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## YOUNG ADULT ATTRITION IN THE AMERICAN CHURCH: THE SUSPECTED CAUSES AND SUGGESTED CURES

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**YOUNG ADULT ATTRITION IN THE AMERICAN CHURCH:  
THE SUSPECTED CAUSES AND SUGGESTED CURES**

A PROJECT DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY  
IN THE BARNETT COLLEGE OF MINISTRY AND THEOLOGY  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY  
RANDALL MARK MORROW  
SPRING 2023



DISSERTATION COMMITTEE SIGNATURE PAGE

This dissertation, written by

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under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Committee identified below and approved by all members of that Committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Barnett College of Ministry and Theology of Southeastern University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry.

May 30, 2023



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## ABSTRACT

Young adults in America today are deciding that the Church is no longer relevant, so they are choosing to drop out in increasing numbers. Their disaffiliation from communities of faith is also harming their personal faith. This observation is irrespective of Church denominations; their exodus occurs in most faith groups, including Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal/Charismatic denominations. Consequently, the future vitality of the Church is threatened. Why does this problem exist, and what can be done to intervene and change the downward trajectory? What should Christian parents and ministry leaders do differently to achieve a higher retention rate of children transitioning through adolescence into adulthood? The research of this project seeks to discern the cause of this withdrawal and recommend solutions to reverse this debilitating trend. Young adults were interviewed – those who have remained in the Church and those who have checked out. Parents of young adults and ministry leaders in positions to observe those young adults were also interviewed. Other researchers have conducted extensive qualitative and quantitative analyses on the perspectives of young adults. Reasons for ecclesiastical departure by young adults have been categorized and noted. The uniqueness of this project is the nexus of Christian parents and ministry leaders partnering together with biblical principles as they focus on the spiritual development of children so that they remain in the Church and the faith. As parents focus on improving the spiritual formation of children in the home and as ministry leaders concentrate on improving the discipleship of children in the Church, the divine blessings promised in Scripture about such collaborative efforts will be explored in this study.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all my children, those born to your precious mother and me, and those who have married into our family. The fully devoted followership of Jesus by each one of you and how every one of you expresses your passionate commitment to Him through your ministry in our local church inspired me to pursue this research project. Thank you all for being such exemplary servants as you lead so well in alignment with your unique gifts. You have built an amazing ministry together, a formidable force significantly impacting the world for the Kingdom of God. My generation's ceiling has become your generation's floor upon which you continue to build. I am also humbly grateful to you all for allowing me the time to research, discover, and articulate the biblical principles for child spiritual formation and to share them with the rest of the world through this project. May many others benefit from this effort.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Pam Morrow**, you have been by my side throughout this project. You have been my greatest critic as well as my greatest cheerleader. This project is not just mine; it is ours. You deliberately chose to abandon your career as an educator and work at home during the formative years of our children's lives to put into practice some of the principles explained herein. You decided to trade short-term benefits for long-term rewards; you exchanged success for significance and wound up with both. Thank you.

**Alan Ehler**, when I turned fifty, I was uneducated, but by the time I turned sixty, I had earned bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees. What a decade! You were faithfully there all along the way, calling on me regularly to continue the pursuit even though I frequently plateaued between degrees and considered settling. As a true leader, you have seen in me something that I did not see in myself, and you called it out repeatedly with great persistence. Thank you.

**Duane Durst**, what started as an arbitrary mentor/apprentice assignment as a part of my doctoral program slowly evolved into a deep, genuine friendship. You welcomed far more calls from me than what the syllabus required. It transcended the professional to the personal. You have not just coached me; you have pastored me. Then when I attempted to limit this project's scope to just my local context, you continued to push me to a nationwide opportunity that would open doors and have a lasting impact. You urged me to go beyond the easy to embrace the difficult. I will always be indebted to you for taking personal ownership of this project and making countless calls on my behalf, leveraging your reputation with others, and taking a risk on me. You are passing that baton that sits so prominently on your desk very well. Thank you.

**Jamie Stewart**, you were one of the first to call me after I suffered my cardiac arrest and miraculous recovery. Your message, "God is not finished with you yet!" motivated me to re-enroll in my educational pursuits and rise to the challenge of earning a doctoral degree. As the Content Specialist for this project, you raised the standard very high. Your conscientious approach to all the editing is greatly appreciated; this project is far better. Thank you.

**CrossWalk Church**, you have paid the price over the past few years as I have had to delegate leadership to our amazing team and focus my efforts on my studies. How could I ever forget your patience and encouragement? You are the best congregation for which a pastor could ever hope. You are not just parishioners; you are friends, very dear friends. Thank you.



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## TERM USAGE

The words *Bible*, *Scripture*, and *God's Word* are used interchangeably, referring to the sacred text that followers of Jesus Christ consider divinely inspired and their authoritative rule for faith and conduct. The words *Millennial*, *Gen Z*, and *emerging generation* all refer to the same young adult age cohort. Furthermore, the words *Christian*, *disciple*, *believer*, and *follower of Christ* are synonymous. The word *child-rearing* is used instead of *child-raising* due to the traditional English notion that the word *raise* used to be limited to physical nourishment whereas the word *rear* also included training and nurture. Hence, ranchers raise livestock, but parents rear children. Lastly, the word *church* is lowercase when referring to a local congregation of believers, but it is capitalized *Church* when referring to the one global body of followers of Jesus Christ.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE PROJECT INTRODUCED

### *Introduction*

In an interview on Fresh Air with Terry Gross about an upcoming movie, Brad Pitt reflected on his spiritual upbringing to the National Public Radio audience:

It was Sunday School and doing good and Bible study and daily prayer. I don't know at what point I became aware that other cultures believed in different religions, but my question was, "Well, why don't they get to go to heaven then?" And that didn't sit well with me. It wasn't 'til I left home that I really came to the conclusion that it didn't make sense to me for many other reasons.<sup>1</sup>

Although this Academy Award-winning actor is older than the age range of the subjects in this research, Pitt does represent the worldview of many Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Gen Zers (born 1997-2012).<sup>2</sup> They were reared in the church but no longer consider themselves a part of it.

Countless young adults in America today are deciding the Church is no longer relevant to them, and they are choosing to drop out in increasing numbers. Other studies show that this disaffiliation is also jeopardizing their personal faith. This observation is irrespective of Church denominations. Consequently, the future vitality of the Church is threatened. Why does this problem exist, and what can be done to intervene and change the downward trajectory? What should Christian parents and ministry leaders do differently to achieve a higher retention rate of children transitioning through adolescence into adulthood? The research of this project seeks to discern the cause of this exodus and recommend solutions to reverse the debilitating trend.

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<sup>1</sup> Brad Pitt, "'Moneyball,' Life, and 'The Stalkerazzi,'" (Fresh Air interview, National Public Radio, Philadelphia, PA, September 22, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

A metaphor that helps illustrate this social and spiritual dynamic is the U.S. men's 4x100 Olympic relay teams. The number of recent failures of these teams on the international stage is very perplexing. From 1920 to 2000, the U.S. dominated this event, winning gold in fifteen of the nineteen Olympic Games. Since then, however, the Americans have had a history of baffling ineptitude in the 4x100 relay. Interestingly, the U.S. regularly has two or three sprinters for the 100m dash in the Olympic finals, yet they cannot put a team on the podium for the 4x100 relay. Meanwhile, Japan and China, which have never produced a single medalist in the 100m dash, regularly make the 4x100 relay final and keep winning medals.<sup>3</sup> It is quite a paradox.

The U.S. competitors have access to the best resources, including training facilities, food and nutritional supplements, running gear, scientific research, and coaches. However, a recurring problem in the relay vexes them, heat after heat, year after year. Speed and proficiency are important factors, but it is all for naught if a seamless baton exchange fails to occur from one runner to the next. The exchange zone between runners is a brief portion of the relay race. The changeover happens in a relatively small box that is only twenty meters long and lasts just 1.9 seconds in an Olympic contest. However, its execution determines the outcome of the entire race.<sup>4</sup> For the American relay teams, they produce the fastest individuals in the world, but their nemesis continues to be their botched baton handoff again and again.

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<sup>3</sup> Doug Robinson, "Trying to Make Sense of the U.S. 4x100 Relay Team Blunders," *Deseret News*, August 8, 2021. <https://www.deseret.com/2021/8/7/22614436/trying-to-make-sense-of-united-states-4x100-relay-team-blunders-fred-kerley-ronnie-baker>.

<sup>4</sup> Rahul Venkat, "All You Need to Know About Relay Races: Rules, History, World Records," The International Olympic Committee, August 26, 2021, <https://olympics.com/en/featured-news/athletics-relay-races-rules-history-world-records-olympics>.

### *The Opportunity Addressed by this Project*

What has occurred in the 4x100 relay race for the Americans at the Olympic games over the past two decades illustrates a much greater concern that poses even more significant consequences. A previous generation of Christian parents and ministry leaders are failing to transfer their church commitment and faith in Christ to the emerging generation. When Christian youth graduate from high school, many seem to also graduate from faith. Barna Group researcher David Kinnaman summarizes, “The ages eighteen to twenty-nine are the black hole of church attendance; this segment is missing in action from most congregations.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Christian families and churches in America have the best resources available. Books, blogs, journals, and website articles abound with every advice and tool imaginable. Furthermore, the previous generation has produced some of the most outstanding leaders and curricula in the history of the Church. They should be able to pass on a spiritual heritage to the emerging generation successfully. Although Ps 78:4 commands Christian parents and ministry leaders to “tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,”<sup>6</sup> for some reason, during the relatively brief exchange zone in life called adolescence, the passing of a religious legacy keeps getting botched. In the end, to draw on Paul’s analogy in 2 Tim 4:7, it does not matter how well the previous generation ran; if the next generation fails to catch the baton and continue the race, then it is all in vain. No wonder secularism is prevailing and influencing the culture of the United States today.

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<sup>5</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by the Tyndale House Foundation.

### *The Rationale for this Project*

There is cause for serious concern about young adults reared in Christian homes and the emphasis by the local churches in which many of them attend. More and more young adults find the Church less relevant in meeting their spiritual needs. Many Christian parents seem inept at the spiritual formation of their children, and numerous ministry leaders appear to lack a priority for discipleship of the emerging generation.

### Young adults face a challenge

Multiple studies show that most of the young people in American churches, regardless of their participation in Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, or Pentecostal/Charismatic denominations, will drop out of Church and risk faltering in their faith as they transition from childhood through adolescence into adulthood. Lifeway Research recently conducted one such study. In 2019, they discovered that sixty-six percent of American young adults who attended a church regularly for at least a year during high school said they dropped out for at least one year afterward.<sup>7</sup> The Barna Group is another research organization that has devoted considerable time analyzing the religious views of young adults in America over the past twenty years. Their conclusions are almost the same. Their most current data reveals that the church dropout rate grew from fifty-nine percent in 2011 to sixty-four percent in 2019 among young adults eighteen to twenty-nine after being actively involved in a church during their childhood and youth.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> “LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church,” LifeWay Research, August 10, 2007, <https://www.archbalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/lifewayresearch.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, and Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in a Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 15.

Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary also launched a six-year qualitative and longitudinal quantitative study called the College Transition Project. According to their research, various denominations report that sixty-four percent to ninety-four percent of their high school students stop attending church after graduation.<sup>9</sup> According to a Gallup study, evidence shows that the plummeting numbers in church attendance are partly due to the significant attrition rate among young adults transitioning from dependence to independence. As the older generation of churchgoers passes away, the pipeline of replacements by the emerging generation of adults is not keeping up. Church membership among young adults is down considerably in the past decade.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the young adult attrition rate in the American Church also gained the attention of the Pew Research Center. Their data shows that as young adults age, the U.S. is steadily becoming less Christian and less religiously observant.<sup>11</sup> After interviewing over 1,000 young adults who regularly attended church in high school, Rainer Research also discovered that two-thirds of them drop out between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two.<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to say that the American Church has a young adult dropout problem that must be addressed.

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<sup>9</sup> Kara Powell, "High School Youth Group Seniors Transitioning to College: Risk Behavior, Social Support, Religiosity, and Attitude toward Youth Group," *Christian Education Journal Research on Educational Ministry* 5 (2008): 47-59, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313212313\\_High\\_School\\_Youth\\_Group\\_Seniors\\_Transitioning\\_to\\_College\\_Risk\\_Behavior\\_Social\\_Support\\_Religiosity\\_and\\_Attitude\\_toward\\_Youth\\_Group](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313212313_High_School_Youth_Group_Seniors_Transitioning_to_College_Risk_Behavior_Social_Support_Religiosity_and_Attitude_toward_Youth_Group).

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "How Religious Are Americans?" *Gallup News*, December 23, 2021. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/358364/religious-americans.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

<sup>12</sup> Thom S. Rainer & Sam S. Rainer. *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2008).



### Christian parents face a challenge

This study shows that the primary responsibility for children's faith retention lies with their parents. The Scriptures reviewed herein show that God has called parents to do the spiritual formation for their children in their homes. However, according to Marissa Boonstra, more and more Christian parents neglect that practice and outsource their sacred role to the local church instead.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in the *Journal of Theological Dialog*, Marcia Bunge claims that this responsibility is not the role of the local church. She states that while ministry leaders should develop discipleship programs to bolster children's faith, God never intended for them to substitute for parents. Bunge insists that church discipleship programs should never operate in isolation of the home but simply as an extension of the home.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, one study was conducted with over 8,000 teenagers whose parents were members of congregations in eleven different denominations. It found that only ten percent of those families discussed faith with any degree of regularity, and in forty-three percent, faith was never discussed.<sup>15</sup>

### Ministry leaders face a challenge

In 2015, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research discovered that almost all the ministry leaders surveyed (over 4,400) admitted to not having a thriving presence of young adults in their

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<sup>13</sup> Marissa Boonstra, "Stop Relying on Church for Your Kids' Spiritual Training," *Called to Mothering* (blog) September 15, 2017. <https://calledtomothering.com/2017/09/15/stop-relying-on-church-for-your-kids-spiritual-training/>.

<sup>14</sup> Marcia J. Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and 'Best Practices' for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today," *A Journal of Theology Dialog*, 47, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 348-360.

<sup>15</sup> Merton P. Strommen and Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2000), 14.

churches. This same study found that the average percentage of young adult participation in American congregations decreased from fourteen percent in 2008 to only eleven percent in 2015.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, that percentage continues to trend downward, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the American Enterprise Institute and the University of Chicago.<sup>17</sup>

From another perspective, *Facts & Trends* published feedback from pastors of Protestant churches in their 2019 Future of the Church study. They found that seventy-two percent of pastors admit their biggest concern is reaching the next generation for Christ. Four out of ten pastors say they are most concerned about how their local church reaches young adults. This number is 2.5 times more than the second most frequent response. Many pastors express frustration as they attempt to connect with a generation that the content on smartphones and social media has already shaped. They readily acknowledge that older discipleship methods are less effective today than they were before.<sup>18</sup>

Other research organizations also continue to sound a prophetic call to action. For instance, President of YouthFront Mike King writes, “According to data from denominations, most young people are walking away from the institutional Church when they reach late adolescence, and most do not come back.”<sup>19</sup> In her book *Choosing Church*, Carol Lytch agrees.

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<sup>16</sup> Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, “Engaging Young Adults: Findings from the FACT 2015 Survey of U.S. Congregations,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2015. <https://slideplayer.com/slide/13572519/>.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel A. Cox, Jennifer Benz, and Lindsey Witt-Swanson, “Faith After the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Changed American Religion,” American Enterprise Institute, January 5, 2023. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/faith-after-the-pandemic-how-covid-19-changed-american-religion/>.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy C. Morgan, “Winter 2019 Future of the Church,” *Facts & Trends*, February 13, 2019, [https://issuu.com/factsandtrends/docs/ft\\_winter2019\\_final](https://issuu.com/factsandtrends/docs/ft_winter2019_final).

<sup>19</sup> Mike King, *Presence Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 11.

She states, "Church-reared youth start disappearing in high numbers in their junior and senior years of high school. The dropout rate accelerates further after teens graduate."<sup>20</sup> Several organizations point to the same fact: Young adults are disillusioned with the Church, dropping out in staggering numbers, and abandoning their faith. Despite the command in Ps 78:4, many ministry leaders seem to have other priorities than reaching, teaching, and keeping youth for Christ. At this rate, it is doubtful that the American Church will be able to maintain its influence in culture and fulfill its mission to be salt and light in a lost world (Matt 5:13-16).

#### *The Relationship of the Researcher's Ministry and Family to this Project*

As the founding pastor of CrossWalk Church (2001) – a multisite, intergenerational, racially diverse congregation with campuses located along an interstate highway in Coastal Virginia – I have witnessed the fallout of young adults from the Church. Since the purpose of our church from its inception is to reach, teach, and keep an emerging generation for Christ, the context of this study is in a solid ministry to children, youth, and young adults. CrossWalk owns a private Christian school and hosts an extension site for a Christian university. I am also an adjunct professor at two collegiate institutions and interact daily with students.

Before planting our church, I was a youth pastor in Canada, Texas, and Virginia for nineteen years. For nearly two decades (1982-2001) in several North American contexts, I had a first-hand opportunity to observe the dropout problem anecdotally among students in my youth groups once they graduated high school and left home. Moreover, I observed

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<sup>20</sup> Carol E. Lytch, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), ix.

patterns that supported my observations, not only of those who remained resilient in their faith but also those who became spiritual casualties. Those observations motivated the research for this project and shaped its direction. Although I have seen the dropout problem everywhere I have served, I did not experience it among my own ten adult children. Therefore, the relationship between my family and this project is significant; it serves as a vantage point and filter through which all the data is considered.

### *The Contextual Scope of this Project*

A perfect storm is a fitting representation of what is occurring today among Christian young people in America. There is a confluence of three powerful, simultaneous formations – the fragmentation of the Christian family, missional drift in the typical local church, and a rapidly increasing secularization of culture. It is wreaking utter havoc on Christian families and the Church. Consequently, many spiritual casualties are in its wake. The research in this study explores those three factors and recommends solutions to prevail despite the storm.

#### Families are fragmented

The average Christian family has become fragmented in the twenty-first century. Psychologist Stephanie Brown observes, “Caught in a chaotic, frenzied spiral of a new addiction, people are chasing money, power, success, and a wilder, faster pace of life.”<sup>21</sup> The costs of those obsessions are significant. She observes that the weight of demands on the typical American family is

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<sup>21</sup> Stephanie Brown, “Society’s Self-Destructive Addiction to Faster Living,” *New York Post*, January 14, 2014. <https://nypost.com/2014/01/04/societys-addiction-to-faster-living-is-destroying-us-doctor/>.

debilitating. All kinds of stress-related disorders in children are the proof – obesity, depression, anxiety, attention disorders, and learning disabilities, to name a few. Hyperstimulation and over-scheduling result from a vicious circle as people try harder to go faster. Consequently, human relationships are the most prominent casualty. Instead of enhancing close bonds, technology facilitates the avoidance of direct person-to-person contact, which many now consider takes too much time and effort.<sup>22</sup> It seems apparent that familial relationships are most affected and harmed by this fast-paced culture. Families seem to become disconnected when their schedules get filled with outside commitments. Parents have prioritized their children’s sports practices and games, music lessons and recitals, youth programs, part-time jobs, extra-curricular activities, homework, time with friends, and specialist appointments. Unfortunately, such a hectic lifestyle has become routine for most families.

Another alarming study published in the *New York Post* found that American families get just thirty-seven minutes of quality time together each day.<sup>23</sup> That fragmentation in Christian families is causing a severe lack of spiritual formation for the children; parents cannot transfer biblical insights and values to the next generation with such minimal interaction. Working parents come home exhausted, and their kids isolate themselves in their rooms, preoccupied with their screens. The accelerating tendency of families to spend increasingly less time together and more time involved in other interests may be the primary culprit for the lack of spiritual interest in the emerging generation.<sup>24</sup> It should be no surprise that young adults are wandering away from the Church and their faith in such drastic numbers.

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<sup>22</sup> Brown, “Society’s Addiction”

<sup>23</sup> Sam Paul, “American Families Barely Spend Quality Time Together,” *New York Post*, March 20, 2018. <https://nypost.com/2018/03/20/american-families-barely-spend-quality-time-together/>.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Campbell, “The Current of our Culture,” Faithlife Sermons, notes of sermon, <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/401256-family-fragmentation>.

Churches are allowing missional drift

Many local churches and their respective denominations seem to be merely entertaining young people with activities in their youth groups, content to keep them occupied with busyness until they are adults instead of making true disciples as Jesus commanded when they are young and impressionable. Hence, there is a missional drift in those organizations. Youth specialist Robbie Crawford of YM360 observes that if the Church fails to introduce life transformation at a formative age and instill spiritual growth habits, then the Church fails in a major part of its mission.<sup>25</sup> Thorough research of the leading denominations in the U.S. revealed that while many of them and their respective churches invest significant resources like personnel, curriculum, and programs in their children and youth ministries, for some reason, those resources stop once those kids graduate from high school. The leaders of those organizations are missing an opportunity for continued discipleship during the latter part of their young people's formational years.

