now ([Eph. 5:15–16](#)).

**3. Parents who possess and pass their faith.** The expression “more is caught than taught” means that we communicate what we actually believe through choices, not just words. As already mentioned, parents often send unintended messages to their kids: When dad lets nothing get in the way of game day preparations and yells at the referee, yet won't carve out time for a fifteen-minute family devotion or express himself in worship, he is communicating what he truly believes is important. When mom can afford a weekly pedicure, the latest beauty products, and fashionable clothes, but won't give a penny to the local crisis pregnancy center, the message about what matters is loud and clear.

With this in mind, could parents confidently say to their kids, “Follow our example as we follow the example of Christ” ([1 Cor. 11:1](#))? My wife often reminds other moms to “be a super model” (i.e., a model of Christ). There is no neutral home environment; either our children see Christ as one part of a compartmentalized life or they see that Christ is our life ([Phil. 1:21](#)).

The principle to remember is that *parents cannot impart what they do not possess*. By God's design, the lived-out beliefs of parents are the key ingredient to imparting their faith to the next generation. The clearest description of this is [Deuteronomy 6:4–9](#), which instructs parents to first possess a wholehearted relationship with God, holding His commands in their hearts, and then intentionally *pass* a godly legacy on to their children. This lifestyle of modeling and communicating is the intertwining of biblical principles and a Christian worldview within the context of life: pointing out the beauty of God's creation, explaining the principles behind family standards, critiquing the philosophy of a movie together, praying for lost friends, and cultivating an atmosphere where kids feel unconditionally loved and safe to share struggles and dreams.

**4. Dads who take the lead.** Dads are the spiritual thermostats of the home. According to both [Malachi 4:6](#) and [Luke 1:16–17](#), when a father's heart turns toward his children, this affects the children's attitude toward their father, and prepares them for God's work. Furthermore, [Ephesians 6:4](#) commands dad deliberately to train and instruct his children. This doesn't mean dads have to know it all—if a child asks something they don't know, they should search Scripture and ask God for wisdom. If a father is not sure how to lead spiritually, he should talk to mature believers and find helpful resources. Satan's lie is that parents are not qualified to train their children, but God has already provided all the grace required ([2 Cor. 9:8](#); [2 Pet. 3:3–4](#)).

**5. Homes and churches that educate, equip, and explain.** Undergirding all of these crucial relationships must be the presence of clearly communicated truth. When teenagers were asked the open-ended question, “Why did you fall away from the faith in which you were raised?” the number one answer was “intellectual skepticism.”<sup>13</sup>

Children often think they’re sinning if they have doubts (I call it *Thomasphobia*—the fear of doubting). If not encouraged to express these doubts, they will either suppress all questions and adopt a *blind faith*, or they will be easily swayed by fine-sounding yet false arguments and end up with a *dead faith*. Wrestling with tough issues in a loving yet truth-centered environment is a great way for a child’s faith to actually become *his* or *her* faith.

With these five elements in mind, both the home and church must:

**1. Educate in sound doctrine.** When News week and Beliefnet asked the question, “Can a good person who doesn’t share your religious beliefs attain salvation or go to heaven?” Sixty-eight percent of evangelical Protestants said yes.<sup>14</sup> This underscores the importance of accurately teaching what Christianity is about and why it is true. Many teens are oblivious to what their faith traditions say they are supposed to believe. Their vague perceptions of religion often contradict the actual teachings of their own religious tradition.<sup>15</sup>

**2. Equip in apologetics.** Though apologetics provides the basis of a well-placed faith ([1 Cor. 15:14–17](#)), young people don’t often appreciate this until a crisis arises (e.g., a challenging teacher, a personal calamity, a Buddhist roommate, etc.). They must understand that faith is not belief despite the evidence, that believing does not make something true, and that sincerity is not all that counts. Rather, biblical faith is trusting in truth that is reasonable to believe. When properly equipped, students will confidently live, defend, and share their faith. ([Col. 4:5–6](#))

**3. Explain moral principles.** Because we want so badly for our young people to live pure lives, we often bypass the foundational step of explaining the moral principles behind God’s commands and how these reflect His perfect character. In addition to right answers or Bible verses in their heads, they must have the wisdom and discernment to transfer biblical principles to diverse situations. Just as essential is the understanding that moral choices reveal what we truly believe about God, His Word, and His plan for our lives ([Titus 1:16](#)).