Kevin Borchers of Youth eSource observes that congregations are unintentionally losing track of their young adults and have no idea whether they are still living out their faith. They are simply slipping through the cracks. He suggests that ministry leaders make a more diligent effort to stay connected with them in genuine relationships. Just like youth pastors are hired and charged to shepherd a flock of students, Borchers suggests ministry leaders should also consider ways to continue shepherding their youth when they become young adults. If they fail to nurture those relationships, then unintentional neglect occurs, and those vulnerable sheep will wander.<sup>26</sup> However, good shepherds count sheep.

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<sup>25</sup> Robbie Crawford, "Should You Play Games in Youth Ministry?" *YM360*, July 20, 2020. <https://youthministry360.com/blogs/all/games-in-ym>.

<sup>26</sup> Kevin Borchers, "Unintentional Neglect: Keeping Track of a Generation," Youth eSource, July 3, 2019. <http://www.youthesource.com/2019/07/03/unintentional-neglect-keeping-track-of-a-generation/>.

It seems apparent that most churches cease deliberate ministry targeted at young people once they finish high school. They may still be programming based on old youth ministry models when the window of adolescence was much narrower. According to Gospel Coalition editor Jared Kennedy, when ministry leaders developed the models of modern youth ministry in the 1950s, people typically reached adulthood much earlier than today. However, studies show that youth today take longer and longer to reach adulthood. The window of adolescence has grown much broader and far longer.<sup>27</sup>

One such analysis by researchers at San Diego State University looked at data from seven national surveys conducted between 1976 and 2016, including those issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health. The surveys included over eight million thirteen- to nineteen-year-olds from varying racial, economic, and regional backgrounds. Data from the study suggested that adolescence in America is getting more and more extended. They observed that eighteen-year-olds tend to look fifteen, and twenty-five-year-olds tend to act eighteen.<sup>28</sup> Columbia University psychiatrist Mirjana Domakonda states, “Delayed adolescence is no longer a theory, but a reality.”<sup>29</sup> The five commonly accepted markers for adulthood are (1) finishing one’s education, (2) leaving home, (3) finding work, (4) discovering a life partner, and (5) having children.<sup>30</sup> Although many young adults reach physical maturity long before they meet those five criteria for adulthood, they still need to achieve

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<sup>27</sup> Jared Kennedy, “Where did Youth Ministry Go Wrong? Identifying a Way Forward,” Crossway, June 22, 2022. <https://www.crossway.org/articles/where-did-youth-ministry-go-wrong-identifying-a-way-forward/>.

<sup>28</sup> Bret Stetka, “Extended Adolescence: When 25 Is the New 18,” *Scientific American*, September 19, 2017. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/extended-adolescence-when-25-is-the-new-181/>.

<sup>29</sup> Stetka, “Extended Adolescence.”

<sup>30</sup> Richard A. Settersten, Jr, “Passages to Adulthood: Linking Demographic Change and Human Development,” *European Journal of Population*, 23 (August 2007): 251-272.

psychosocial maturity at the same pace. However, there is a significant delay in reaching those five indicators of adulthood.<sup>31</sup> For instance, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median age for men to get married rose from twenty-three years of age in 1950 to thirty in 2018. Similarly, for women, the median age to get married has risen from eighteen years of age in 1950 to twenty-eight in 2018.<sup>32</sup> Compared to the mid-twentieth century, young people in the U.S. today are taking longer to reach adulthood, so they need their churches to respond accordingly and extend their pastoral care as a critical part of their discipleship mission.

American society has become more secularized

Children today are not growing up in the same context their parents and grandparents did due to the rapid secularization of American society. Professors of Sociology Claude Fischer and Michael Hout observe that Millennials and Gen Zers are generally less religious than older Americans.<sup>33</sup> These researchers state that during the Baby Boomer era, the public developed a cultural nuance that people should have the opportunity to think for themselves; everyone should be allowed to find their moral compass. Even though such a notion is at odds with organized religion and its long tradition of moral obedience, this cultural context formed the perspectives of the young adult population today. Furthermore, according to a 2016 study conducted by the Pew

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<sup>31</sup> Nancy E. Hill and Alexis Redding, “The Real Reason Young Adults Seem Slow to ‘Grow Up,’” *The Atlantic*, April 28, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/04/real-reason-young-adults-seem-slow-grow/618733/>.

<sup>32</sup> “Median Age at First Marriage: 1890 to Present,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed April 2, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/ms-2.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout, *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).



Research Center, Millennials and Gen Zers have lost faith in institutions, for the most part, both religious and non-religious. Their finding is that due to many scandals in recent decades, institutions have let young people down. As a result, they lack trust in the labor market, government, marriage, the press, churches, and many other sectors of life.<sup>34</sup>

Increased media consumption also plays a significant role in how the views of an emerging generation evolve. Since 2011, the sum of entertainment media accessed by individuals in the U.S. has increased by twenty percent across all categories. Young people spend an average of four hours and twelve minutes daily on mobile devices. Mobile usage has grown to 460% in just the past ten years. The younger the generation, the more media they consume.<sup>35</sup> While other activities occupy their naïve parents, those messages that relentlessly bombard young people are not virtuous based on biblical principles. Instead, secular advocates have taken to cyberspace to preach their values to an impressionable and unsuspecting generation. Young adults today are growing up exposed to an incessant diet of ungodly messaging for over four hours a day on average. The Church cannot compete in influence when the culture has reduced young adult church participation to a mere 1.5-hour Sunday morning service twice a month.

The confluence of these three factors – the fragmentation of family, the missional drift of the Church, and the secularization of culture – directly impacts the young adult dropout rate from the Church and their faith. This project seeks to discover creative solutions to address those three fronts so Christian parents and ministry leaders can curb the tide of this debilitating effect.

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<sup>34</sup> David Masci, “Q&A: Why Millennials are Less Religious than Older Americans,” Pew Research Center, January 8, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans/>.

<sup>35</sup> Aran Ali, “How Media Consumption Has Changed Over the Past Decade,” Visual Capitalist, April 28, 2021. <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/how-media-consumption-has-changed-in-2021/>.

### *The Limitations and Assumptions of this Project*

Several factors limit the scope of this project. The spiritual condition of a dropout from the Church is the first matter to be considered. Combining all dropouts into just one category can be misleading since each one is at a different stage of their faith journey. The Barna Group has defined three ways young adults separate from the Church. *Nomads* are young adults who have walked away from church engagement but still consider themselves Christians. *Prodigals* are young adults who have lost their faith and describe themselves as “no longer Christian.” *Exiles* are young adults who are invested in their Christian faith but still feel stuck (or lost) between the culture and the Church.<sup>36</sup> There is a difference between those who drop out of church and those who have lost their faith, but this research suggests the former decision affects the latter.

The scope of this analysis is also limited to the American context. However, the worldwide environment affects the American context researched in this study; other international studies are informative. For instance, Rob Hoskins of OneHope published one such report. Although forty-three percent of the respondents in his study from around the world self-identify as Christian, only seven percent display the beliefs and behaviors of a typical committed Christian. Furthermore, over half of those who claim religious affiliation also admit they never read Scripture on their own, believe all religions teach equally valid truths, and do not believe in an exclusive view of spiritual truth.<sup>37</sup> Although the church dropout rate is very concerning worldwide, even those who have remained in the Church and the faith are also of cause for great concern. The OneHope study showed that American young adults are similar to

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<sup>36</sup> Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 31-34.

<sup>37</sup> Rob Hoskins, *Global Youth Culture: Insights from a Digital Generation* (Pompano, FL: OneHope, Inc., 2000), 7.

their international counterparts. There is a pronounced lack of spiritual formation in Christian families and a deficiency of discipleship in local churches in the context of rapid cultural secularization.

There are also several assumptions in this project. Theologically, the Bible is the divinely inspired authoritative rule for people's faith and conduct. Today's young adult attrition challenge could be due to neglecting certain principles in God's Word that should be rediscovered.

Ideologically, God's best for the most effective spiritual formation for children is in the context of a Christian home led by two parents who actively attend a vibrant, Bible-believing church.

Contextually, the study will focus on the narrow field of the Pentecostal/Charismatic Church in America rather than the broader spectrum of all the denominations worldwide.

Methodologically, adequate answers will be gained from existing literature as it is cross-referenced with a qualitative analysis of interviews with a wide range of participants.

### *The Research Question and Anticipated Result for this Project*

What are the causes for so many American young adults disconnecting from the Church and risking the loss of their faith? Once the reasons for that challenge are discovered, solutions can be prescribed to reverse this debilitating trend. Christian families in America, and the churches they attend, cannot afford to keep doing business as usual and hoping for different results. Hope is not a strategy; a deliberate change of course is needed. For the Church to remain an influencing factor in society in the future, it must rediscover the means to retain a more significant percentage of the emerging generation today.

This project explores what the Bible says to Christian parents and ministry leaders about successful childrearing, effective discipleship, and their children's faith retention. It draws on historical and contemporary literature that meritoriously interpreted and implemented those biblical principles. For the parents who have successfully passed on the baton of faith to their adult children and grandchildren, this project seeks to discover how they practiced those insights to achieve successful results. These acumens are highly relevant as the emerging generation takes its place in ecclesiastical leadership.

After forty-one years of observation in ministry, my hypothesis that drives this study is as follows: Christian parents who neglect the spiritual formation of their children and ministry leaders who disregard the discipleship of their young people may be causing them to drop out of the church due to its perceived irrelevance. A much fuller explanation of this thesis will follow in the next chapter. The anticipated result of this project is that Christian parents and ministry leaders should alter their approach to children, youth, and young adults so a more significant number of them will remain in the Church and the faith.

### *The Goals and Objectives of this Project*

The purpose of this project is to contribute to the mission of the Church through reflective practice and actualized ministry with Millennials and Gen Zers. A biblical and theological foundation for the spiritual formation and discipleship of children, along with an extensive review of ancient and contemporary literature on childrearing and current young adult views, and an in-depth Human Subjects Research, provide an understanding about why young adults are dropping out of the Church and what can be done to alter the trend. With a

qualitative research approach, this project draws on many interviews to analyze the possible causes for the high rate of young adult disaffiliation from the American Church. Through generalizable facts and a deeper understanding of insights, this project suggests practical solutions to Christian parents and ministry leaders to improve the emerging generation's faith retention. Ultimately, this project seeks to provide a model for how Christian parenting and ministerial discipleship of children can accomplish their spiritual objectives more effectively and with much greater success.

### *Summary*

After conducting 27,140 interviews with members of the Millennial and Gen Z generation in more than 200 studies for over a decade, the Barna Group summarizes the challenge of projects like this one. They ask, "For what reasons do so many spiritually active teenagers put their faith – or at least their connection to a church – on the shelf as they reach adulthood?"<sup>38</sup> Many scholarly studies and anecdotal observations show that it is an obvious concern. The answer to that question, and the action steps for Christian parents and ministry leaders to address it, will have profound implications for the future of the Church in America. This research prescribes solutions by drawing on biblical passages, ancient and contemporary literature, and interviews with young adults, their parents, and ministry leaders. In the next chapter, the biblical and theological foundation for childrearing and discipleship will be established and cross-referenced with ancient and contemporary literature on childrearing and current young adult views.

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<sup>38</sup> "5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church," Barna Group, September 17, 2013, <https://www.barna.com/research/5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church/>.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE PROJECT IN PERSPECTIVE

#### *Introduction*

With one of several serious challenges facing today's American Church delineated in the previous chapter – a majority of spiritually active teenagers are putting their connection to church on the shelf as they reach adulthood (and often their faith)<sup>1</sup> – this chapter seeks to explore the biblical and theological foundation for child spiritual formation and child discipleship and conduct an extensive review of ancient and contemporary literature on childrearing. This research offers something fresh but complementary to all the other published works, fills a gap of information, and contributes to the knowledge base about effective childrearing that leads toward a solution to the exodus problem.

The Bible is the authoritative rule for people's faith and conduct, according to 2 Tim 3:16-17, 2 Pet 1:20-21, and Ps 119:11-16. Christians believe it is an "owner's manual" that God Himself inspired, and they can maximize the benefits of the life that He has given them and avoid the unnecessary consequences due to their tendencies to sin and be self-destructive. Deut 28:1-2 also promises abundant blessings if God's followers fully obey Him and carefully keep all His commands. Furthermore, in Luke 11:28, Jesus confirms that promise. He assured that all those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice will be blessed.

With this foundational understanding in place, the Bible provides people with ample instructions on how to rear children so that they will successfully grasp the baton of faith from the previous generation and carry it into their own generation. This chapter will show that in the

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<sup>1</sup> "5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church."

biblical books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Proverbs, God promises that Christian parents and ministry leaders can successfully retain their children in their community of faith as they mature from dependence to independence, regardless of how secular and antagonistic the surrounding culture becomes. This chapter will also show that in those same biblical books, God warns Christian parents and ministry leaders that if they neglect the biblical instructions on spiritual formation and discipleship, then they are more likely to suffer the consequences of attrition by the emerging generation.

Moreover, the Bible claims that the Holy Spirit illuminates His Word and provides practical application for current situations. As Christian parents and ministry leaders have sought the Lord in prayer about childrearing, this chapter will show that the Holy Spirit is faithful to reveal strategies that work very effectively in the twenty-first century. As those people have published their insights, those additional resources are also available for study and application.

This project maintains three perspectives: analytical, theological, and practical. Analytically, it includes an exhaustive interaction with relevant literature about the spiritual formation and discipleship of children and youth. A critical review of the theological and secular literature and practices is conducted. Familiarity with what has preceded this project and what is occurring now in the Church and broader culture is also demonstrated. Theologically, this project examines the essential texts and theological dialog that pertains to the spiritual formation and discipleship of children and youth. Hermeneutical principles are utilized in the approach. Practically, this project is viewed through the lens of ministry at home and in the local church. Given this project's analytical and exegetical work, insights and recommendations will be offered to correct the negative trend of young adult disaffiliation from the Church and the faith.

### *Biblical and Theological Foundation*

The strength of this project is the biblical and theological distinctive that undergirds it. God has not spared any effort to teach Christian parents and ministry leaders about reaching, teaching, and keeping dependent children so that they may thrive during adolescence into adulthood and, ultimately, independence. The undermentioned scriptural review will follow the familial, ecclesiastical, and cultural contexts for faith formation in children, youth, and young adults.

The Bible provides instructions to parents

According to God's Word, the primary responsibility for developing and retaining children's faith lies with their parents. Like a cocoon for susceptible caterpillars that are developing into butterflies, God established the family as a safe place where vulnerable and impressionable children may develop. Just as the womb is God's design for a safe environment for a pre-born child to be placed, shaped, and formed (Ps 139:13-16), the family is God's design for a safe environment for a post-born child to be placed, shaped, and formed. The Scriptures reviewed herein will show that God gave authority to parents to establish the right culture in their homes. In Mal 2:15, God asks parents, "What does God want? Godly children from your union. Guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth." This passage shows that God sovereignly brings a man and a woman together, makes them one in spirit, and charges them to preserve that union with fidelity. God has a specific intention for this covenantal union. He has ordained the family to be the safest place for children to come forth and experience godly training that will direct them throughout the rest of their lives. The Bible provides adequate answers for how those children become godly.



The book of Proverbs contains many insights for parents on proper childrearing. In many of its chapters, the king of Israel, recorded by the Bible as the wisest person who had ever lived, instructed and trained his own children how to live successfully based on the covenant instructions in the Old Testament for God's people (Prov 1:8-9). Paradoxically, as good as Solomon's advice is to parents, he was a dysfunctional husband and father whose words did not match his actions. The Bible records that he married seven hundred wives and kept another three hundred mistresses (1 Kgs 11:3). Because many of those wives were foreign (1 Kgs 7:8; 11:1), he violated God's commands in Deut 7:3-4 and Exod 20:14. Solomon was a very poor example, following in the failed fatherhood ways of those who had gone before him – Eli, Samuel, and his own father, David (1 Sam 2-3, 8, 2 Sam 13-15). The Bible also records that regarding his one son mentioned by name (1 Kgs 14:21), Solomon failed in passing on a spiritual heritage to the next generation. When his son Rehoboam grew up and inherited the throne, he did evil because he did not set his heart on seeking the Lord (2 Chr 12:14).<sup>2</sup> However, the wisdom of Proverbs regarding childrearing is proof that God inspired the writing of Scripture regardless of the moral shortcomings of those on which He moved to write them. Peter Gentry of Phoenix Seminary observes that the maxims from Proverbs are written down for the benefit of every father and mother in God's covenant community.<sup>3</sup>

In that context, Prov 22:6 is considered by many to be the paradigmatic verse for a biblical understanding of godly childrearing. It commands parents with a promise: "Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it." Nevertheless, so

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<sup>2</sup> Mart De Haan, "Solomon's Messed-Up Life," *Our Daily Bread*, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://ourdailybread.org/article/solomon's-messed-up-life/>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Gentry, "Raising Children, the Christian Way," *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry*, 2.2 (2012), 96-108.

much of the impact of this assurance gets lost in the translation from Hebrew to English. This verse begins with the Hebrew word *chanak*, which the English Bible translates as “direct.” However, it is the only place in Scripture where it is translated as such (The New International Version translates *chanak* as “start children off,” and the English Standard Version translates it as “train up a child”). All three other times *chanak* is employed (Deut 20:5, 1 Kgs 8:63, and 2 Chr 7:5), it is translated as “dedicate” (as in to initiate and set straight at the beginning).<sup>4</sup> In the figurative style that characterizes Hebrew, English translates this concept as “to put something into the mouth” or “to give to be tasted.”<sup>5</sup> Just as a nurse gives an infant a small quantity of masticated food to prepare the child for nursing, this word is used figuratively to permeate or saturate.<sup>6</sup> The spirit of this verse is that Christian parents are to establish biblical principles in their children’s lives firmly in their formative years. They should develop a taste for the Word of God during their earliest formation so that they will have a strong appetite for it for the rest of their lives (Ps 34:8). Solomon counseled parents to give their children a frequent dose of God’s Word multiple times a day from their infancy right up through their formative years. The Hebrew word in this verse suggests they should do it the same way they frequently nurse their children for physical nourishment and then graduate them to eating solid food.<sup>7</sup> Christian parents are to initiate their children on a godly path.

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<sup>4</sup> *Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon*, s.v. “chanak,” accessed March 3, 2023, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/chanak.html>.

<sup>5</sup> *Pulpit Commentary*, “Proverbs 22:6,” accessed March 5, 2023, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/proverbs/22-6.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Claude Houde, “How is Your Chanak?” World Challenge, September 10, 2022. <https://www.worldchallenge.org/devotion/how-your-chanak>.

<sup>7</sup> “Proverbs 22:6.”

This verse also advises parents to remain consistent with that discipline until their children reach independence. If they do, then godly perspectives, values, and behavior will become second nature to them.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, if something is genuinely second nature, then children will not depart from it as they age. It will be the main thing they know. If Christian parents and ministry leaders reach them while they are young, then they will not have to rescue them when they get older. In the metaphoric terms Paul used in his epistles, parents are to ensure that divine intimacy sparks at a young age, is fanned into flame during childhood, and then becomes their own blazing experience during adolescence (2 Tim 1:6). Otherwise, obligatory religious observances that are not heartfelt as young adults will not be enough to sustain their interest when they become independent and start making decisions for themselves.

According to several interviews conducted for this project, some Christian parents may attempt to rationalize this verse and dilute its meaning by suggesting that kids make up their own minds, and they often choose differently; they have free will. Admittedly, this verse is a proverb, not a divine guarantee. God is full of grace, but by comparing the original depth and intent of *chanak* in Prov 22:6 to the shallow spiritual formation tendencies described in several of the interviews in this project, their Christian parenting was not as thorough as it could have been. They did not have their children “taste” spiritual food as frequently as they tasted physical food. Godly principles did not become second nature in their children’s lives as much as they had hoped. Whether the spark of faith ever actually ignited in their children is questionable. If it was, then it was not fanned into flame. It fizzled out from the winds of secular culture.

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<sup>8</sup> Wes McAdams, “Proverbs 22:6 Re-examined: Train Up a Child in the Way He Should Go,” *Radically Christian*, November 14, 2017, <https://radicallychristian.com/proverbs-226-re-examined-train-up-a-child-in-the-way-he-should-go>.

Another key word in this foundational Prov 22:6 verse is “children.” It refers to a wide range of ages throughout the Old Testament, from a baby just born (1 Sam 4:21) to Joseph at seventeen (Gen 37:1) and again Joseph at thirty (Gen 41:46). The primary focus of the Hebrew word *na'ar*, which is translated in English as “child,” is not an arbitrary age like it is in English. Instead, the Hebrew word points consistently to one on the verge of maturity, emphasizing their role in society and the responsibility that goes with it. It also refers to one’s dependent relationship to a superior, as in Abraham’s attendant (Gen 18:7-8), Joseph under Potiphar (Gen 41:12), Joshua under Moses (Exod 33:11), Gideon’s squire (Judg 6:12), and Jonathan’s armor-bearer (1 Sam 14:1). Each of the seven times the word *na'ar* appears in Proverbs, the advice given (sexual, economic, social, and military) is more suited to young adults than to children. It stands to reason that parents should not stop their childrearing at eighteen but continue for as long as their “child” is dependent on them, even during young adulthood when they are still living at home, sleeping in a bed, and eating food their parents are providing for them.<sup>9</sup>

The following passage for godly childrearing comes from the book of Deuteronomy. The Israelites had been steeped in an ungodly Egyptian culture for over 400 years, which influenced them as they were on their way to the Promised Land. God used their forty-year sojourn in the Wilderness to eradicate wicked practices from their lifestyles and to replace them with righteous practices (Deut 8:1-3). In that context, God inspired Deut 6:4-9. It is foundational for successful childrearing:

Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

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<sup>9</sup> Gentry, “Raising Children,” 47.

In Matt 22:36-40, Jesus identified the beginning of this passage as the most important commandment in the Old Testament: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength” (Deut 6:5). In the Jewish tradition, it is called the *Shema* and serves as the centerpiece of morning and evening prayers.<sup>10</sup> Observant Jews recite it twice daily with their children – the first activity in the morning and the last one in the evening.<sup>11</sup> Following this command, Jewish parents get the Lordship of God ingrained in their children before they can even remember; it is God’s intention. Christian parents are to observe this practice at the beginning and end of each day and repeat the principles of His Word again and again with their children throughout the day. They are to be in their conversations at home and away from home. Their homes are also to be adorned with reminders inside and outside their houses.

God commanded them: “Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders.” God meant for parents and children to be mindful of His commands, decrees, and regulations in everything they thought and did. Similarly to Prov 22:6, the passage commands that parents are to thoroughly saturate their children’s environment with the things of God. Orthodox Jews today still wear phylacteries on their heads and attach mezuzahs on the doorframe of their homes. Both are small devices that contain tiny parchments of paper with the Jewish Scriptures printed on them. However, the spirit of this command is for parents to establish God’s Word centrally in every activity their family does daily throughout the developmental years of their children’s lives.<sup>12</sup> Godly saturation is the key to retention.

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<sup>10</sup> R.W.L. Moberly, “Yahweh is One: The Translation of the Shema,” in *Studies in the Pentateuch*, ed. J.A. Emerton (Leiden, NL: Brill Publishers, 1990), 209-215.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Rabin, “Bedtime Shema,” My Jewish Learning, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/bedtime-shema/>.

<sup>12</sup> Aurel Gheorghe, “What Does ‘Bind Them as a Sign on Your Hand’ Mean in Regards to the Law in Deuteronomy 6:8.” eBible, September 22, 2020, <https://ebible.com/questions/21953-what-does-bind-them-as-a-sign-on-your-hand-mean-in-regards-to-the-law-in-deuteronomy-6-8>.

Such training in both knowledge and godliness was expected to occur on a formal and informal basis. Whereas in verse six, the word *repeat* infers formal education, in verse seven, the expressions are merisms that indicate totality. Parents are to use opportunities at hand to speak about the things of God during all the moments and activities while their children are awake. Jesus exemplified this two-fold kind of training to His disciples. There are examples of formal teaching, such as the Sermon on the Mount when the Rabbi *sat down* (Matt 5:1). There are also examples of informal teaching, such as when Jesus invited the Twelve to just *be with Him* (Mark 3:13) so that they could observe how He walked, talked, and lived on a moment-by-moment basis. In those cases, Jesus used different occasions as they came up as opportunities for teaching moments (i.e., Matt 21:18-21). It would behoove parents to follow the example of Jesus and His training methods when considering how to train their children.<sup>13</sup>

A comparison between the Jews and Greeks regarding their approach to life and how that contrast applies to the American manner of living is helpful here. Jews in the Bible tended to view life as a whole; their priorities were at the center, and everything else revolved around those priorities. On the other hand, the Greeks tended to view life in compartments, with their priorities isolated in particular silos. For instance, the typical religious Jew believed the Lord is God alone, and people should love Him wholeheartedly; that conviction was central to their lives. Everything else – job, sports, leisure, family, school, hobbies – all revolves around that one main priority.<sup>14</sup> However, early Greek Christians influenced by Hellenistic thought relegated God and everything associated with Him to life's spiritual compartment.<sup>15</sup> Though they went to a church

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<sup>13</sup> Gentry, "Raising Children," 51.

<sup>14</sup> Reuven Hammer, "Tradition Today: Holistic Judaism," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 22, 2009, <https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/tradition-today-holistic-judaism>.

<sup>15</sup> George Eldon Ladd, "The Greek Versus the Hebrew View of Man," *The Present Truth*, 29, no.2, <http://www.presenttruthmag.com/archive/XXIX/29-2.htm>.

service on Sunday and talked about God there, He might not have even entered their minds at their job, home, school, or any other silo of life. The Greek way of life had a much more significant impact on American culture than the Hebrew way.<sup>16</sup> As a result, Americans today, including Christians, tend to compartmentalize their lives rather than think holistically about their priorities.

The relevance of this Greek approach in American Christianity is that it leads Christian families away from the saturation of godly concepts in the home as prescribed by Deut 6:6-9. One's thoughts and feelings often conflict from one compartment to the other. Even behavior can become dualistic; people can act differently at church than at home, job, or school. An unhealthy dissociation results when one places God in one compartment of life and does not allow Him to influence the other compartments. Compartmentalization allows these conflicting ideas and behaviors to co-exist.<sup>17</sup> American children reared this way subconsciously place God in a "box" and only visit Him at their convenience. As they get older, they "visit" Him less and less until they go off to college, where they hardly ever allow Him to enter their mind. They are left to make life-impacting decisions without following a moral compass or hearing the Spirit's warning. In that spiritually weakened state, they hear a professor posit science against Scripture and allow their education compartment to overshadow their spiritual compartment.

Following God's command to saturate one's home with godly themes, He issued a stern warning:

When you have eaten your fill, be sure to praise the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. But that is the time to be careful! Beware that in your plenty you do not forget the Lord your God and disobey His commands, regulations, and decrees that I am giving you today. For when you have become

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<sup>16</sup> Freddie Wilkinson, "Greek Influence on U.S. Democracy," *National Geographic*, June 2, 2022. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/greek-influence-us-democracy/>.

<sup>17</sup> Mark R. Leary, *Handbook to Self and Identity* (New York: NY: Guilford Press, 2005), 58-61.

full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in, and when your flocks and herds have become very large and your silver and gold have multiplied along with everything else, be careful! Do not become proud at that time and forget the Lord your God, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt... Remember the Lord your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful, in order to fulfill the covenant He confirmed to your ancestors with an oath. (Deut 8:10-18)

Unfortunately, when God's people finally settled in their Promised Land, the very thing God warned against eventually came true. In their newfound prosperity, the Israelite parents must have neglected to practice Deut 6:6-9 and instill a godly worldview in the hearts and minds of their children. Judg 2:10-15 and 21:25 report what transpired:

After (Joshua's) generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things He had done for Israel. The Israelites did evil in the Lord's sight... They abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors... They went after other gods, worshiping the gods of the people around them... God handed them over to raiders who stole their possessions. He turned them over to their enemies all around, and they were no longer able to resist them... And the people were in great distress... In those days... all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.

This passage is evidence that the parents failed to practice Deut 6:6-9. While wandering in the Wilderness, they took the time to carefully instill a godly worldview in their children. However, once they arrived in the Promised Land, they settled in their houses, got busy, and enjoyed affluence. The fact that the Israelite children grew up not remembering what God had done and failing to acknowledge Him in their lives is evidence that their parents neglected the practice of ingraining God's statutes in the souls of their children and saturating their homelife with godly themes.

The resulting spiritual ignorance of the emerging generation caused them to practice evil deeds. They also sought a higher power other than the one true God by pursuing the gods of the Canaanites, whom their parents' generation allowed to co-exist in the land. Consequently, the passage states that God handed them over to their passions and allowed them to suffer the



victimization of what they were chasing. They could not resist the challenges against them and suffered great distress. The epistle to the Romans also records the consequences people suffer when they go their own way and abandon the ways of God. It is a description of what is occurring in the American young adult generation today:

They knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give Him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles. So, God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So, they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator Himself. That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires... As a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved. Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, He abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness (Rom 1:21-29).

Though the Deut 6 and Judg 2 passages deal with different events in Israel's history and focus on distinct aspects of its relationship with God, they are complementary. Deut 6:6-9 emphasizes the importance of passing down a legacy of faith to future generations, while Judg 2:10-15 features the consequences of failing to do so. Together, the two passages illustrate a pattern of the Israelite's faithfulness and unfaithfulness to the Lord. God told the next generation not to forget Him, but they ignored this admonition.

According to David Platt, the above scenario sounds familiar to America's young adult generation. He observes that Christian Baby Boomer parents got so caught up in their materialistic drive for more affluence that they neglected biblical childrearing principles.<sup>18</sup> The carnal desire to want more and to seek after satisfaction in the things of the world has always

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<sup>18</sup> David Platt, "Spreading the Gospel to Young Adults (Judges 2:10)" *Radical Podcast*, July 19, 2021, <https://radical.net/podcasts/pray-the-word/spreading-the-gospel-to-young-adults-judges-210/>.

been a temptation for God's people. He observes this trend is strengthened by a culture that teaches people to live as consumers and expect that we deserve to have our desires fulfilled.<sup>19</sup> As Deut 8:10-18 states, a common by-product of prosperity is forgetfulness.

Given Platt's commentary on today's Christian parenting considering the Hellenistic influences on American culture, Christian families tend to compartmentalize God to someone they acknowledge on Sundays without bringing Him into all the other aspects of life. They are not making Him the central priority of their lives. Praying and reading Scripture daily with their children, as Deut 6 prescribes, has become too burdensome as both parents work to keep up with the American lifestyle. As a result, their children are growing up failing to acknowledge the Lord or remember what He had done in the lives of their ancestors. No wonder many young adults today are confused about gender identity and sexuality and believe that all roads lead to heaven. Countless of them believe that Scripture is full of nice myths but is not authoritative and that Jesus is not the only way, truth, and life. Numerous young adults have no problem embracing pluralistic ideas imported from other religions under the concept of synchronicity.

Consequently, today's young adult generation is suffering the distress described in Judg 2:10-15. The American Psychological Association reports that today's youth and young adults are the most distressed age demographic in the history of our country, and they possess a grim outlook on their future.<sup>20</sup> It appears their physical distress could be tied to their spiritual drift.

An example of how Christian young adults do what seems right in their own eyes, like the emerging Israelite generation described in Judg 21:25, is how they have always gotten their basic questions of life answered. Instead of relying on the wisdom of Christian parents and

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<sup>19</sup> Platt, "Spreading the Gospel."

<sup>20</sup> "Is Gen Z the Most Stressed Generation?" The LifeStance Health Blog, January 11, 2021, <https://lifestance.com/blog/is-gen-z-the-most-stressed-generation/>.

ministry leaders who glean insights from God’s Word, they have usually turned to their peers’ opinions. In this generation, social media platforms exasperates this problem due to the prevalence of readily available peer opinions.<sup>21</sup> John Piper counters this trend by observing, “The most influential theological teachers a child should ever have are Mom and Dad.”<sup>22</sup> However, what Judg 2 demonstrates is that parents who neglect the daily saturation of God in their homelife and who allow the dilution of ungodly peers and mobile devices in their children’s lives contribute to their children’s spiritual ignorance and confusion and lead errantly to their destruction.

In the New Testament, Paul gave valuable insight into childrearing. Interestingly, he, too, is another example of how the Spirit moved on someone to write His instructions regardless of their qualifications, for Paul was never married or had children of his own to write out of his own experience (1 Cor 7:8). Eph 6:4 is a foundational verse for childrearing. Understandably, this passage reflects the mores of the patriarchal society that characterized the Jewish culture in his day. Had Paul been writing in today’s context, no doubt he would have addressed both parents, not just the fathers instead of ignoring the indispensable role of mothers.<sup>23</sup> He said, “(Parents)... bring up (your children) with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.” The words “bring up” in the original Greek in which Paul wrote is *ektrepho*. It means “to nurture and to nourish to maturity.”<sup>24</sup> One of the principles in Scripture is that this verb refers to all aspects

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<sup>21</sup> Ann Lurie and Robert Lurie, “Parenting Teens in the Age of Social Media,” Children’s Hospital of Chicago, September 1, 2020. <https://www.luriechildrens.org/en/blog/social-media-parenting-statistics/>.

<sup>22</sup> John Piper, “Will the Next Generation Know?” Knowing God Through His Word, April 12, 2009, <https://bible-daily.org/2009/04/12/will-the-next-generation-know/>.

<sup>23</sup> Carol Meyers, “Patriarchy and the Hebrew Bible,” Bible Odyssey, accessed March 13, 2023. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/patriarchy-and-the-hebrew-bible>.

<sup>24</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. “ektrepho,” accessed March 18, 2023, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ektrepho.html>.

of education, whether it is mathematics, grammar, or moral training. God’s covenant is all-encompassing. Hence, Christian education is not simply incorporating a Bible course into the curriculum. Instead, it entails a complete world-and-life view.<sup>25</sup> Paul instructed Christian parents to ensure their minds and their children’s minds are so filled and saturated with the Scripture that such biblical teaching shapes their worldview.<sup>26</sup>

Paul uses the word *ektrepho* earlier in his letter to the church in Ephesus to reference how Jesus nurtures the Church and nourishes it to maturity in the same way people nurture themselves mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually (Eph 5:29).<sup>27</sup> In both verses, the perplexing issue is “to maturity.” The moment a child crosses the line into maturity needs to be defined. It is when a person can demonstrate independence, not just physically and mentally, as most parents in American society errantly assume, but also emotionally, which is often overlooked and not considered.<sup>28</sup> Studies show that young people realize complete maturity in all aspects of their lives only when they reach their early twenties.<sup>29</sup> Though the judgment of adolescents in situations that permit measured decision-making – what psychologists call “cold cognition” – might be mature by the age of sixteen, their judgment in situations with aroused emotions – what psychologists call “hot cognition” – is not mature until they get older, most

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<sup>25</sup> Arthur Holmes, “Integrating Faith and Learning,” Azusa Pacific University, accessed March 21, 2023, [https://www.apu.edu/live\\_data/files/219/integrating\\_faith\\_and\\_learning.pdf](https://www.apu.edu/live_data/files/219/integrating_faith_and_learning.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Gentry, “Raising Children,” 81.

<sup>27</sup> “Ektrepho.”

<sup>28</sup> “10 Signs of Emotional Maturity,” American Behavioral Clinics, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://americanbehavioralclinics.com/10-signs-of-emotional-maturity/>.

<sup>29</sup> Sara B. Johnson, Robert W. Blum, and Jay N. Giedd, “Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy,” *National Library of Medicine*, September 2009, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2892678/>.

often in their early twenties.<sup>30</sup> According to Laurence Steinberg, a professor of developmental psychology at Temple University, adolescents in their late teens likely possess the necessary intellectual skills to make informed choices about choosing a college and their respective courses. However, they still lack the social and emotional maturity to control impulses, resist peer pressure, and fully appreciate the riskiness of dangerous decisions.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, when most eighteen-year-olds head off to college, they may appear mature enough in some ways, but in other ways, they are still quite vulnerable. No wonder two out of every three end up dropping out of Church, according to the Lifeway, Barna, Fuller, and Rainer studies referenced in the previous chapter. They feel pressure from peers and professors to think and act differently from their parents and ministry leaders. Too often, they find themselves in circumstances that bring out the worst in their lack of judgment abilities. The temptation of immediate rewards often pits against the prudent consideration of long-term costs, and they cannot handle it.<sup>32</sup> Such observations from adolescent experts like Steinberg lead some parents to resist the cultural pressure to send their recent high school graduate out of town and away from home to university for the next four years, far from their protective covering, observant eye, wise counsel, and, if necessary, prompt intervention.

Studies also show that one's beliefs will usually influence logical reasoning.<sup>33</sup> Belief bias occurs when presented with neutral content. However, emotionally charged content will diminish

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<sup>30</sup> Laurence Steinberg, "A 16-year-old is as Good as an 18-year-old – or a 40-year-old – at Voting," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-steinberg-lower-voting-age-20141104-story.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Laurence Steinberg, "While Adolescents May Reason As Well As Adults, Their Emotional Maturity Lags, Says New Research," American Psychological Association, 2009, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2009/10/teen-maturity>.

<sup>32</sup> Steinberg, *Los Angeles Times*.

the likelihood of beliefs influencing decision-making. Hence, when the interaction between emotions and beliefs occurs in immature adolescents, it always interferes with their ability to make reasonable choices.<sup>34</sup> Young people far from their parents often make significant decisions that have life-altering consequences. Their faith may also be affected in the process.

The Seven Stages of Faith Development theory, proposed by developmental psychologist James Fowler, is helpful for Christian parents and ministry leaders in their understanding of young adulthood and how they develop their faith and practice. Fowler's observations of these developmental stages of faith identify predictable ways of expression.

As an overview of Fowler's theory, the first stage, Intuitive Projective Faith, occurs in young children when they cannot differentiate between fantasy and reality and often have a vivid imagination. It is when children learn simple stories about God and faith. The second stage, Mythic-Literal Faith, occurs in early adolescence when young people develop a more concrete understanding of the world around them. It is when youth rely heavily on religious stories and beliefs to make sense of their experiences. The third stage, Synthetic-Conventional Faith, occurs in late adolescence and early adulthood. It is when young adults question their beliefs and develop a more personal understanding of their faith. It is also when they will either adopt for themselves the beliefs of their religious institution or the beliefs of their community. Often, though, the beliefs of their community might be contrary to their religious institution and how their parents reared them. The fourth stage, Individuative-Reflective Faith, occurs in mid-adulthood and is marked by a desire for personal autonomy and independence in one's faith. It is

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<sup>33</sup> Stephanie Sarkis, "Emotions Overruling Logic: How Belief Bias Alters Your Decisions," *Forbes*, May 26, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephaniesarkis/2019/05/26/emotions-overruling-logic-how-belief-bias-alters-your-decisions/?sh=6ba831227c56>.

<sup>34</sup> Vinod Goel and Oshin Vartanian, "Negative Emotions Can Attenuate the Influence of Beliefs on Logical Reasoning," *Cognitive and Emotion* 25 no.1 (September 24, 2008): 121-131, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02699931003593942?journalCode=pcem20>.

when adults critically examine their beliefs and question previously held beliefs. This stage of faith development is when people deconstruct their faith begin that slow process. The fifth stage, Conjunctive Faith, occurs in mid-life and is marked by a desire to reconcile conflicting beliefs and values. It is when adults may seek out spiritual practices from different traditions to find a more holistic understanding of their faith. It is also when those who have drifted out of the church have historically returned and plugged in again. Incidentally, that return is occurring less and less among Millennials and Gen Zers than in previous generations.<sup>35</sup> The sixth stage, Universalized Faith, is rare, but if it occurs, it is when individuals can transcend their own culture and beliefs to see the world from a universal perspective. Finally, the seventh stage, Mystical Faith, is even rarer, but if it occurs, it is marked by a direct, personal experience with God. Those who reach this stage describe a sense of oneness with God and tend to have a profound sense of peace and understanding.<sup>36</sup>

Fowler claims that the transition from adolescence to adulthood (the young adult age) is evidenced by “critical distancing” from external sources of authority structures that were developed in the earlier stages of their faith development (i.e., parents, educators, and ministry leaders). During this season, a person becomes their own source of authority, and their “executive ego” emerges (autonomy). This phase is essential because it enables young adults to establish their identity, beliefs, and spiritual practices.<sup>37</sup> Critical distancing occurs when one

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel de Visé, “Churchgoing and Belief in God Stand at Historic Lows, Despite a Megachurch Surge,” The Hill, December 21, 2022. <https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/arts-culture/3782032-churchgoing-and-belief-in-god-stand-at-historic-lows-despite-a-megachurch-surge/#:~:text=religion%20at%20all,-Church%20membership%2C%20church%20attendance%20and%20belief%20in%20God%20all%20declined,Researchers%20call%20them%20“nones.”>

<sup>36</sup> James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981).