## NAVIGATIONAL QUESTIONS

Having a map is very helpful if travelers need to get somewhere. Before they can begin, however, they must know *where they are* and *where they intend to go*. As we turn to practical ways to equip and disciple those coming after us, it might be tempting to think there is insufficient time for such a major task. However, we make time for what is important to us (hobbies, reading, TV). If an employee got a promotion at work that required learning new material or skills, would the employee tell the boss that he or she did not have the time to get up to speed? No, that employee would put in the effort to read, ask questions, and plan how to fulfill his or her new role. Likewise, taking on the God-given responsibility to pass on our faith and make necessary changes might feel inconvenient, but remember what’s at stake: we are already on the verge of losing the next generation.

### Where Are You?

Allow these questions<sup>16</sup> to help determine where you currently are in the next-generation handoff (if you don’t have children, you can still disciple those younger in the faith): What is the quality of your relationship with God? Is it at such a level that you would be happy if your child never rises above it? Is your greatest desire that your children live for God’s glory? How have you communicated this in words and priorities? If you were to ask them, “What is most important to me?” what would they honestly say? Do your children know what you believe? Have you told them? Do you know what *they* believe? Have

you asked them? Have you shared your testimony with them? Have you ever asked them to share theirs? Have they ever seen you witness to or pray for a lost person? How often do you use encouraging and affirming words with your children? Do you ever spend time as a family in prayer or Bible reading? Have you ever shared strategies for spiritual growth with them?

### **Where Are You Going?**

Having a healthy Christian family is a choice, and raising confident teens with a desire to make an impact for God's glory doesn't happen by itself. When you picture your child in the future, what do you see? A passionate love for Jesus shown in an unquenchable love for others? The truth is, the current choices of most parents are not leading to the future result they desire for their children. To put it bluntly, your future picture of them may only be a fantasy. This is why we must be intentional about what is most important in life. If I pass on to my children the skills to succeed in this world but don't train them how to chase what matters, I am not fulfilling my role as a parent. I don't want to meet Christ face to face and discover that how we spent our time, energy, and treasure was insignificant to His kingdom ([1 Cor. 3:12-15](#)).

So how serious are you that your children possess both orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right action)? Do you desire that they see academics, sports, hobbies, and work as a springboard for Kingdom impact? Do you want them equipped to articulate and defend their faith with boldness, gentleness, and respect? ([1 Pet. 3:15](#)). Should they not only survive college, but also thrive?<sup>17</sup> As Voddie Baucham reminds us, "there is a big difference between sending fully trained disciples into enemy territory and sending recruits to our enemy's training camp. If we do the latter, we shouldn't be surprised when they come home wearing the enemy's uniform and charging the hill of our home while waving an enemy flag."<sup>18</sup>

### **How Will You Get There?**

As a final step, plan how to begin moving in the right direction with realistic actions. The Deuteronomy 6 model describes these as a natural part of your everyday life (as you walk, lie down, get up, etc.). This requires eyes to see teachable moments and the determination to intentionally pass on your faith.

There are various ways to impart Bible-centered values, a Christian worldview, and Christ-honoring character. Overall, your kids need and want time with you. In a 2007 MTV survey, thirteen- to twenty-four-year-olds were asked the open-ended question, "What makes you happy?" The top answer was *spending time with family*.<sup>19</sup>

Be purposeful in using words of affirmation and encouragement. Frequently hug them and tell them they are loved and appreciated. Use mealtimes to discuss fun or thought-provoking questions.<sup>20</sup> Tell your kids how they are being prayed for, and ask for prayer requests, and pray together.

Have regular one-on-ones—go grab a soft drink or snack and talk about life. Have a Family Fun Night: one evening each week set aside for family bonding and fun (play a game, plan a brief Bible lesson, worship together, go to a park, stop for ice cream).<sup>21</sup> Build a family memorial: a shelf lined with items to remember stories of God's faithfulness, protection, provision, and answered prayer ([Deut. 4:9](#), [Josh. 4:4-7](#)); share a story each week at mealtime.