<sup>37</sup> James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 179.

relocates authority from established external value systems to new internal value systems (doing right in their own eyes).<sup>38</sup> Given this tendency for critical distancing and executive ego, Christian parents and ministry leaders must establish a firm foundation in their children’s hearts while they are still young and impressionable (Prov 22:6). Then, as young adults become independent, they are still tethered to their earlier influences. Despite their drive to distance themselves from previous authority structures, their faith is still constructed based on the religious influences that were strongly present earlier in their development process.<sup>39</sup>

Based on the definition above, Eph 6:4 reads, “Parents... (nurture and nourish to complete maturity) your children with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.” The above science shows that process ends far too early in many Christian homes today. Such an observation leads some parents to combat society’s social pressure on their high school seniors to flee from their homes and away from their parents as far away as possible to the military or educational institutions.

Most parents want their children to have the best opportunities to advance in their careers, and a good education from one of America’s esteemed secular universities might increase those odds over a local community college or a lesser known Christian college. However, given the dangers outlined above, the big institutions faraway should not be glamorized. Furthermore, when Christian students have attractive offers to attend distant, prestigious universities but decline those opportunities to attend inferior schools locally while still living at home, they should not be made to feel that they are squandering their chances for

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<sup>38</sup> Andrews Acquah and Ebenezer Boakre, “Applying Faith Development Theory for the Teaching of Religious Education,” *Journal of Philosophy, Culture, and Religion*, 36, (2018).

<sup>39</sup> Carlton Johnstone, *Embedded Faith: The Faith Journeys of Young Adults within Church Communities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 25.



great promotions later in their careers. Jesus issued a grave warning in Mark 8:36. He said, “What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?” In other words, what are those educational opportunities worth in a person’s relatively short lifespan compared to the salvation of one’s soul for the rest of eternity? What good is it to gain an education from a celebrated institution but fall away from the Lord once they get there and risk eternal separation from God? In the application of Jesus’s statement in this verse, parents and young adults should wisely consider the long-term threat of such a risky decision rather than foolishly ignoring the issue because of the short-term benefits.

Furthermore, regarding this critical Eph 6:4 verse, the words translated as “discipline” and “instruction” in English Bibles are the Greek words *paideia* and *nouthesia*, respectively. Given the Old Testament background in which Paul was well-versed, the “instruction” was neutral information-sharing and admonition, chastisement, correction, warning, and punishment. Because foolishness fills a youngster’s heart, but physical discipline will drive it far away (Prov 22:15), parents must ensure physical discipline is part of their children’s education. Otherwise, if they are lax, then their children will not develop the character God intends them to have (Prov 13:24; 29:15).<sup>40</sup>

The Hebrew word for the instrument of discipline in Prov 22:15 is *shebet*. It is translated more accurately as a flexible “branch or shoot.” This word differs from the word used in Exod 7:9 about Moses’s staff (*matteh* – “a hardened stick or rod.”)<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the instrument used in physical discipline should look more like switching with a branch than beating with a rod. The book of Proverbs reveals two types of discipline: (1) correction by word and (2) correction by a

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<sup>40</sup> Gentry, “Raising Children,” 46.

<sup>41</sup> *Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon*, s.v.v. “shebet” and “matteh,” accessed April 3, 2023, Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/shebet.html>.

temporary, physical sting to etch in a children's memory a direct association between their action and their sense of feeling. It also emphasizes that parents are to verbally warn their children that specific courses of action will bring destructive consequences. Then if their children disregard that parental warning, corrective discipline should result in a mild, harmless, brief, physical penalty.<sup>42</sup> The Bible does not speak about beating small children harshly for their mistakes but instead recommends that rebellious youth are due some measured corporal punishment with the loving intention of getting them back on track.<sup>43</sup>

Discipline has become more and more lenient in the cultural shift that has occurred in the U.S. over the past fifty years.<sup>44</sup> In fact, to many people, parental punishment for their children's bad attitudes and behavior has somehow become synonymous with child abuse.<sup>45</sup> Many modern parents are opting for an unbiblical concept called "gentle parenting."<sup>46</sup> Consequently, foolishness still abounds in the hearts of young adults because it was never dealt with by their parents in their younger years (Prov 22:15). That foolishness leads them to make poor, moral decisions.<sup>47</sup> Prov 29:15-17 also warns parents, "To discipline a child produces wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by an undisciplined child... Discipline your children, and they will give you

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<sup>42</sup> Dave Miller, "Children and the Rod of Correction," Apologetics Press, December 31, 2002. <https://apologeticspress.org/children-and-the-rod-of-correction-1255/>.

<sup>43</sup> Gentry, "Raising Children," 80.

<sup>44</sup> Jennifer E. Lansford, et. al., "Physical Discipline and Children's Adjustment: Cultural Normativeness as a Moderator," *National Library of Medicine*, 76, no 6 (Nov-Dec 2005): 1234-1246, <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2005.00847.x>.

<sup>45</sup> Eve Glicksman, "Physical Discipline is Harmful and Ineffective," American Psychological Association, 50, no. 5, (May 2019), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/physical-discipline>.

<sup>46</sup> "What is Gentle Parenting?" Cleveland Clinic, August 5, 2022, <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-is-gentle-parenting/>.

<sup>47</sup> Suzanne Holland, "Grown Children, Foolish Choices," Biblical Counseling for Women, accessed March 28, 2023, <https://bc4women.org/grown-children-foolish-choices/>.

peace of mind and will make your heart glad.” Prov 23:13-14 adds, “Don’t fail to discipline your children. The rod of punishment won’t kill them. Physical discipline may very well save them from death.” Finally, Prov 13:24 says, “Those who spare the rod of discipline hate their children. But those who love their children care enough to discipline them.” Parents of wayward young adults tended to live in regret that they were not strict enough disciplinarians during the formative years of their children’s lives.<sup>48</sup> Parental negligence regarding child discipline results in spoiled, self-centered behavior and choices.

Given the biblical understanding of maturity and the scientific recognition of young adult maturity today, eighteen years of age is not the finish line for parenting.<sup>49</sup> Although parenting children in their twenties is no longer about teaching them life skills, it still involves other factors, and the stakes are much higher. When children are younger, parents tell their kids to stop doing certain things while compelling them to do other things. That role needs to continue into their early twenties.<sup>50</sup>

Age is arbitrary, but maturity is variable. Though the government may state that age eighteen is the legal age of an adult, neuroscientists know better. Sandra Aamodt, neuroscientist and co-author of the book, *Welcome to Your Child’s Brain*, states that emerging science about brain development suggests that most people do not reach full maturity until age twenty-five. That fact is why some car rental companies have policies that prevent young adults from renting

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<sup>48</sup> Jessica Winter, “The Harsh Realm of ‘Gentle Parenting:’ The Approach Flourishes Because it Caters to a Child’s Inner Life. What Does it Neglect?” *The New Yorker*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-harsh-realm-of-gentle-parenting>.

<sup>49</sup> Megan Devine, “When Your Teen Says: ‘I’m Almost 18 – You Can’t Tell Me What to Do!’” *Empowering Parents* accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.empoweringparents.com/article/when-your-teen-says-im-almost-18-you-cant-tell-me-what-to-do/>.

<sup>50</sup> Meagan Francis, “Parenting Kids over 18 is still Parenting,” *NBC Think*, January 26, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/parenting-kids-over-18-still-parenting-you-just-get-less-ncna1122376>.

their cars until they are twenty-five years of age. The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that helps people inhibit impulses and organize their behavior to reach a goal, is not fully developed before twenty-five. Another part of the brain, the “reward system” in young adults, is much more sensitive to peer pressure than when they become fully mature.<sup>51</sup> Developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett adds that young adults before age twenty-five are making weighty decisions with lifelong implications. However, they do not possess the wisdom alone to always make the correct decisions. They still need the advice of their parents or other mentors.<sup>52</sup>

Naturally, parents are concerned about maintaining the balance between prying too much into their young adults’ personal lives and ensuring they take good care of themselves. The seeds of self-sufficiency are sprouting, but work is still required to tend those tender shoots of independence.<sup>53</sup> Parenting decisions are based on what parents know about their young adult child, not on the cultural norm and what other people might think.

Nehemiah posed a challenge to his generation of parents regarding proactively taking interventive action for their children. The principle can be applied today when parents detect early patterns of poor decision-making even after their children become young adults. In his memoir in Neh 4:14, he said, “Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!” Although the context of this passage was while the Israelites were rebuilding a physical wall to prevent a physical assault from a physical enemy, basic hermeneutics suggests that Old Testament physical realities

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<sup>51</sup> Sandra Aamodt and Sam Wang, *Welcome to Your Child’s Brain: How the Mind Grows from Conception to College* (New York: NY: Bloomsbury, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties,” *American Psychologist*, 55 no. 5 (2000): 469-480.

<sup>53</sup> Francis, “Parenting Kids.”

foreshadow New Testament spiritual realities.<sup>54</sup> Since what happens in the invisible realm is often difficult to understand, New Covenant believers can study visible Old Covenant accounts and draw accurate conclusions about their current situations happening in the unseen world. 1 Cor 10:1-7 says the stories that occurred in the Old Testament physical realm inform an understanding of what believers face today in the spiritual realm. Therefore, just as God's people in Nehemiah's day faced a physical threat from the Moabites, Ammonites, Arabians, and Ashdodites, God's people today face a spiritual threat from "evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). This theological understanding suggests that parents should rise valiantly and do fierce spiritual warfare on behalf of their children; the responsibility is nonoptional.

In 2 Tim 1:5-6, Paul revealed another profound insight into Christian parenting. Under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, he told his young son-in-the-faith, Timothy, "You share the faith that first filled your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice. And I know that same faith continues strong in you. This is why I remind you to *fan into flames* the spiritual gift God gave you when I laid my hands on you" (emphasis added). The Christian faith is not about religious motions and rituals, but about a kindled spark of faith that grows and becomes a vibrant relationship with Jesus.<sup>55</sup> Every person must experience that spark of divine encounter for themselves at some point in their development and then have it fanned into flames that burn brightly. That fact is the essence of true discipleship.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the metaphor Paul used for

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<sup>54</sup> "What the Bible Says about Shadow of Things to Come," *Forerunner Commentary*, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/2830/Shadow-of-Things-Come.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Jake McWhirter, "Why Christianity is NOT a Religion," *Philippians 1v21* (blog), accessed April 1, 2023, <https://philippians1v21.wordpress.com/why-believe-in-jesus/why-christianity-is-not-a-religion/>.

Timothy suggests that every parent and ministry leader should look for this inner spark in their young people. They cannot just be satisfied with religious compliance, outward gestures, and external behavior modification. Every parent and ministry leader should also deliberately plan spiritually intensified activities and events like conferences, retreats, and camps that will fan that spark into raging flames.<sup>57</sup> This verse proposes they need to cultivate a passion for Jesus, not just a nonchalant acknowledgment of Jesus. Each person should realize a Christ encounter for themselves; they cannot merely borrow it from someone else's experience.

Paul said in Phil 3:5-6,

I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin – a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

Paul was going through all the religious actions even before he could remember (since he was eight days old). He adhered to the Scriptures by the strictest standards. Paul was so passionate about religion that he carried out his actions in misguided ways. Regarding outward righteousness, Paul was faultless. Nevertheless, he was still missing the mark. He continues in Phil 3:7-9a,

I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with Him.

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<sup>56</sup> Ben Walls, "Don't Allow that 'Spark' God Put in Your Heart to Remain Dormant," *Building Disciples*, August 11, 2019, <https://www.pastorbenwalls.com/2019/08/11/dont-allow-that-spark-god-put-in-your-heart-to-remain-dormant-determine-to-use-your-gifts/>.

<sup>57</sup> Walter Forde, "The Pastoral Care of Young People," *The Furrow*, 28, no. 5 (May 1977): 287-299.

After Paul's Damascus Road experience where he was confronted by Jesus, it no longer sufficed to go through religious motions outwardly. His heart had been transformed by Jesus. Paul summarizes his testimony in Phil 3:10, "I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised Him from the dead."

The word *know* that Paul used from the original Greek language is *ginosko*. To the Jews, it reminded them of their Hebrew word, *yada*, the most intimate relationship between humans.<sup>58</sup> *Ginosko* was a Jewish idiom for sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife because that is what *yada* meant.<sup>59</sup> For instance, Gen 4:1 says, "Adam had sexual relations (*yada*) with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant." The English Standard Version, a word-for-word translation, says, "Now Adam *knew* his wife, Eve, and she conceived" (emphasis added).

For Paul, all his going through the motions of outward religious piety in his younger years was considered rubbish compared to becoming intimately acquainted with Jesus. A kindled spark of faith grew in Paul's heart, becoming a vibrant relationship with Jesus. Paul's experience became Timothy's experience, and they serve as an example for every young person reared in a Christian home and the Church.

To continue the biblical exploration of godly childrearing, God said in Gen 18:19, "I have singled Abraham out so that he will direct his children and their families to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." The word *direct* in this verse is the Hebrew word *sava*, which is different from the word translated direct in Prov 22:6. *Sava* is translated as "charge,

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<sup>58</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. "ginosko," accessed, March 5, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ginosko.html>.

<sup>59</sup> *Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon*, s.v. "yada," accessed April 1, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/yada.html>.

command, or order,” like a military commander who directs subordinates in the heat of battle.<sup>60</sup> The stakes are always high for commanders and their subordinates because they could lose the battle, surrender territory, endure enslavement, and suffer casualties. In the same way, God expected Abraham to charge, command, and order all his children to keep the way of the Lord. The stakes were even higher because of the spiritual and eternal implications. That parental responsibility has never expired; God still expects the same diligence from parents today. Otherwise, spiritual losses will continue to occur.

Deut 4:10 sheds light on another responsibility that parents have toward their children. God told His covenant people, “Summon the people before Me, and I will personally instruct them. Then they will learn to fear Me as long as they live, and they will *teach their children to fear Me* also” (emphasis added). God expects parents to teach their children to “fear” the Lord. That word in the original Hebrew does not necessarily mean haunt or intimidation as it does in English. It is *yare*, and it means “to be in awe of, to revere, honor, and respect.”<sup>61</sup> For instance, when children play near an electrical outlet on the wall or walk on a sidewalk alongside a busy street, they do not need to be terrified, but they do need to be careful and aware. Both electricity and vehicles can be a blessing if used correctly, but they also have the potential to be dangerous if misused. The children will be quite safe if they restrain from playing with the socket or veering into the traffic. Out of awe of the power of electricity and vehicles and out of respect for the danger they pose if the children carelessly ignore caution, they should exercise restraint against their impulses. Who is responsible for teaching children as early as possible about the power of

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<sup>60</sup> *Blue Letter Bible KJV Lexicon*, s.v. “sava,” accessed March 3, 2023, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h6680/kjv/wlc/0-1/>.

<sup>61</sup> *Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon*, s.v. “yare,” accessed March 2, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/yare.html>.



electricity and vehicles? Their parents are responsible for instilling awe and respect for their power.

In Deut 30:1, God says, “When you experience all these blessings and curses I have listed for you... take to heart all these instructions.” God is not vindictive; He does not curse people because they do not do what He wants. An analogy of an umbrella is helpful here. In a rainstorm, a parent holds an open umbrella overhead to create an immediate space shielded from the pouring rain. As long as the child listens to the instructions of the parent to remain close to the parent inside the shielded space, the child will remain dry. However, if the child disobeys the parent’s instruction and wanders away from the parent and outside the shielded space, then they will suffer the consequences of their errant decision; they will get wet. In the same way, God’s instructions are His covering for people. As long as they remain close and follow all His commands, then they will benefit from His benevolent nature and experience blessing. But when they drift away and disobey His commands, then they will suffer the consequences. In that sense, God does not send the curses; He has done everything in His power to instruct people how to avoid them.

According to Deuteronomy, parents are responsible for teaching their children as early as possible about the power of God. They are charged to instill awe, reverence, honor, and respect for Him. However, when parents neglect to impress on their children the proper “fear” of electricity and vehicles, their children may make foolish decisions that would cause them pain, suffering, and even death. More importantly, parents cannot neglect to impress on their children the sober awe, reverence, honor, and respect of God. Otherwise, they will make foolish decisions that will cause them needless distress.

There seems to be a correlation between the dropout rate of young adults from the Church and an absence of a healthy fear of the consequences of such a choice.<sup>62</sup> The lack of an immediate effect of not meeting with other Christians can be likened to an unhealthy diet. Suppose young adults indulge once in a grease-laden triple bacon cheeseburger at a local dive. In that case, they will not suffer any long-term consequences (although they may experience a bit of temporary indigestion). However, if they regularly indulge in poor dietary choices over several years, then they will most likely suffer obesity and cardiovascular problems. Likewise, young adults who drift away from the Church are likelier to share a similar fate. Although they may not feel the effects of missing out on Christian fellowship in the short term, their spiritual health will tend to suffer in the long run. Parents can help prevent this outcome by heeding the principle in Deut 4:10 and teaching their children about the proper fear of the Lord.

God feels strongly about parents who neglect to discipline their children and direct their hearts. For example, 1 Sam 3:12-13 gives a dire warning in what God spoke to Eli: “I am going to carry out all my threats against Eli and his family, from beginning to end. I have warned him that judgment is coming on his family forever *because* his sons have made themselves contemptible, and he hasn’t disciplined them” (emphasis added). When Eli failed to discipline his sons, and they turned out contemptible, God held Eli responsible as their parent. Childrearing is a sacred task, and shaping the spiritual formation of children is nonoptional for parents.

Solomon not only penned many Proverbs, but he also wrote a divinely inspired Psalm. Although he was not a model father, parents can still apply his God-given wisdom today. Psalm 127 says,

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<sup>62</sup> Jeffrey Krall, “Twelve Reasons Why ‘Mature’ Believers No Longer Go To Church,” February 28, 2017, <https://onelordonebody.com/2017/02/28/12-reasons-why-mature-believers-no-longer-go-to-church/>.

Unless the Lord builds a house, the work of the builders is wasted. Unless the Lord protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good. It is useless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, anxiously working for food to eat; for God gives rest to His loved ones. Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from Him. Children born to a young man are like arrows in a warrior's hands. How joyful is the man whose quiver is full of them! He will not be put to shame when he confronts his accusers at the city gates.

The inherent principle in this passage is that parents should let God help them build their home before children ever become part of the picture. “Unless the Lord builds” (v. 1a) is a conditional clause. If the parents do not establish their home’s foundation on God’s blueprints explained in His Word, then their family will eventually suffer spiritual cracks and risk collapse. Parents need to also depend on God’s protection for their family. “Unless the Lord protects a city” (v. 1b) suggests that no matter how vigilant sentries watched for stealthy enemies from their stations on the city’s ramparts, they were not the ones who ultimately protected the citizens within the walls. God did.

Furthermore, just as God is the family’s Protector, He is also their Provider. “It is useless to work so hard” (v. 2a). Parents are called to be attentive to their children and provide for them, but they cannot replace God’s sovereign role in their family’s security. Workaholism is just as much a curse today as it was in Solomon’s day; parents cannot neglect their children’s spiritual formation while they are attempting to accumulate the tangible items they think their children need as they grow and develop. “God gives rest” (v. 2b). For those who have their priorities in balance, He gives clarity and perspective. He restores and rejuvenates parents and their children. Parents should enjoy their children as they are growing up, spending lots of time with them. Values are not just taught; they are caught.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Burton House, “Some College Values are Caught and Not Taught,” *The Journal of General Education* 2, no. 3, (April 1948): 187-192.

With the right priorities aligned, Solomon turns his attention to the proper attitude parents should have toward their children. “Children are a gift... a reward” (v. 3a). Interestingly, people’s flawed ways are usually opposite to God’s right ways. Nowhere is that truth more evident than closest to home. Today, many parents work to preserve what God calls a curse while they also work to protect against what He calls a blessing. In Deut 28:44-45 and Prov 22:7, God calls debt a curse, yet many parents are concerned about improving their credit score just in case they need to go into more debt. In Ps 127:3, God calls children a blessing, yet many parents are concerned about the latest form of birth control just in case they conceive and have more children. Although managing children’s spacing in the birth order has its place, too many Christian parents have adopted the subtle, anti-child sentiments of the world and aim far too low for their family size. Their fear of a lack of provision is evidence of their lack of faith in God’s provision. That anti-child attitude keeps showing up all during their children’s developmental years; the parents are anxious to get their kids off to childcare so that they can pursue other interests. Alternatively, they are eager to get their kids off to another table so that they can enjoy their conversations with their friends.

According to this Psalm, that attitude should change if parents stand the greatest chance of their children carrying their values and perspectives into the next generation. Throughout the Old Testament, childless women considered themselves cursed, but fruitful women considered themselves blessed (Deut 28:4, 18). However, according to a recent article in *Fortune* magazine, America is suffering a historically low birth rate due to the decision of Millennials to delay having children or not have them at all. Those values were inherited from their parents’ generation. After the highs of the American

baby boom in the mid-twentieth century, the dramatic lows of the baby bust characterized the 1970s when the parents of Millennials and Gen Zers were born.<sup>64</sup> Deepak Reju of the Biblical Counseling Coalition insists that Christians should lead the way in this attitude change; they should base their worldview on the timeless truths of Scripture instead of the fickle ideas of the world.<sup>65</sup> Spiritual formation begins with *wanting* to have children and then *wanting* to have them around frequently, even though their hearts are filled with foolishness (Prov 22:15).

Solomon continues his Proverb in verse 4: “Children... are like arrows in a warrior’s hands.” Parents need to launch their children to be effective and impactful in their generation. Straight arrows hit their target, but crooked ones can cost one’s life in battle. A person whose lifestyle has uncompromising integrity is a straight arrow. Parents have the responsibility to shape their “arrows” accordingly. They can consider themselves successful when their children launch well, soar successfully, and hit their target in their generation, making their life count for eternal things and significantly impacting society. “How joyful... whose quiver is full of them!” (v. 5a). There is a correspondence between a parent’s joy and a parent’s full quiver. The opposite is also true; one can become quite melancholy once they experience an empty nest, especially if their children relocate far away and disconnect relationally.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sarah Hayford and Karen Guzzo, “A Decades-Long Broken Economy Screwed Over Millennials, and their Decision to Delay Having Kids is Fueling America’s Historically Low Birth Rate,” *Fortune*, January 12, 2023, <https://fortune.com/2023/01/12/millennials-broken-economy-delay-children-birthrate/>.

<sup>65</sup> Deepak Reju, “15 Wisdom Principles on Deciding When to Stop Having Children,” Biblical Counseling Coalition, August 3, 2015, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2015/08/03/15-wisdom-principles-on-deciding-when-to-stop-having-children/>.

<sup>66</sup> Lori Lawrenz, “Empty Nest Syndrome,” PsychCentral, October 29, 2021, <https://psychcentral.com/health/empty-nest-syndrome>.

The Proverb concludes, “He will not be put to shame... at the city gate” (v. 5b). Parents receive the greatest satisfaction when they prepare their children to lead well once they become adults. It was an ancient custom for leaders to occupy their official place at the city gate (Deut 21:18-21; Ruth 4:1-2). It was where they solved domestic disputes, forged contracts, passed policies, and made treaties. If the leaders were wise and honest, then the community enjoyed peace and prosperity, but if they were corrupt and capricious, then the community’s safety and well-being were compromised. If parents teach wisdom and integrity to their children well, then when they grow up and assume leadership roles in their generation, their parents will be proud as they watch them flourish and make a difference.<sup>67</sup>

To summarize the section above, contrary to the pattern of many Christian parents to delegate their children’s education to government-operated schools, a fundamental principle in Scripture is that the education of children, in the broadest sense of the word, is primarily the responsibility of parents. In America, public education was introduced to provide equal opportunity for all, the poor as well as the rich.<sup>68</sup> Though it was successful for a long time when everyone in society shared the same worldview, today, there are many conflicts between the worldviews of Christians and the State. These conflicting religious and secular views are incompatible in many ways. Although the following section focuses on ministry leaders, the education of children is not chiefly the responsibility of the government or the leaders of the religious community. Ministry leaders may supplement parents’ childrearing, but they are not the

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<sup>67</sup> Julie Barrier, “7 Valuable Lessons from King Solomon That Every Parent Needs,” Salem Media Group, June 12, 2019, <https://www.crosswalk.com/family/parenting/valuable-lessons-from-king-solomon-that-every-parent-needs.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Nancy Kober and Diane Stark Rentner, “History and Evolution of Public Education in the US,” Center on Education Policy, George Washington University, 2020, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf>.

substitute. According to Gentry, ministry leaders should be concerned about providing instruction in the faith for all ages, but parents should never assume that it is the Church's chief responsibility to teach their children about the Bible. God will hold parents, not ministry leaders or government officials, accountable. All the above verses were issued to parents.<sup>69</sup>

According to Scripture, grandparents also have a potentially crucial role in the spiritual formation of young people, but they tend to be one of the most overlooked and marginalized resources in the family and in the church today.<sup>70</sup> Not only did Paul recognize Timothy's grandmother Lois as a key figure in Timothy's spiritual development (2 Tim 1:5), but Deut 4:9 also says, "Be careful never to forget what you yourself have seen. Do not let these memories escape from your mind as long as you live! And be sure to pass them on to your children *and grandchildren*" (emphasis added). A key word in that verse is the second-to-last: *and*. According to this verse, the responsibility of grandparents is not finished when their children grow up and leave the home. They are to continue shaping and molding the second generation after them, too. Grandparents have seen the faithfulness of God throughout their lifetime. They remember those occasions and have stories to tell. Now God expects them not to keep their experiences to themselves but to pass those memories down to their grandchildren.

Even in the transient society that characterizes Americans today, and even though grandchildren are often brought up a considerable distance from their grandparents, families still have state-of-the-art tools like FaceTime, Zoom, and WhatsApp to keep in touch with each other frequently. Influence can be achieved on a screen just as effectively as in person.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Gentry, "Raising Children," 29.

<sup>70</sup> Sarah Wellard, "Grandparents: An Underestimated Resource for Children's Health Development," *National Library of Medicine*, 20 no. 5 (2010): 150-152, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21158353/>.

<sup>71</sup> Wayne Rice, *Long-Distance Grandparenting: Nurturing the Faith of Your Generation When You Can't be There in Person* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2019).

Grandparents have the task of helping the children in their family get that spark of faith kindled and then fan that spark into flames. Grandparents are not to spend their retirement years only in leisure and self-indulgence; their grandchildren look up to them and value what they believe and speak. Grandparents should not relegate themselves to the sidelines and only show up in their grandchildren's lives for special occasions. They have a God-given responsibility to make a significant difference in their grandkids' lives – to help etch their character development.

Dr. Charles Stanley was a great example of grandparents' tremendous value and impact on their grandchildren. In the wake of the recent passing of this prominent pastor, broadcaster, and author, his family members reflected on his life and legacy. One of his grandsons, Matt, offered some valuable insights applicable here. The twenty-nine-year-old recounted how his late grandfather once saved him from committing suicide.

"A few years ago, while living in Los Angeles, I was struggling with drugs and alcohol and deep depression. I blew all my inheritance money," Matt said. "I was suicidal. I called my mom, and I said, 'I'm not doing well. I've failed.' I was thinking about killing myself."

During that dark time, his grandfather called him and encouraged him to surrender his life totally to Jesus Christ. "It meant the world to me. I just started crying and crying and crying after that phone call, and I decided that I didn't want to die," Matt remembers. "My grandfather was so genuine and authentic. He was the real deal. Always meditating on God's Word, always reading his Bible, always staying up to date on current news and thinking about it in relation to the Bible."

Overall, Matt says that Dr. Stanley always encouraged him when he was struggling in his life. "Whenever I was down in the dumps, my grandpa would call me," he shared. "He'd



give me words of encouragement and pray for me over the phone. And then he would keep calling me constantly to check in on me. That really meant a lot to me. That kept me alive."<sup>72</sup>

Although the Catholic, Protestant Mainline, Evangelical, and Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in America are suffering lower retention rates as a whole, a few faith groups are experiencing extraordinarily high retention rates. Even though they are in the same country and their young people are facing the same radically secularized culture, somehow, those exceptional faith groups are experiencing success against all the odds. They must be doing something that the other faith groups are neglecting.

Deut 6:6-9 is a “transferrable principle” – any statement that is true in one context is true in another (This principle is also called Law of Continuity).<sup>73</sup> The passing down of beliefs and the retention of views work in all faith groups, whether doctrines are correct or questionable. Stickiness is not based on correct theology but on correct training methods. Whereas the retention rate for most churches is only about thirty-three percent (see Chapter One), the retention rate for Mormons is sixty-four percent,<sup>74</sup> the retention rate for the Amish is eighty-five percent,<sup>75</sup> and the retention rate for Orthodox Jews is ninety-three percent.<sup>76</sup> They are practicing

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<sup>72</sup> Milton Quintanilla, “Charles Stanley’s Grandson Shares How His Grandfather Saved Him from Suicide,” *Christian Headlines*, April 21, 2023, <https://www.christianheadlines.com/contributors/milton-quintanilla/charles-stanleys-grandson-shares-how-his-grandfather-saved-him-from-suicide.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Jerome H. Keisler, *Elementary Calculus: An Infinitesimal Approach* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007), 902.

<sup>74</sup> Pew Research Center, “U.S. Religious Landscape Study,” May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/dataset/pew-research-center-2014-u-s-religious-landscape-study/>.

<sup>75</sup> Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and Erik J. Wesner, “Sources of Enterprise Success in Amish Communities,” *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy* 5, no. 2 (May 2011): 112-130, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227429558\\_Sources\\_of\\_enterprise\\_success\\_in\\_Amish\\_communities](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227429558_Sources_of_enterprise_success_in_Amish_communities).

<sup>76</sup> Jacob Ausubel, Gregory A. Smith, and Alan Cooperman, “Denominational Switching Among U.S. Jews: Reform Judaism has Gained, Conservative Judaism has Lost,” Pew Research Center, June 22, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/22/denominational-switching-among-u-s-jews-reform-judaism-has-gained-conservative-judaism-has-lost/>.

their faith differently than other faith groups. Although this study does not endorse all the family and community observances that these three faith groups practice, and it does not endorse their interpretation of the Bible, this study does suggest that since those faith groups are doing Deut 6:6-9 better than most other faith groups, then they are suffering less of the consequences of Judg 2:10-15. The contingent principle works and proves the discovery in this study.

The Amish and Mormons place a high value on family worship, which involves praying, studying Scripture, and discussing religious teachings together as a family. Both groups also emphasize family meals, which are often seen as a time to come together and share in the blessing of food and fellowship (see *sobremesa* earlier in this chapter). Furthermore, both the Amish and the Mormons attach great importance to traditional gender roles, which include clear expectations for the roles of men and women within the family. Both groups also esteem parental responsibility, including teaching children about their religious beliefs and helping them to develop a strong sense of faith and tradition. All these familial emphases help to reinforce religious beliefs, practices, values, and parental responsibility. They also help create a strong sense of identity and belonging within the family, stability and structure, and continuity from generation to generation.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, like their Amish and Mormon counterparts, Orthodox Jews have several family practices that help retain their identity from generation to generation. These practices include the strict observation of Shabbat, the weekly Jewish day of rest, which begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. They observe Shabbat by refraining from work, lighting candles, reciting prayers, sharing meals, and attending synagogue services. This observance

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<sup>77</sup> Tim B. Heaton, *Latter-Day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members*, edited by James T. Duke (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1998), 21; Richard A. Stevick, *Growing Up Amish: The Rumspringa Years* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 48.

provides an opportunity for families to spend quality time together and reinforce their Jewish identity. This faith group also celebrates various Jewish holidays throughout the year, including Rosh Hashanah, Passover, Sukkot, Hanukkah, and Yom Kippur. These “holy days” allow families to come together, share meals, participate in rituals and customs, and, most of all, allow parents to explain why they do what they do for their children.<sup>78</sup> Orthodox Jews also strongly emphasize the study of the Torah, the Jewish holy scripture. Parents conscientiously teach their children Torah and Talmud from a very young age, and families also attend study groups and classes together. This faith group also follows strict dietary laws, known as kashrut, which prohibit the consumption of certain foods and require the preparation of other foods in a certain way. Most of the parents of these three faith groups are diligent about their practice of Deut 6:6-9, and their retention statistics are proof that their parenting strategies are effective.

Considering these three faith groups that are experiencing an exception to the trend of young adult attrition, there also seems to be a correlation between living a life of biblical separation and faith retention. Before that connection is explained, a theological foundation for biblical separation is helpful. Jesus taught His followers to be in the world, but not of the world (John 15:19; 17:14-16). In 2 Cor 6:17 and in reference to Isa 52:11, Paul taught, “Come out from among unbelievers, and separate yourselves from them.” He also taught in 1 Thess 5:22, “Stay away from every kind of evil.” Peter held the same conviction; he taught, “Don’t slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires... be holy in everything you do” (1 Pet 1:14-15). Biblical separation is the recognition that God has called believers out of the world and into purity amid a sinful culture. It involves a commitment to a godly of behavior, and it is modeled by Daniel who was “determined not to defile himself” (Dan 1:8). The action of setting oneself

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<sup>78</sup> Ausubel, Smith, and Cooperman, “Denominational Switching Among U.S. Jews.”

apart as holy and dedicated to God's service is called *sanctification*. Paul said in Rom 6:5-14 that God sanctifies His people from their sins and sets them apart from the world to serve Him alone. Every Christian is called to set themselves apart from the world to honor God with their lives (2 Tim 2:21; 1 Pet 2:9).

Whereas many young people who participate in Catholic, Protestant Mainline, Evangelical, and Pentecostal/Charismatic churches have lost their distinction from the world,<sup>79</sup> the extraordinary biblical separation practices of the Mormons, Amish, and Orthodox Jews help facilitate their high retention rate as their children become adults.

The Amish and Mormons highly value community and social ties. They often live in close-knit communities and have a strong sense of belonging. Both groups also have strict adherence to religious practices and traditions.<sup>80</sup> They have a clear set of rules and expectations that govern behavior and religious observance. They also strongly stress religious education. All these communal emphases help to reinforce the religious beliefs and traditions of the faith group, which consists of all the families therein, making it more likely that children will continue to adhere to them when they come of age and begin making their own decisions. Observably, this clear structure and expectations make it easier for children to understand and internalize the religious beliefs and traditions of the group. No wonder their faith sticks.

Orthodox Jews also have customs that reinforce the Jewish identity and promotes a sense of community. For instance, they wear traditional clothing. The men wear a kippah and tzitzit while the women dress modestly and cover their hair with a headscarf or wig. These traditional clothing practices help to distinguish those in this faith group from the wider community and to

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<sup>79</sup> Brett McCracken, "Have Christians Lost Their Sense of Difference?" Mere Orthodoxy, June 19, 2013, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/have-christians-lost-their-sense-of-difference>.

<sup>80</sup> Stevick, *Growing Up Amish*.

reinforce their Jewish identity proudly. Like their Mormon and Amish counterparts, they also place a high value on community and social ties. Jewish communities provide a sense of connection and support, which is particularly important for young people navigating the challenges of adolescence and young adulthood. Jewish education is also highly valued within the community and is a priority for Jewish families. This special education provides a strong foundation in Jewish history, culture, and tradition, as well as the Hebrew language. This knowledge and understanding from an early age help young people feel a deeper connection to their faith and identity. Judaism also has many rituals and traditions that are central to Jewish faith. These practices provide a sense of continuity and connection to the past and a sense of purpose and meaning in the present. Lastly, many Jewish organizations and movements prioritize social justice and community service, potent motivators for young people who intend to make a difference in the world.<sup>81</sup>

The Mormons, Amish, and Orthodox Jews boast of very high retention rates because they strongly emphasize the importance of family, tradition, and community. Although many churchgoers may disagree with some of their theology, the fact that they are doing Deut 6:6-9 and 2 Cor 6:17 better is proving to help them do better at retaining their youth through their adolescent transition into adulthood. These practices help reinforce their identity as a faith group from generation to generation. All these factors provide a sense of connection, meaning, and purpose deeply ingrained in their respective traditions. Mainstream Christians can certainly learn from them and borrow some of their practices.

Storks are examples of good parenting and ostriches are examples of bad parenting

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<sup>81</sup> Stevick, *Growing Up Amish*.

The ancient parent Job observed a comparison between two birds that became immortalized in Scripture. Job 39:13-18 says,

The ostrich flaps her wings grandly, but they are no match for the feathers of the stork. She lays her eggs on top of the earth, letting them be warmed in the dust. She doesn't worry that a foot might crush them, or a wild animal might destroy them. She is harsh toward her young, as if they were not her own. She doesn't care if they die. For God has deprived her of wisdom. He has given her no understanding. But whenever she jumps up to run, she passes the swiftest horse with its rider.

In ancient Hebrew poetic style, Job compares an ostrich to a stork concerning their parenting dispositions. Since most American parents are unfamiliar with the traits of these two birds (their natural habitats exist in other parts of the world), with some help from basic ornithology, they can still make a wise application regarding their childrearing. Although the stork and the ostrich are similar in anatomy and appearance – they both have long necks, long legs, and feathers – they are very different in lifestyle and God-given instincts.

The Hebrew words for both fowls are revealing. The word for *stork* is derived from “lovingkindness” or “loyal love.”<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, the word for *ostrich* originates from “daughter of the greedy one.” The stork is known for its commitment to others and the sacrifices it is willing to make. The ostrich is known for the opposite – its self-centeredness.<sup>83</sup> Those proclivities indeed show up in their familial characteristics. Though it is God's design for human parents to sacrifice their aspirations for the sake of their family's interests, more and more parents are putting their own interests first – pursuing their careers and social circles at the

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<sup>82</sup> Sharona Margolin Halickman, “The Bird of Loving-Kindness,” *The Times of Israel*, April 6, 2021, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-bird-of-loving-kindness/>.

<sup>83</sup> “They May Look Goofy, But Ostriches are Nobody's Fool,” *National Geographic*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/they-may-look-goofy-but-ostriches-are-nobodys-fool-feature>.

expense of their marital enrichment and the quality time that they should spend shaping their children's values and perspectives.<sup>84</sup>

Storks are known for their life-long monogamy; they are committed to one mate for life. Even when they get separated from their partners during long migrations, they will always reconnect with each other back at their nest. Such a commitment is a strong foundation for stability in their "home" and chick-raising. Ostriches, on the other hand, do not share that familial stability. They are known for their polygamy. A cock may have a harem of up to seven hens at a time and sire chicks from all of them. Such an arrangement causes considerable friction between the hens as they establish their pecking order between the stronger and weaker ones. Then during the next mating season, before the chicks from the last hatching are mature, new relationships between cocks and hens form in the ostrich flock, and they conceive even more chicks. Interestingly, ostrich cocks are even known to approach other animals and humans with sexual advances.<sup>85</sup>

The disregard that ostriches have toward marital commitment and fidelity describes more and more parents today, even in Christian homes. The statistics in America between Christian and non-Christian couples regarding divorce are the same.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the current divorce rate in America is 2.9 per 1,000 people, the highest in the world. Interestingly, the national divorce rate among adults aged twenty-five to thirty-nine is twenty-four per 1,000 people – very high

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<sup>84</sup> Carolyn J. Heinrich, "Parents' Employment and Children's Wellbeing," *Center for Health and Social Policy*, University of Texas at Austin, 24, no. 1 (Spring 2014), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1029033.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> "Birds of the Bible – Stork," *Birdwatching from a Christian Perspective*, January 27, 2011, <https://leesbird.com/2011/01/27/birds-of-the-bible-stork-iii/>.

<sup>86</sup> "New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released," Barna Research Group, March 31, 2008, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released/>.

during their children's young, formative years.<sup>87</sup> The percentage of marriages ending in divorce is fifty percent for first marriages, sixty-seven percent for second marriages, and seventy-five percent for third marriages.<sup>88</sup> These statistics do not include those who opt for long-term separation arrangements. Furthermore, those rates are not the complete picture of heart-wrenching break-ups; fewer couples are choosing to marry today because common-law relationships are easier to dissolve. Those who finish cohabitating, even with young children, are not included in those counts, but they do not lessen the negative impact on severely affected children from those split-ups. Nor do they lessen the negative repercussions of the couples who suffer hurt, betrayal, depression, and loneliness from those separations. With over 750,000 divorces granted in the U.S. each year, over 1.5 million individuals endure the pain of being ripped from their soulmate, and several million children are affected annually. The average marriage in America only lasts eight years.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the adverse effects of single parenting on children are evidence of the lessened stability that two-parent arrangements can have. With twenty-five million children suffering because of an absent parent, children of single-parent households tend to get lower grades in school, their school dropout rate is higher, and their college enrollment is lower. They also commit more crimes, face more incarceration (three times higher), are less successful in the marketplace, and are more likely to become single parents. Children of single parents also tend to feel more frightened, stressed, and frustrated due to the

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<sup>87</sup> Renee Stepler, "Led by Baby Boomers, Divorce Rates Climb for America's 50+ Population," Pew Research Center, March 9, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/03/09/led-by-baby-boomers-divorce-rates-climb-for-americas-50-population/>.