Train children *how* to study the Bible, draw out the meaning, and apply it. If the goal is for children to learn something, learn together. Don't just give them a book on adolescence or an mp3 on evolution; read or listen to it together, discuss it, do more research. Have them share what they believe about salvation; explain to them why Jesus is our only hope. Clarify what evolution and Intelligent Design are and then make it practical: visit Web sites or a natural history museum, watch *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, discuss God's revelation to man in [Romans 1:18-21](#). To test what they think, play

devil's advocate. Challenge them with age-appropriate subjects: *Where does the Bible say that? Why do you think God hears your prayers? How come you don't think the universe came from nothing? Why does God allow evil? How can you say Jesus is the only way?*

Create family service opportunities: help an elderly neighbor move, go on a mission trip, invite someone (or a whole family) over for a meal. When they demonstrate godly character, make a big deal of it.

Talk about the power of words by illustrating [Proverbs 12:18](#) with a sword (or big knife) and a first aid kit. Encourage them when they ask questions ("That is such a great question! I'm glad you asked") and take the time to answer.

For daughters, have a Daddy Date Night. Choose a time to talk about purity and modesty. For sons, pick manly Bible heroes and discuss their character qualities.<sup>22</sup>

Talk honestly and seriously about sex, lust, pornography, and strategies to combat temptation. Have a Rite Night ceremony for a son or daughter's passage into adulthood.

Go through an age-appropriate catechism to reinforce foundational Christian beliefs. Look up all the celebrities who have committed suicide, have eating disorders, or need rehabilitation for substance abuse, and discuss the deceitfulness and emptiness of fame. For dads, ask to be mentored about how to lead a family by a respected father.

What will the next generation look like? The statistics are undeniable: we cannot maintain the status quo, relying on church programs alone to equip our children. Scripture makes it clear that evangelism begins with the souls that live under one's roof and that parents are to raise them in the training and instruction of the Lord. Do you view your offspring as gifts, rewards, and arrows ([Ps. 127:3-4](#)), and your young people as warriors ([1 John 2:14](#))? The bottom line is, it is not someone else's job to disciple your children; it is your awesome privilege and solemn responsibility. The role of a parent is to fulfill the biblical command, live a life worthy of the calling he or she has received ([Eph. 4:1](#)), and entrust the outcome to a sovereign God.

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Notes

1 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 240.

2 Nehemiah Institute, Inc. PEERS Trend Chart and Explanation (Lexington, KY: Nehemiah Institute, 2004).

3 "Twentysomethings Struggle to Find Their Place in Christian Churches," Barna Research Online, September 24, 2003, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/127-twentysomethings-struggle-to-find-their-place-in-christianchurches>.

4 NSYR data cited in Richard Ross, gen. ed., *Transforming Student Ministry: Research Calling for Change* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2005), 6-8, 46, 114.

5 Ross, 14.

6 Josh McDowell and David H. Bellis, *The Last Christian Generation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006)

7 Ross, 82.

8 McDowell and Bellis, 59–60.

9 Ross, 63.

10 Tim Kimmel, *Raising Truly Great Kids* conference workbook (Family Matters, 2007), 46.

11 Richard Dawkins, *the God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 315.

12 Richard Rorty, "Universality and Truth," in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 22.

13 McDowell and Bellis, 79.

14 Jerry Adler, "In Search of the Spiritual," *Newsweek*, September 5, 2005, 48–49, cited in McDowell and Bellis, 34.

15 McDowell and Bellis, 43–44.

16 Many of these practical questions are scattered throughout *Transforming Student Ministry*.

17 I recommend *How to Stay Christian in College* by J. Budziszewski (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999), and the Student Survival Kit audio series by Greg Koukl (available through Stand to Reason, <http://www.str.org>).

18 Voddie T. Baucham, Jr., *Family Driven Faith: What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 126.

19 "MTV and the Associated Press Release Landmark Study of Young People and Happiness," August 20, 2007, <http://www.mtv.com/thinkmtv/research/>.

20 A helpful resource for this purpose is Gary Chapman and Ramon Presson, *Love Talks for Families* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2002).

21 Heritage Builders offers excellent resources for family night ideas (<http://www.heritagebuilders.com>).

22 I recommend *The Gauntlet: A Study of Some of the Most Challenging Men in the Bible That Even Works for Busy Fathers and Sons* (to order, contact Chris Legg at [Chris.m.legg@gmail.com](mailto:Chris.m.legg@gmail.com)).