<sup>88</sup> Mark Banschick, "The High Failure Rate of Second and Third Marriages," *Psychology Today*, February 6, 2012, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-intelligent-divorce/201202/the-high-failure-rate-of-second-and-third-marriages#:~:text=Key%20points,do%20not%20hold%20them%20together.>

<sup>89</sup> Branka Vuleta, "Divorce Rate in America," LegalJobs, January 28, 2021, <https://legaljobs.io/blog/divorce-rate-in-america/>.



higher likelihood of financial problems from having just one income earner in the family. Children of single parents are also more prone to various psychological illnesses, alcohol abuse, and suicide than children from homes with two parents. Many children of divorce also feel lonely, abandoned, and even guilty due to their parents' break-up. The disruptions due to moves and remarriage also contribute to the emotional toll on children.<sup>90</sup> Ostrich-like tendencies characterize American society, contributing to many of the social problems Americans face as a society. Those same detrimental tendencies are affecting many Christian families, too.

Moreover, both cock and hen storks work together to build a solid nest in the tops of trees, far from the dangers and distractions that threaten their families. That nest will last them their entire lives. Their breeding is in a solitary context, and they both share the responsibility of incubating their eggs. Then they dote on their chicks and devote considerable time feeding them. Their strict diet consists of insects, worms, fish, and small land creatures until they are old enough to learn successful hunting skills their parents teach them. Both parents will also teach their young how to fly and migrate – to soar majestically high in the clouds as they travel. On the other hand, ostriches practice colonial breeding in a nomadic flock of about fifty at a time. Since they are earthbound creatures and cannot fly, they make a crude nest by making a shallow indentation in the desert sand, and they lay their eggs there. Many hens will share the same communal nest and take turns incubating all the eggs. Often, they confuse their eggs and cannot distinguish whose chicks are whose. The hens are also known to abandon their nests for a considerable time during the day while they hunt for food for themselves and play with the other ostriches. Their eggs are vulnerable to destruction by other animals and the elements. Since ostriches are indiscriminate about their diet (they will eat anything, including indigestible items),

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<sup>90</sup> Dan Brennan, "How Does Single Parenting Affect a Child?" MedicineNet, August 12, 2021, [https://www.medicinenet.com/how\\_does\\_single\\_parenting\\_affect\\_a\\_child/article.htm](https://www.medicinenet.com/how_does_single_parenting_affect_a_child/article.htm).

their chicks are left to forage for trash and anything else to satisfy their little hungry appetites. Parental commitment by ostrich cocks and hens to teach their chicks in the flock any survival skills does not exist. They are inclined to chick procreating but disinclined to chick parenting. Ostriches are known to be even callous toward their young; they do not carefully tend to them and do not seem to care about their welfare.<sup>91</sup>

For human parents in America today, there is a striking similarity to their ostrich counterparts. An old African proverb is gaining considerable traction: “It takes a village to rear a child.” However, nowhere in Scripture is such a notion referenced. With this errant assumption, parents are allowing more and more sources of influence to affect their children’s values and perspectives. Many children spend more time under the direction of daycare workers, schoolteachers, peers, and bloggers than they do their parents.<sup>92</sup> With most families enjoying a double-income arrangement today, the average amount of time an American mom spends with her children is only ninety-six minutes a day, and the average amount of time an American dad spends with his children is only sixty-eight minutes.<sup>93</sup> With the mad dash to get out the door in the mornings for before-school care and then the rush to grab a late dinner following after-school care, there is hardly any time left to help with homework, much less to discuss the important matters of life and shape a child’s worldview in their formative years. Out of the sixteen waking hours in a child’s day, other voices spend far more time influencing children than their parents.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> “The Ostrich and the Stork,” *Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society*, 1987, <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/101987005>

<sup>92</sup> Sam Dogan, “The Average Amount of Time Parents Spend with Their Kids a Day is So Low,” *Financial Samurai*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.financialsamurai.com/the-average-amount-of-time-parents-spend-with-their-kids-a-day/>.

<sup>93</sup> Dogan, “Average Amount of Time.”

<sup>94</sup> Brooke Auxier et al., “Parenting Children in the Age of Screens,” *Pew Research Center*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/parenting-children-in-the-age-of-screens/>.

Then parents wonder why their kids are not growing up sharing the same values, perspectives, and behaviors. Since parents do not have the time to teach their children basic survival skills, they delegate that sacred task to other caregivers. Furthermore, since parents are working hard to achieve the “American dream,” they assign many parenting responsibilities to others. Those other influences are the ones who feed the spiritual diet to the children. Furthermore, on average, children and teens spend 5-7.5 hours daily on various social media platforms.<sup>95</sup> Most parents are unaware of the unhealthy influence on their children. No wonder kids today tend to get the answers to life’s most challenging questions from Google, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok, and their peers rather than from their parents and ministry leaders.<sup>96</sup> Like their ostrich counterparts, adult communal life certainly has its drawbacks.

Latchkey children are also to be considered here. According to census data, over four million children ages five to thirteen (fifteen percent of the American population) are left alone without supervision for more than six hours weekly.<sup>97</sup> Just as unwise ostriches leave their young chicks unattended for periods during the day, so do more and more parents in the United States today. Just as ostrich eggs and chicks are vulnerable to predators and the elements, studies confirm a direct relationship between child self-care before/after school and such negative social ills as drug abuse, juvenile crime, sexual promiscuity, and obesity.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Sarah Darnanjan, “Kids, Teens, and Social Media,” Nexstar Media, November 1, 2021, <https://www.news10.com/news/kids-teens-and-social-media/>.

<sup>96</sup> Ann Lurie and Robert Lurie, “Parenting Teens in the Age of Social Media.”

<sup>97</sup> “Census Bureau Releases New Estimates on America’s Families and Living Arrangements,” U.S. Census Bureau, November 21, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/families-and-living-arrangements.html>.

<sup>98</sup> “Latchkey Children Statistics Unlocked,” *The Washington Times*, April 13, 2000, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2000/apr/13/20000413-011102-8484r/>.

Furthermore, storks are ferocious in defending their family and other members of their migrating muster. Their bills are long and sharp; with their strong neck muscles, they use them like daggers to fight courageously in self-defense.<sup>99</sup> On the other hand, ostriches do not possess any self-defense mechanism, and they are very fearful. Ostriches will flee and hide at the first sense of any danger. If cornered, they will lay their heads flat on the ground, appearing to bury them in the sand in denial of imminent danger. Ostriches will even abandon their eggs and chicks when danger presents itself.<sup>100</sup>

For today's Christian parents, Neh 4:14 has always been available as an insightful guide: "Remember the Lord... and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." God has called parents to be vigilant in caring for their children, especially when they notice risky behaviors. Nevertheless, many parents feel helpless in these challenges and revert to denial tactics.<sup>101</sup> Denial is foolish, though; their children may only worsen unless they change course. Some parents would rather send their children to a child psychologist than invest the time in truly understanding their children's concerns, identifying potential threats, and addressing their problems head-on.<sup>102</sup>

Incidentally, storks also lack a syrinx (vocal cords), and they glide in the wind to exert minimal effort. They live very quietly and decline any attention to themselves. By comparison, ostriches frequently make loud screeching noises and flap their wings furiously, posturing

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<sup>99</sup> Ranjit Lal, "Storks: Birds with Broadsword Bills," RoundGlass, May 8, 2023, <https://roundglasssustain.com/species/storks>.

<sup>100</sup> "What Defence (*sic*) Mechanisms Do Ostriches Have?" South Africa Online. 2023, <https://southafrica.co.za/what-defence-mechanisms-do-ostriches-have.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Haim Omer, *Parental Vigilant Care* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge Publishing, 2017), 47.

<sup>102</sup> Gary Direnfeld, "Four Points to Consider Before Sending Your Child to Counseling," WordPress. September 13, 2016, <https://garydirenfeld.wordpress.com/2016/09/13/4-points-to-consider-before-sending-your-child-to-counseling/>.

themselves to make a good impression on those around them. Furthermore, storks keep themselves relatively clean compared to all other species of birds,<sup>103</sup> but ostriches allow themselves to become nasty by neglecting essential self-care.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, parents who wish to model their childrearing after storks should consider being less focused on their business and community than on making their home solid and healthy. Although in the short-term, they may recognize that one's credibility might be based on their reputation in the church, marketplace, and community, but in the long run, their credibility is based on the character of their adult children (Prov 23:24). They work diligently behind the closed doors of their home, day-in-and-day-out quietly, without drawing any attention to themselves. In that context, they diligently keep their hearts and minds relatively clean by limiting the unwholesome outside influences from the world. Conversely, ostrich-like parents are all about making a name for themselves in the community, often at the risk of neglecting the training and development of their children. In their pursuit of expanding their realm of influence outside of their home, they also risk worldly influences soiling the hearts and minds of their children. However, in the long run, it is not worth it.<sup>105</sup> As referenced earlier in this study, Jesus warns in Mark 8:36, "What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?" (and, by extension, the souls of your children?)

What Job observed about these two very different kinds of birds is instructive to human parenting. The devotion and attentiveness of stork parenting yield a much higher survival rate

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<sup>103</sup> Easy Science for Kids, "Storks," accessed February 20, 2023. <https://easyscienceforkids.com/all-about-storks/>.

<sup>104</sup> James Strong and John McClintock, "Ostrich," *The Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1880).

<sup>105</sup> Kendra Cherry, "Characteristics and Effects of an Uninvolved Parenting Style," Very Well Mind, March 14, 2023, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-uninvolved-parenting-2794958>.

than all other birds,<sup>106</sup> but the negligence of ostrich parenting yields only a fifteen percent survival rate. In fact, of the seven species of ostriches that existed in the past, only two are left; the other five have suffered extinction.<sup>107</sup> Christian parents need to apply what Job observed regarding their godly childrearing. Storks are symbolic of wisdom and understanding; ostriches are symbolic of foolishness and ignorance. Christian parents need to decide how they will be known regarding their familial success, whether they are stork-like or ostrich-like. The spiritual causalities among the emerging generation are compiling; may more parents learn the ways of the stork and follow those ways accordingly.

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson claims that the identity crisis of adolescence is the most significant conflict a person will ever face. During these crucial years, young people face the question, “Who am I?” Then pressures from peers, raging drives due to hormones, and expanded opportunities to experiment with illicit behaviors combine to create new temptations.<sup>108</sup> Erikson recommends parents should remain engaged and avoid neglect regarding their children. Because teenagers are in preparation for independence and separate identity from their parents, and because the part of their brains that controls decision-making, social behavior, and personality expression is still developing, then it is a normal process of growing up to test boundaries, argue, and appear to be rebellious. Defiant behavior and a new disregard for family rules cause conflict in the home to increase in frequency and intensity.<sup>109</sup> During this season, the

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<sup>106</sup> Shay Rotics et. al., “Early-Life Behaviour Predicts First-Year Survival in a Long-Distance Avian Migrant,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, January 13, 2021, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rspb.2020.2670>.

<sup>107</sup> McGill School of Computer Science, “Ostrich,” accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/wikispeedia/wpcd/wp/o/Ostrich.htm>.

<sup>108</sup> Tim Clinton, Chap Clark, and Joshua Straub, *Counseling Teenagers: 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights, and Easy-to-Use Action Steps* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 7.

“soil receptivity” for the seeds of the Gospel in the hearts of adolescents can seem like the condition Jesus described in Matt 13:5 – shallow with underlying rock that prevents roots from taking hold. As the primary sowers of the Gospel seed in their children’s hearts, parents need to remain vigilant to keep cultivating that soil. Their children are a sacred trust given to them directly by God. Ps 127:3 says, “Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from Him.”

The Bible provides instructions to ministry leaders

In Col 1:28, Paul challenges ministry leaders with their job description: “We tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all the wisdom God has given us. We want to present them to God, mature in their relationship to Christ.” Children are included in this realm of leaders’ ministry. The secondary responsibility for developing and retaining a child’s faith lies with the child’s ministry leaders (often in a local church setting). Just as a Christian family should be the safest place to rear young people and shape their spiritual formation, a community of faith should also be a safe place to supplement that childrearing. It should not be a church that just entertains students with programs and activities. Instead, it must be a local church that is vibrantly alive, Jesus-focused, biblically based, Spirit-empowered, and life-transforming. Its focus must be on disciple-making. Just as Scripture thoroughly instructs parents, it also provides ample directions for ministry leaders.

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<sup>109</sup> Dan Brennan, “Why Does Teenage Rebellion Happen?” MedicineNet, August 18, 2021, [https://www.medicinenet.com/why\\_does\\_teenage\\_rebellion\\_happen/article.htm](https://www.medicinenet.com/why_does_teenage_rebellion_happen/article.htm).

In Matt 28:19, Jesus said, “Go and make disciples...” The Greek word that Jesus used in that verse is *mathetes*. It means “one who seeks to learn from another.”<sup>110</sup> In English, the word *disciple* is distinguished from a mere convert. A disciple is not only a partaker of information but also seeks to become like their teacher.<sup>111</sup> In Luke 6:40, Jesus adds, “The student who is *fully trained* will become like the teacher” (emphasis added). Discipleship is about being fully trained. The words *disciple* and *discipline* share the same Latin root *discere*, which means “to learn.”<sup>112</sup> Unlearned people discipline themselves to become learned people. Chris Byrley observes that becoming a disciple is also about modifying one’s entire lifestyle, both thoughts and behavior.<sup>113</sup> For instance, in Matt 4:18-22, when Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, they immediately “left their fishing nets.” They immediately left everything that was their identity and sustenance and followed Jesus to become like Him. Similarly, as Jesus disciplined His followers, ministry leaders should disciple those under their care.<sup>114</sup>

There is great risk if young adults are not disciplined. Heb 2:1 warns, “We must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it.” The word in that verse English translates as “listen” is *akauo*. As in English, listening is distinguished from merely hearing. When one hears, they may forget, but if one listens, they are more likely to remember,

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<sup>110</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. “mathetes,” Bible Study Tools, accessed March 28, 2023, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/matheteuo.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Jonathan Parnell, “What is a Disciple?” *Desiring God*, July 28, 2014, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-a-disciple>.

<sup>112</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “Discipline,” accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline#:~:text=Discipline%20comes%20from%20discipulus%2C%20the,Christ%20in%20his%20lifetime>”).

<sup>113</sup> Chris Byrley, “Discipleship,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

<sup>114</sup> “Mathetes and Matheteuo,” New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, access March 31, 2023. <https://www.nobts.edu/discipleship/downloadable-documents1/Mathetes%20and%20Matheteuo.pdf>.



apply, and benefit, especially if they listen carefully as this verse instructs. The Greek word *akouo* means “to attend to, to consider, to understand what has been said, to give ear to, to learn.”<sup>115</sup> If young adults do not firmly grasp the concepts of God’s Truth, then they risk eventually drifting away from it.

Furthermore, the decision to walk away from the Church does not occur abruptly. Instead, it is usually a “drifting” away – the Greek word there is “to glide, to be slowly carried, to slip away, to escape.”<sup>116</sup> The inherent meaning is a gradual, unnoticed change in position until it is often too late. They do not instantly abandon the Church and perhaps their faith; it is a prolonged erosion over several years. Young adults who admit to deconstructing their faith claim that it was a process that occurred over a long period – long enough for discerning parents and astute ministry leaders to suspect something was wrong and take interventive action.<sup>117</sup>

Another instructive passage for ministry leaders is Heb 10:24-25. It says, “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another.” The word “encourage” is translated from the original Greek word *parakaleo*, which means “called” (*kaleo*) “alongside” (*para*) as a way of synergistically strengthening each other.<sup>118</sup> As long as one remains engaged in a local church by active fellowship and service, their fervency for God usually remains. On the other hand, when one becomes unengaged in the Church, their fervency for God often

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<sup>115</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. “akouo,” accessed April 6, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/akouo.html>.

<sup>116</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. “pararrhueo,” accessed April 6, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/pararrhueo.html>.

<sup>117</sup> “Body, Mind, and Deconstruction,” Intercollegiate Studies Institute, October 8, 2014, <https://isi.org/intercollegiate-review/body-mind-and-deconstruction/>.

<sup>118</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. “parakaleo,” accessed April 10, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/parakaleo.html>.

wanes. That tendency is why people should heed Heb 10:24-25. Thus, it is vital for Christ-followers, especially during the season of their faith formation between childhood and adulthood, to actively participate in a vibrant, Gospel-centered, Spirit-empowered church.

The Greek term *koinonia* is relevant here. Translated in English Bibles as “fellowship” (Acts 2:42) and “joint participation” (2 Cor 8:23), it means “association, community, social intercourse, and sharing” (which is proof of genuine fellowship).<sup>119</sup> It usually refers to the unity that should exist among believers in a local church. Young adults are especially longing for an authentic community. It is incumbent on ministry leaders to show as much diligence in providing ample opportunities for genuine *koinonia* among young adults as they do every other age group – children, youth, young families, homebuilders, empty-nesters, and seniors.<sup>120</sup>

The book of Acts provides a great model of *koinonia* that ministry leaders can replicate today, and in doing so, they can make a deliberate effort to include their young adults. Acts 2:42-47 says,

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity – all while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

Ministry leaders should also focus on true discipleship. Jesus instructed His disciples to make fully devoted followers of Him, not just converts to a Christian social club. Going through

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<sup>119</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s. v. “koinonia,” accessed April 11, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/koinonia.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Jan McCoy, “Creating Faith-Building Community for Young Adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Scholar Blogs, Emory University, April 3, 2019, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/candlerdmin/2019/04/03/creating-faith-building-community-for-young-adults-in-the-21st-century-2/>.

religious motions and observing traditional practices disconnected from the present reality does not suffice for young adults. They also seek meaningful service in the local community and beyond; they find significance in sacrificial service and sharing things in common with others. They find more contentment living on less than their predecessors did. The word “community” is a buzzword among them. The more frequently they can get together, the more joy they seem to possess. If ministry leaders want to attract young adults and keep them engaged, then they should carefully model their efforts after Acts 2:42-47.

Based on his team’s research data, David Kinnaman observed this generation’s young adults: “The dropout problem is, at its core, a faith-development problem; to use religious language, it’s a disciple-making problem. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture.”<sup>121</sup> Ironically, although Kinnaman indicates that teenagers are some of the most religiously active Americans, he insists that American twentysomethings are the least religiously active according to many studies.<sup>122</sup> This fact calls into question the effectiveness of the methods many churches employ today in their youth ministries before their youth ever become young adults. A greater level of intentional spiritual experiences leads to a greater level of internalized faith among young people, which will, in turn, lead to a greater level of retention.

Most ministry leaders frustrated over their lack of ministry effectiveness to young adults seem to focus primarily on worship and communication styles, relevance to young adult culture, room aesthetics, printed and online resources, service and small group structures, and other programming issues. Though all those details have their place, attention to these superficial

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<sup>121</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 21.

<sup>122</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 22.

matters often causes these well-intentioned leaders to overlook the more foundational aspects of young adult ministries. Regarding the continual fanning into flame the spark of faith, young adults need a transformative encounter with Jesus more than surfacy replications of pop-culture spirituality.<sup>123</sup>

The book of Psalms reveals God’s heart about the adult generation’s responsibility regarding the passing on a legacy of faith to the emerging generation after them. Ps 145:4 says, “Let each generation tell its children of God’s mighty acts; let them proclaim His power.” Ps 84:4-7 continues,

We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about His power and His mighty wonders. For He issued His laws; He gave His instructions. He commanded our ancestors to teach them to their children, so the next generation might know them – even the children not yet born – and they in turn will teach their own children. So, each generation should set its hope anew on God, not forgetting His glorious miracles and obeying His commands.

Ps 71:18 adds, “Now that I am old and gray, do not abandon me, O God. Let me proclaim Your power to this new generation, Your mighty miracles to all who come after me.” It is evident from the Scriptures that God inspired He has a divine passion for the proper spiritual formation and discipleship of young people. God has certainly not spared any effort to teach parents and ministry leaders about reaching, teaching, and keeping dependent children so that they may thrive during adolescence into adulthood and independence. True discipleship of children that they can carry into their adult lives is close to the heart of God. It is up to parents and ministry leaders in partnership to implement the principles that God has readily provided in His Word.

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<sup>123</sup> Randy Jumper, “Meshed Ministry: Retaining Young Adults During their Complex Migration into Adulthood,” (DMin dissertation, George Fox University, 2021), 56.

What Jesus said about planting seeds of the Gospel in fertile soil is appropriate for young adults who need to develop a solid relationship with Jesus. One of the disciples recorded the parable in his Gospel. Matt 13:3-8 says,

Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died. Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. Still, other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!

Due to the disciples' request for an interpretation, Jesus's subsequent explanation of His parable is available for application today. Matt 13:19-23 says,

The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts. The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced. The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!

This parable is quite instructional for ministry leaders responsible for reaching, teaching, and keeping young people in the faith and their church through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It opens by describing the efforts and intentions of a farmer who sowed seeds indiscriminately on various soils. As in any agricultural context, it is the sower's responsibility to prepare the soil first for optimal results. Likewise, since ministry leaders have the seeds of the Gospel they are sowing in the hearts of young people, it is their responsibility to prepare the hearts of those young people first.

For the first category that Jesus identified, the devil snatches away the seed of the Gospel from those who have heard the message but do not understand it. The word “understand” translates the original Greek word *sunimi*. Although the English translation is accurate, it was also a Jewish idiom for knowing specifically of those things that pertain to salvation.<sup>124</sup> For the second category that Jesus identified, some students receive the message in their church youth group. However, because they are not well-rooted and firmly established, their commitments do not last long, and Jesus said they end up falling away. For the third category that Jesus identified, some students receive the message, but it gets choked out by the cares of the world. By the time those young people get to college and face temptations and challenges to their faith, there is no lasting fruit from all the efforts spent on them while they were in their church youth group back home.

The fourth category that Jesus identified, those who are the “good soil,” represent those who fully understand the Gospel. Those young people have a solid knowledge of those things that pertain to salvation. They have been discipled, so they are well-rooted in their faith. They are unshakable. Even when the worries of this life pose a threat, they are strong enough to withstand their ground and prevail. Then they go on to be quite fruitful in their adult years.

The inherent application of Jesus’s parable to youth ministries today is that ministry leaders cannot be satisfied with young people just attending their youth group and church services. Jesus’s explanation of the “good soil” is that they must ensure their young people are discipled and fully grasp their spiritual formation before they graduate high school and enter their young adult years. According to Sam McDowell of Leadership Network, when Christian parents are a part of the church, then ministry leaders should partner with those parents to ensure

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<sup>124</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. “*sunimi*,” accessed April 12, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/sunimi.html>.

those children are being shaped in their spiritual formation at home.<sup>125</sup> Jesus's parable is a sober challenge to any ministry leader leading young people and their families.

Vis-à-vis the parental responsibility to instill the fear of the Lord in their children's hearts, Acts 9:31 is the counterpart biblical reference for ministry leaders regarding their responsibility toward children. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke recorded, "The church... became stronger as the believers lived in the fear of the Lord. And with the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it also grew in numbers." God expects Christian leaders to cultivate an environment characterized by a "fear of the Lord" in their churches and ministries. That word in the original Greek could mean that which strikes terror depending on the context, but in this case, like its Hebrew counterpart, the word *phobos* means "to be in awe of, to revere, honor, and respect."<sup>126</sup> Just as importantly it is for parents in their homes, ministry leaders in their church cannot neglect to impress on the children within their realm of influence the profound awe, reverence, honor, and respect of God.

Heb 13:17 reveals how God feels about the responsibility of ministry leaders to disciple their people, especially young adults, when making life-impacting decisions. The verse says, "Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God." Like shepherds watching over sheep, ministry leaders are to watch over the souls under their charge. That command is easier said than done because souls wander like sheep. If leaders neglect their responsibility, then that verse says that "they are accountable to God." Jer 23:2 expands on this sober reality: "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to

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<sup>125</sup> Sam McDowell, "Leveraging Your Ministry to Equip Parents as Spiritual Leaders in the Home," Leadership Network, August 14, 2023, <https://leadnet.org/leveraging-your-ministry-to-equip-parents-as-spiritual-leaders-in-the-home/>.

<sup>126</sup> *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. "phobos," accessed April 13, 2023, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/phobos.html>.

the shepherds: ‘Instead of caring for My flock and leading them to safety, you have deserted them and driven them to destruction. Now I will pour out judgment on you for the evil you have done to them.’” If ministry leaders disregard their responsibilities for providing and protecting their people, if they desert them or become preoccupied with other concerns, then God’s accountability for them involves pouring out judgment on them for their failure to lead, protect, care, and provide. Since God thinks the discipleship of young people is vital, then so should ministry leaders.

### *Literature Review*

The following literary review demonstrates a familiarity with relevant literature on the parental spiritual formation of children in the home and ministerial discipleship of children in the Church. It also clarifies the relationship between this study and previous work on this salient topic. This literary review forms the intellectual underpinnings for proper childrearing by first exploring ancient works of Early Church fathers, then contemporary works of leaders today.

Ancient works offer insights for the spiritual formation of children

This project compares the insights of ancient authors to those of modern writers. The Patristic Era was a time not too far removed from Jesus and the authors of the Gospels and Epistles.

Those theologians addressed a very different culture from the American culture, but many of their suggestions still have much relevance to parents today. Fundamentally, they viewed the care of children in the context of Christian theology and ethics. Of all the classical writings in the



Early Church, the Greek works of Clement of Alexandria (late second to early third centuries), Basil of Caesarea (fourth century), and John Chrysostom, and the Latin works of Jerome and Augustine of Hippo (fourth and fifth centuries) are some of the Church Fathers who expounded the most on family life.<sup>127</sup>

In response to the asceticism of his day, Clement suggested that the ordinary tasks of marriage and parenthood provide opportunities for training in virtue and can lead to contemplative insight. Human parenthood is an aspect of the divine image that defines authentic human identity. In his commentary on 1 Tim 2:15, Clement maintained that both parents would be saved through childbearing, assuming they continue to live in faith, love, holiness, and modesty. He also insisted to children that parents shared in God's creative work in begetting them; they merely cooperated in causing their birth, but God is their Creator.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Augustine argued that although his mother's milk consoled him, God filled her breasts and provided him infant food according to God's natural order. In this context, Augustine described the profound biological interrelatedness and symbiosis that unite parents with their children. The everyday tasks of parental childcare, by instinct as well as a conscious choice, manifest God's wise design.<sup>129</sup> In light of the anti-child sentiments in American culture today and the deliberate delay many couples practice before they have children, these Church Fathers remind us of the holiness of parenthood because of its partnership with God's creativity.

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<sup>127</sup> Nonna Verna Harrison, "Early Christian Approaches to Child Rearing," (lecture, Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, Dallas, Texas, November 1998).

<sup>128</sup> Otto Stählin, *Stromata*, translated by Henry Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1954), 89.

<sup>129</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6-7.

Clement also believed that fulfilling parental responsibilities, as taxing as it may be, leads men and women to redirect their attention away from self-centered concern with their own pleasure and status. Such discipline develops virtues and obedience to God's commands and contributes to one's spiritual journey. This drawing of concern beyond oneself becomes a crown that adorns far better than the customary festive garlands that the world bestows.<sup>130</sup>

Matt 18:20 says, "Where two or three gather together as Christ's followers, He is there among them." Regarding Clement's commentary on this passage, he suggested that the concept of family is a small church, and that the family should consider itself that way: husband plus wife plus children equals Christ's presence.<sup>131</sup> Such insight is an anecdote for today's compartmentalization of life where "church" is relegated to Sunday mornings, and the spiritual formation of children are the responsibility of ministry leaders instead of parents.

Plato established that teaching is a highly prized mode of childbearing, and Clement agreed with this assertion. However, as a departure from Plato, Clement insisted that parental teaching should include spiritual concepts; godly concepts were a significant part of parents' nurture and education of their children. The spiritual aspects of parenthood are just as important as the physical aspects of parenthood. In his commentary on Isa 65:23, Clement said, "For one who brings children into being and rears them and educates them in the Lord, just as for one who procreates by means of the true teaching, a reward is laid up, as also for the elect seed."<sup>132</sup> He insisted that parents have the same responsibilities toward their children as the priests have toward their flock; they are to educate them to be Christians. Parents give birth to their children

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<sup>130</sup> Stählin, *Stromata*, Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*, 71.

<sup>131</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Chadwick, 12-13.

<sup>132</sup> Stählin, *Stromata*, Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*, 86.

spiritually just as much as they give birth physically; it is a serious responsibility. Augustine shared Clement's conviction. In *Confessions*, he reflected on his mother, "who brought (him to birth both in her body so that (he) was born into the light of time, and in her heart so that (he) was born into the light of eternity."<sup>133</sup> To the Church Fathers, physical and spiritual childbearing belong together; they are inseparable. An anonymous book entitled *Apostolic Constitutions*, written at the time of Clement, referred to parental accountability: "Fathers, educate your children in the Lord and bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord... He who neglects to admonish and instruct his son hates his own child... If the children go astray by the carelessness of their parents, those who begat them will be responsible for their souls."<sup>134</sup>

John Chrysostom makes a similar point:

This, then, is our task: to educate both ourselves and our children in godliness; otherwise, what answer will we have before Christ's judgment seat? If a man with unruly children is unworthy to be a bishop (Titus 1:6), how can he be worthy of the kingdom of heaven? If we have unruly children, shall we not have to render an account for them? If the man who buried his one talent was punished (Matt 25:24-28), it is obvious that one's own virtue is not enough for salvation, but the virtue of those for whom we are responsible is also required.<sup>135</sup>

Chrysostom's words echo the example of the priest Eli, whom God punished because of the bad conduct of his sons (1 Sam 3-4). Chrysostom's conviction was that a child's upbringing is crucial to God. He continued,

Let us bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4), and a great reward will be in store for us. For if when people make statues of kings and paint images, they enjoy great honor, when we beautify the royal image, will we not enjoy countless good things, as we offer back what is according to God's likeness? For when we educate our children to be good, to be gentle, to be without

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<sup>133</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Chadwick, 166.

<sup>134</sup> Marcel Metzger, *Les constitutions apostoliques*, 2 (Paris, FR: Cerf, 1986), 188.

<sup>135</sup> John Chrysostom, Homily 21 on Ephesians 4, edited by J. P. Migne in *Patrologia Graeca cursus completus* (Paris, FR: Migne, 1857-1866), 62:154; translated by Catharine P. Roth and David Anderson in *St. John Chrysostom on Marriage and Family Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1986), 71-72.

rancor – all these are proper to God – to act generously, to love others, when we educate them to regard things of the present age as nothing, this is the divine likeness, the virtue of the soul.<sup>136</sup>

Chrysostom speaks here of children as being in God’s image. Therefore, through educating their character, their parents have the sober task of shaping them as living icons of Christ. Thus, one of the primary aims of education should be to train young people in virtue, not just core subjects.

In the era of the Church Fathers, children were taught a general knowledge of classical literature, philosophy, culture, persuasive argument, and refined prose writing, even at an early age. Parents focused on these subjects because if their children excelled in these skills, then it could bring the family wealth, fame, and higher public office.<sup>137</sup> Basil, Augustine, and Chrysostom were all trained in rhetoric and used their polished gifts. However, they maintained that training to attain wealth, fame, and power was transitory and could be lost due to life’s instability, so parents should train their children for God’s eternal Kingdom with an emphasis on virtue. In their day, such a position was profoundly counter-cultural. These Fathers suggested that children should be taught to reject those goals rather than pursue them.<sup>138</sup> To that end, Chrysostom summarized this contrast when he exhorted parents as follows:

Don't ask how your child can enjoy a long life here, but how he can enjoy an infinite and eternal life in the age to come. Give him the great things, not the little things... Don't strive to make him a clever orator, but teach him to love true wisdom. He will not suffer if he lacks clever words; but if he lacks wisdom, all the rhetoric in the world can't help him. A pattern of life is what is needed, not empty speeches; character, not cleverness; deeds, not words. These things will secure the Kingdom and bestow God's blessings. Don't sharpen his tongue, but purify his soul.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> John Chrysostom, Homily 21, 154.

<sup>137</sup> Nonna Harrison, “Early Christian Approaches.”

<sup>138</sup> Nonna Harrison, “Early Christian Approaches.”

<sup>139</sup> John Chrysostom, Homily 21, 69.

Such a position would be counter-cultural by today's standards of education. These leaders in late antiquity would undoubtedly be appalled at today's public school curriculum and the number of Christian parents who subject their children to it for many hours each week.

Chrysostom also recommended that parents dedicate their children to God like Hannah dedicated her son Samuel (1 Samuel 1).<sup>140</sup> Similarly, two distinguished bishops during the fourth and fifth centuries, Gregory Nazianzen and Theodoret of Cyrrhus, claimed they were born in response to the prayers of devout parents who pledged to offer them to God. They both claimed that their lives experienced providential favor directly due to the intercessory prayers of their parents. They urged parents to pray for their children continually even when they become adults.<sup>141</sup>

Not only were early Christian parents exhorted to teach their children good character, but they were also urged to provide their children with a thorough grounding in Christian culture and practice. Children were to be taken to mass frequently and trained to pray, fast, and read and understand Scripture. Learning to read was emphasized because comprehending the Bible was central to the Christian life.<sup>142</sup> In addition to educational storytelling of biblical accounts, children's memorization of Scripture was also greatly emphasized. Families recited and chanted psalms together. Children at an early age were taught to bring their personal concerns into a living dialogue with God. With Rom 2:15 in mind, early Christian parents considered their role as etching the laws of God on their children's hearts so that they were permanently marked for

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<sup>140</sup> John Chrysostom, Homily 21, 151.

<sup>141</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Concerning His Own Life*, edited by Caroline White in *Autobiographical Poems* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>142</sup> Harrison, "Early Christian Approaches."

the rest of their lives. Such an educational process often displaced the ancient systems of *paideia* that served as the foundation for classical culture. Since children today are being brought up within Western civilization, it would serve parents well to reconsider their roles in light of their predecessors.<sup>143</sup>

Jerome and Chrysostom also advised parents to show children considerable affection and frequently remind them how much they were loved.<sup>144</sup> Such a practice was especially beneficial when children were required to do tasks that they found difficult or disagreeable. They also insisted that parents make Bible study fun and enjoyable so that they would continue the practice into adulthood. These Church Fathers also urged parents to praise their children publicly before others whenever they demonstrated proficiency in Bible knowledge and Christian character.<sup>145</sup> Their rationale was that people tend to repeat what gets celebrated.

Chrysostom also addressed the dubious issue of child discipline. He advised parents to use it sparingly in an era when harsh corporal punishment was the standard. He suggested that parents would achieve and maintain respect from their children if they disciplined them firmly but with kindness. Augustine also suggested that blows inflicted on children do not achieve the results that adults want. He even compared adult mistreatment of children regarding their discipline to the tortures of the Roman criminal system.<sup>146</sup> However, Augustine was also not

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<sup>143</sup> Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>144</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, "Theory and Practice in Late Ancient Asceticism: Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 5, no. 2, (Fall 1989): 25-46.

<sup>145</sup> Jerome, Letter 107.4 translated by Isidor Hilberg in *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*; John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory* 78; Malingrey, 182.

<sup>146</sup> Bent D. Shaw, "The Family in Late Antiquity: The Experience of Augustine," *Past & Present* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), no. 115 (May 1987): 3-51.

ambivalent about child discipline. He praised it because he considered it invaluable to himself now that he was an adult. He said, “I had no love for reading books and hated being forced to study them. Yet pressure was put on me and was good for me. It was not of my own inclination that I did well, for I learnt nothing unless compelled.”<sup>147</sup> In light of the value of discipline, Augustine maintained that the world uses corporal punishment to prepare children for a lucrative career, but Christian parents should employ loving discipline so that children might be prepared for service unto God.<sup>148</sup>

Clement of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine also emphasized the importance of providing children with good role models. They advised parents to show children examples of good character and conduct in the Bible, the lives of Christian saints, and them as parents themselves. They also insisted that parents surround their children with adults who set good examples while protecting them from harmful companions. Chrysostom was mindful of the powerful influence of social pressure to conform during a child’s formative years. He said, “For nothing can direct conduct rightly as much as emulation can, not anything. Let us act thus in every circumstance, especially if the child is drawn toward emulation, for it has much greater power than fear, than promises, than everything else.”<sup>149</sup> Augustine also expounded on the value of positive social pressure and the dangers of negative social pressure.<sup>150</sup>

Given the pervasiveness of immoral Greco-Roman culture, Christian parents and leaders struggled with rearing children in their cultural environment, much like Christian parents and ministry leaders see their young people facing grave dangers today. Early theologians considered

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<sup>147</sup> Nonna Harrison, “Early Christian Approaches.”

<sup>148</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Chadwick, 10-11.

<sup>149</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 178-180.

<sup>150</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Chadwick, 34.

it crucial that parents protect their children from harmful forms of entertainment. Chrysostom preached at length against attending the theater, for the shows were vulgar akin to many of today's movie and television programs, replete with explicit sex and violence. He urged parents to teach their offspring good character by providing rules to regulate their appetite for entertainment. He maintained that the senses, especially sight and hearing, were gateways to a child's soul through which external influences can enter and set a tone for the rest of a child's life. Chrysostom challenged parents to guard these gates vigilantly. Instead, parents should redirect their children toward wholesome forms of entertainment that they all could enjoy together.<sup>151</sup> Such advice is just as relevant for parents today; rather than allowing a child to be entertained for hours on end unsupervised in their room while on screens, why not have families explore outdoor recreation, museums, cultural events, and other arts and sciences?

Another concern Paleo-Christian authors had was the form of education standard for the Greco-Roman world at that time. The curriculum focused on classical literature full of mythology; it was fundamentally incompatible with the Christian faith. Invariably, the secular stories contained moral lessons contradicting Christian standards. So Christian parents had to find alternative forms of education to the public curricula of their day. Basil suggested that parents carefully choose curricula that convey moral lessons based on God's Word, values, and character. When necessary, Basil also artfully transposed mythical tales into Christian contexts.<sup>152</sup>

According to the Church Fathers, God calls Christian parents and children to live in His likeness. They are to share in the divine life that became incarnate in Christ. Like links in a

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<sup>151</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 180.

<sup>152</sup> Basil, *Address to Young People*, translated by R. J. Deferrari and M. R. P. McGuire (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 398.



chain, they can pass on life in Christ from generation to generation through their familial relationships.<sup>153</sup> Advising mothers to train their daughters in all the virtues, Chrysostom summarizes the purposes and rewards of Christian parenthood:

If you mold her completely in this way, you will save not only her but also the husband who will marry her, not only the husband but also the children, not only the children but also the grandchildren. For when the root becomes good, the shoots are outstretched toward what is better, and for all these you will receive the reward. Therefore, let us do all things so as to help not one soul alone, but many through the one.<sup>154</sup>

Society at the time of these early Church writers was like today's world. Large cities were scattered throughout and consisted of pagans, Jews and Christians, people of many different nationalities, freemen and enslaved people, the poor and the rich. People had Roman and Hellenic pagan traditions mixed in with their everyday lives. Furthermore, those who were believers were only second-generation Christians. Christianity had only just begun to enter society's customs. Fornication, divorce, domestic violence, and irresponsible parents, for whom entertainment and money were more valuable than children and families – these were the issues Chrysostom was addressing.<sup>155</sup> Today's conditions are no better than those in their day.

More resources are available about John Chrysostom than the other early theologians. His insights are valuable here as ancient insights are relevant to today's childrearing. As the fourth-century priest of Antioch and then highly respected bishop of Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, John Chrysostom is a frequent source of pedagogical counsel, including

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<sup>153</sup> Nonna Harrison, "Early Christian Approaches."

<sup>154</sup> John Chrysostom, Homily 9 on First Timothy.

<sup>155</sup> Anna Saprykina, "St. John Chrysostom on the Family and the Upbringing of Children," *Orthodox Christianity*, February 8, 2020, <https://orthochristian.com/127870.html>.

parental guidance and the proper upbringing of young people.<sup>156</sup> His extensive work presents a systematic exposition of Christian education. For the parents in ancient Greece who were determined to rear their children in the fear of the Lord, Chrysostom's timeless book *On Vainglory and the Raising of Children* was considered the textbook on parenting.<sup>157</sup> In essence, the attitudes of parents toward the spiritual formation of their children in his day were not unlike those attitudes demonstrated today. Their plans for their children's future were confined to professional success and prosperity more than spiritual formation. Parents were mainly concerned with securing all the material conveniences for their children in hopes that their standard of living would become higher than their own. They seemed to pay no attention to the sacrifices to find the right schools and the best teachers so their children could rise in the ranks. The obsession with acquiring material goods was the most potent motivating factor for parents that trumped every other priority. Parents seemed to be hoisting their children like trophies rather than tending to their souls with outstanding care.<sup>158</sup> As a result, the parents of Chrysostom's day unintentionally introduced two great tyrannical vices in the perspectives of their children – the love of money and the love of social status.<sup>159</sup> Chrysostom called this end a perversion. He lamented, "The loss of children comes about through no other way than the obsession that their parents have with earthly things."<sup>160</sup> Although parents cared about securing wealth, clothes,

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<sup>156</sup> Herbert Moore, *The Dialogue of Palladius Concerning the Life of Saint John Chrysostom* (New York, NY: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1921).

<sup>157</sup> Salmanes Sozomen, "The Ecclesiastical History," translated by Chester D. Hartranft, *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, II (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 197-427.

<sup>158</sup> Theodoros Zisis, "Raising Children According to Saint John Chrysostom," Orthodox Christian Information Center, <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/raising-children-according-to-saint-john-chrysostom.aspx>.

<sup>159</sup> Theodoros Zisis, "Raising Children," 5.

<sup>160</sup> John Chrysostom, *Προς τούς πολειμουντας* 3, [4].

servants, and prosperity, they seemed to care nothing about the spiritual cultivation of their children's virtue and devotion. Vice replaced virtue, a complete inversion of Christ's intentions. Such a description is not unlike the characterization of many parents and their youth today, seventeen centuries later.

Chrysostom's rebuke of carnal parenting did not end with just family life. As those children became adults, the culture deteriorated. The schools and courts were soon negatively affected. (Sound familiar?) He complained, "There is no escape from this, neither with the judges nor in the laws, not in the teachers, or parents nor in servants. Some can be bought off with money, while others care only for their salaries."<sup>161</sup> Those concerned did not dare speak out for fear of the power of the immoral. According to Chrysostom, the improper care of children and the neglect of their spiritual cultivation directly contributed to society's ethical wantonness and social unrest. He wrote, "The downfall of society stems from this disregard for children. Many seek the preservation of their estates, but not the preservation of their souls."<sup>162</sup> He did not hesitate to call the indifference of parents and teachers to the spiritual cultivation of children "criminal." With chastising language, he said that since vices kill the souls of their children, then those adults commit infanticide – the murder of their children.<sup>163</sup>

1 John 2:16 states, "For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our accomplishments and possessions. These are not from the Father but are from the world." Chrysostom's insights are consistent with this verse. He also insisted that society in his day did not suffer from a lack of shrewd businesspeople or a lack of

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<sup>161</sup> John Chrysostom, *Προς*.

<sup>162</sup> John Chrysostom, *Προς τούς πολεμουντας* 3, [8].

<sup>163</sup> John Chrysostom, *Προς*.

the literate and educated. Instead, it suffered from a lack of virtuous people. Society suffered because of the power-hungry; it suffered because extravagance and comfort became the sole aim of people in his day. “Those things which are considered superfluous and unimportant are the very things required for the course of our life.”<sup>164</sup> The bishop contended that any attempt at social and economic reconstruction is condemned to failure if it does not originate in ethical, spiritual restoration, reformation, and regeneration of one’s soul. Parents and teachers should undertake their sacred work of childrearing in faith, constantly seeking divine advice and direction. Instead, he castigated adults in his day for allowing youth to be “easily enflamed” (a reference to sexual promiscuity, the gratification of fleshly desires). Chrysostom wondered how God tolerated it so much. Why did God not send fire to consume Antioch like He once did to Sodom and Gomorrah?<sup>165</sup> The Orthodox Father placed great responsibility for his city’s waywardness in the hands of the theater, for he accused its program of principally covering harlotry, adultery, and pornographic themes. “For indeed... youth are corrupting themselves: all there is iniquity to the full, all sorcery, all shame.”<sup>166</sup>

In *Vainglory*, Chrysostom claimed that vanity is the erroneous perception that people gain their self-worth from their exhibitions of wealth, dress, homes, and furnishings. He also chastised the organized games played in the Hippodrome because the motivation for the participants’ actions was the applause and acclaim of the people. He observed that his society’s infatuation with sports caused a disproportionate display of economic power. Although the athletes displayed a lifestyle funded by incalculable money, they were morally bankrupt and

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<sup>164</sup> John Chrysostom, *Προς τούς πολεμουντας* 3, [9].

<sup>165</sup> John Chrysostom, *Προς*.

<sup>166</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 37.

spiritually impoverished. The problem was that these athletes were the heroes whom the youth of his day idolized. He said this cultural inclination was not just limited to the wealthy; it penetrated all levels of society. Even people experiencing poverty got caught up in the exhibitions of the athletes.<sup>167</sup> A parallel application can be made today regarding some sports heroes' apparent lack of virtue and the poor example they model for impressionable children. For example, the NBA suspended Phoenix Suns star Charles Barkley in March 1991 and fined him \$10,000. He tried to spit at a racist heckler seated courtside in New Jersey but hit an 8-year-old girl instead. In response to the discipline (which was captured by Nike for a subsequent commercial), Barkley stated, "I can't be a role model for your kid. Your kid doesn't know me. I can be an athletic hero, but a role model should be a mom, a dad, an aunt, an uncle, someone the kid has contact with."<sup>168</sup> Indeed, some parents today allow their children to idolize sports heroes even though some do not model virtuous values and perspectives.

Chrysostom was angry by this situation, as evidenced in his writings. He regarded all these things as external and of no benefit to the soul. Virtue should be the measure of an ideal person, not their appearance or abilities. Parents should teach children that virtue is the source of human dignity. "It is virtue that constitutes a good reputation and honor."<sup>169</sup> On the other hand, he said, it is the infusion of such vanity by public figures that affects children and causes the perpetuation of vice. The bishop connected the root of vices in society to the fact that children have grown up in an unhealthy environment allowed by their parents and mentors.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Jeff Eisenberg, "Iconic Sports Commercials: Charles Barkley's 'I am not a role model,'" Yahoo Sports, July 7, 2019, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/iconic-sports-commercials-charles-barkleys-i-am-not-a-role-model-055726035.html>.

<sup>169</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 14.

Chrysostom claimed that parents tend to do everything for their children from birth, including adorning them with clothes and buying them trinkets, but their attention does not include seeking out proper ways to rear them. Rather than extracting the foolishness that fills their youngsters' hearts according to Prov 22:15, they neglect the physical discipline that will drive it far away.<sup>171</sup> They also introduce the care of unprofitable things. The great shame in these shortcomings, he complained, is that childhood is their prime time for development, the most suitable opportunity to implant either virtue or vice. The souls of children are soft and delicate, like warm wax. Just as a sculptor makes an impression when the wax is soft, and then in time, the image is hardened and sealed. No one can undo the image. Parents should devote the necessary attention to impressing values on their children. At the same time, they are impressionable so that as they grow up, those from the secular culture cannot undo those values easily (Prov 22:6). Often, a sculptor must rid superfluous substances from the wax during the development of the image. Hence, parents need to rid the foolishness that fills their children's hearts while they are still impressionable.<sup>172</sup> Chrysostom insisted that there is no more wonderful material to work than with children's souls. Parents are allowed by God to create living statues for God's glory.<sup>173</sup>

Chrysostom also made a point to impress on parents the importance of the care required to control what enters a child's soul and what influences it. The parents' selection of influences on a child's soul is vital. With graphic imagery, he likened a child's life to a city; the walls are

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<sup>170</sup> Theodoros Zisis, "Raising Children," 11.

<sup>171</sup> Theodoros Zisis, "Raising Children," 13.

<sup>172</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 20.

<sup>173</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 28.

the child's body, and the gates are the child's five senses. Like his contemporaries, he also observed that all impressions and stimulants enter from the outside world through one's senses. However, if these "gates" are left unchecked, then evil impressions are allowed to pass through. Havoc will be wrought because the child's resistive ability is limited. Chrysostom maintained that parents should exercise great care concerning what a child is allowed to see and hear.<sup>174</sup> Although he had no idea about the unwholesome content that is now readily accessible to children (unbeknownst to their parents), the analogy is just as apt today as ever. Unethical and dangerous material flows in through these entryways if a child's parents do not vigilantly defend against it.

Regarding the associations that children keep, Chrysostom compared their delicate souls to plants when they were young and fragile. More attention and care are required. Parents should be attentive to the company children keep to control what their children see and hear. Parents should not abandon their children to just anyone because those people may very well shape their children's souls in ways the parents would disapprove of them. Suppose parents forbid the entertainment of the theater for their children. In that case, there exist engaging narratives in the Holy Scriptures that will captivate a child's interest and will, as a by-product, teach the child virtue.<sup>175</sup>

Chrysostom was very conscience of an adolescent's awakening of sexual desires and the forceful drives that result in immoral cravings. However, his views were at great odds with the world's liberal and unbridled philosophies of his day. Restraint is difficult, he admitted, but it is not impossible. Children, therefore, are to be kept away from obscene sights and sounds because

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<sup>174</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 30.

<sup>175</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 39.

they excite these desires in an unhealthy way. As a counterbalance, parents can shift their children's interests in other directions, like family excursions and spending time with wholesome people.<sup>176</sup> The current culture's easy access to influential media, such as Netflix, Disney+, Hulu, Amazon, Apple TV, and other popular streaming outlets are even more powerful examples of the kinds of influences Chrysostom warned parents from which to shelter their children.

The wise pedagogical traditions of the Church Fathers, like those of John Chrysostom, advocated parental control and the prevention of irritants to children's souls. Temptations and provocations were to be kept at bay so that true joy and delight could characterize the children under the parents' care. Interestingly, the Early Church Fathers also deduced that parents do not have to teach the principles of successful marriage to children. Just like people do not need to learn how to eat, drink, and sleep, they taught that nature is a self-sufficient teacher. If children are diligently taught virtuous principles from God's Word, then they will naturally make good marriages when they become adults.<sup>177</sup>

Martin Luther, the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century German theologian, emphasized the importance of parenting by referring to it as a vocation. He reflected deeply on the central responsibilities of parenting and incorporated them into his overall view of divine calling. He said,

Most certainly, father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 41.

<sup>177</sup> Ives Digory, "Gregory of Nyssa's On Virginity: Beauty Will Save the World," *Sanctum In Heremis* (blog), accessed April 30, 2023, <https://pilgrimvisions.wordpress.com/2014/11/24/gregory-of-nyssas-on-virginity-beauty-will-save-the-world/>.



Like Clement and Chrysostom, Horace Bushnell, Congregationalist pastor and scholar of the nineteenth century, also refers to the family as a “little church.” Although he considers the church’s role important for children, he views the family as the primary agent of grace for such a sacred task, not the Church. He observes, “Religion never thoroughly penetrates life until it becomes domestic.”<sup>179</sup> His outlook is in keeping with Luther’s views that parents have the sacred responsibility to lead their children spiritually as the primary pastors of their souls.

The Early Church Fathers believed parents, not the government or the Church, were primarily responsible for their children’s education. Training in godly ways should be included along with their academics. Just as parents give birth to their children physically, parents should also make sure their children are born again spiritually. They believed physical and spiritual childbearing ought to be inseparable. Since God creates children to be in His image, then part of the parents’ task is to shape their children to become more like Christ in their character. Additionally, the Early Church Fathers believed that since wealth, fame, and power are transitory, parents should train their children with an emphasis on godly virtue instead.

Teaching children good character is good, but the Early Church Fathers also urged parents to ground their children in Christian culture and practice. Rom 2:15 suggests that Christian parents consider their role as etching the laws of God permanently on their children’s hearts. The above-referenced authors in antiquity also advised Christian parents to show children considerable affection and frequently remind them how much they are loved. Since children tend to repeat what gets celebrated, parents are to praise them publicly before others whenever they

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<sup>178</sup> Jane Strohl, “The Child in Luther’s Theology: ‘For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for the Young,’” *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 134-159.

<sup>179</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1861), 63.

demonstrate proficiency in Bible knowledge and Christian character.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, if parents consistently discipline their children firmly but in love, then their children will respect them more. The Fathers taught that parents would prepare their children best for service unto God by exercising loving discipline. Furthermore, since there is great value in positive peer pressure and great danger in negative peer pressure, parents are encouraged to monitor their children's friends.

Christian parents today can learn from their early Christian counterparts. Just as their context for childrearing was the secular Greco-Roman culture, Christian parents today need to counter the secular American culture in their context for childrearing. The Early Fathers would urge parents to direct their children away from unwholesome forms of entertainment on screens, just like they did back then regarding the theater. The wise pedagogical traditions of the Church Fathers advocated parental control and the prevention of irritants to the children's souls, which required them to limit non-Christian influences. That wisdom has not changed.

In summary, the Early Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine, along with Martin Luther and others after them, did a considerable amount of writing about parental childrearing. They agree that parenthood is a holy vocation because of its partnership with God's creative activity. Parental childcare manifests God's wise design. They also seem to agree that the concept of family is a small church; husband plus wife plus children equals Christ's presence. They did not separate family from church; it was intertwined. Parents are to shepherd their children like ministry leaders pastor their church.

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<sup>180</sup> Nonna Harrison, "Early Christian Approaches."

Contemporary studies offer insights for the spiritual formation of children

Many adolescent specialists have published academic books and peer-reviewed articles on the current views Millennials and Gen Zers embrace. Other contemporary authorities also offer advice on godly parenting; they sound an alarm and issue a dire warning on the state of childrearing today in America. Moreover, other experts today also provide keen insights for ministry leaders with young adults in their flock. This research reviews some of those works, and the following themes emerge.

*The spiritual state of young adults today is concerning.* Over the past four decades, there has been a rapid increase in the percentage of young Americans who claim no religious affiliation in polls. The informal term to describe these people is “Nones.” They now account for more than a quarter of the U.S. population but are trending toward becoming the largest segment of that population. They are the first generation in American history in which the Nones outnumber the Christians, forty-eight percent to thirty-six percent. Political science professor Ryan Burge addresses this trend in his book *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where Are They Going*. His conclusion about what accounts for this seismic shift is not limited to typical culprits like social isolation, a lack of trust in institutions, and changing family structures. It is the exodus from the Church by political liberals who have come to view political conservatism and religion as essentially inseparable. Young adults in churches today generally see issues differently than their parents’ generation did; they are significantly more moderate. Furthermore, as the number of Nones has grown, this category has become more diverse. Today, no segment of American society is immune to the rise of religious disaffiliation. Burge also

suggests that as American society continues to advance in educational achievement and prosperity, there is a corresponding move away from religion, as in other countries worldwide. It is reminiscent of the children of Joshua's generation in Judges 2, who drifted away from the things of God once their parents settled into their cities, built homes, and started enjoying prosperity.<sup>181</sup>

Burge does offer hope for ministry leaders. Although atheists and agnostics have well-thought-out objections to faith, the “nothing in particular” group, the fastest-growing religious group in the U.S., is more malleable and receptive to faith. Though they do not associate with a particular religion per se, almost all of them still profess some belief in God. They should be the Church's most important mission field. If ministry leaders intend to reach them, then they must be creative and change how previous generations have done church practices.<sup>182</sup>

In Jonathan Pokluda's work *Welcome to Adulthood*, he defined the word *adulthood* as “the practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks,” and he distinguishes the immature pursuit of money, power, and toys from the more mature finding purpose in life.<sup>183</sup> Essentially, the heart of the matter is sheer obedience to God's revealed will. How can anyone aspire to know specific instructions about one's life when living in defiance of God's revealed principles?<sup>184</sup> This position informs a biblical perspective on relevant young adult topics such as purpose, responsibility, and community. According to John 10:10, God wants His children to live life to the full. Therefore,

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<sup>181</sup> Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where are they Going* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 46.

<sup>182</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 47.

<sup>183</sup> Jonathan Pokluda, *Welcome To Adulthood: Navigating Faith, Friendship, Finances, and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 9.

<sup>184</sup> Pokluda, *Welcome to Adulthood*, 12.

the Bible contains many time-proven guiding principles to direct a believer's life toward a more meaningful experience. Pokluda also deals with identity, gender, negative experiences, direction, belonging, and eternity. He makes a strong case for multigenerational communities as the healthiest context for young adults to develop into all God intends.

Fuller Seminary faculty members Kara Powell and Chap Clark led a team of graduate students on a six-year qualitative and quantitative study to discover how the steadfast faith of high school students can so quickly become irresolute once they get to college. They tracked the collective journeys of five hundred Christians during their first three years of college. Their research results became the impetus for their book *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*. They discovered that when young adults were asked what it means to be a Christian, a third of them listed answers associated with “doing” their faith, a lifestyle of unsustainable external behaviors. However, instead of focusing on the “dos and don'ts list,” Powell and Clark suggest that parents and ministry leaders should focus on how Jesus transforms lives from the inside out. Since other adults can often influence kids and speak to them in ways that parents cannot, then parents need to build substantial social capital in their kids' lives – a web of trusting adults who share the same parental values and mentor their children. A church is one of the best places to find that network of caring supporters. Since children should develop a strong, personal identity, then this community will help make the children's faith stick.<sup>185</sup>

In Michael Brown's book *Why So Many Christians Have Left the Faith: Responding to the Deconstructionist Movement with Unshakeable, Timeless Truth*, he argues that several factors contribute to the young adult attrition rate. His list includes the influence of secularism, the failure of the church to address contemporary issues, and the rise of new religious

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<sup>185</sup> Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

movements. Brown examines how secularism has undermined the Christian faith, particularly in sexuality, morality, and politics. He argues that secular values have swayed many Christians, and they have abandoned their faith. Brown also discusses the failure of the church to address contemporary issues important to young adults, such as social justice and environmentalism. He posits that many young people are looking for a faith relevant to their lives and addresses these issues, but the Church has been too slow to respond. Finally, Brown examines the rise of new religious movements and their appeal to some Christians. He suggests that these movements are filling a void left by the Church and that many Christians are being drawn away from the faith. According to Brown, the Church must be more proactive in addressing contemporary issues and responding to the challenges posed by secularism and new religious movements. He claims Christians should be more engaged in the world and address social and political issues while remaining true to their faith.<sup>186</sup>

In an article entitled “UPDATED: Are Young People Really Leaving Christianity?”, Warner Wallace offers an excellent summary of several books on young adult theological views, biblical illiteracy, church attendance habits, and attitudes toward Christianity. This study references most of his recommended books. Wallace’s point in the article is that while some Christian observers deny the flight of young people from the Church, the growing statistics are alarming enough to call ministry leaders to do something interventionally about the dilemma. Wallace suggests the evidence is so overwhelming that those denying the reality do not have a case.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Michael L. Brown, *Why So Many Christians have Left the Faith: Responding to the Deconstructionist Movement with Unshakable, Timeless Truth* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2023).

<sup>187</sup> J. Warner Wallace, “UPDATED: Are Young People Really Leaving Christianity?” Cold Case Christianity, October 30, 2021, <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/are-young-people-really-leaving-christianity/>.

In *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, authors Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist posit that most teenagers are incredibly inarticulate about their faith, religious beliefs and practices, and their place in their lives. About teenagers who identify themselves as Christians, these directors of the National Study of Youth and Religion state that teenagers are “remarkably inarticulate and befuddled about religion,” and they have “a difficult to impossible time explaining what they believe, what it means, and what the implications of their beliefs are for their lives.”<sup>188</sup> The authors claim that contemporary U.S. teenagers’ *de facto* dominant religion is “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” They believe a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. God also wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Furthermore, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. God also does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when He is needed to resolve a problem. Lastly, good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>189</sup>

According to *The State of Theology*, Ligonier Ministries reports that in a survey of theological beliefs in 2015, researchers asked self-professing Christians to respond to a series of statements related to classic, historic Christian doctrine. In every answer related to these theological beliefs, young people between eighteen and thirty-four consistently held heretical views at a higher percentage than older respondents. The researchers point out that young people who identify as Christians are far more likely to hold views that are not actually Christian.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27, 262.

<sup>189</sup> Smith and Lundquist, *Soul Searching*, 263.

<sup>190</sup> “The State of Theology,” Ligonier Ministries, 2015, <https://thestateoftheology.com>.

In the *State of the Bible, USA* study conducted by the American Bible Society in 2021, the research of nearly one hundred Gen Z youth (ages fifteen to seventeen) and more than 3,300 Gen Z adults (ages eighteen to twenty-four) found that only nine percent of the younger group could be designated as “Bible Engaged” – centered on reading the Bible – compared to fourteen percent of Gen Z adults and twenty-three percent of Millennials. Forty-seven percent of Gen Z youth are designated as “Bible Disengaged” – five times as many as “Bible Engaged.” Even fewer Gen Z American youth read their Bibles in 2020 amid the racial injustice protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also found that Gen Z teens were more prone than older generations to identify as atheist, agnostic, or religiously unaffiliated (thirty-five percent) – compared to thirty percent of Millennials and Gen X and twenty-six percent of Baby Boomers.<sup>191</sup>

According to Tom Bisset in *Why Christian Kids Leave the Faith*, there are four prominent reasons why young people abandon their faith. The first reason was doubts about their faith. When young people have questions, if they do not get the answers, then they eventually leave. The second reason is the need for more community. When they feel isolated or disconnected from the church, their lack of engagement results in them leaving it. The third reason why Christian kids are leaving the faith is hypocrisy. When they see inconsistency in their parents’ and ministry leaders’ behavior, they question the faith’s authenticity and drift away from it. The final reason is negative experiences. When they feel judged or rejected by those in the church, they are driven away.<sup>192</sup>

In *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young People are Leaving the Faith and How to Bring Them Back*, author Drew Dyck identifies several factors contributing to young adults leaving the

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<sup>191</sup> “State of the Bible, USA 2022” American Bible Society, accessed February 28, 2023. [https://1s712.americanbible.org/state-of-the-bible/stateofthebible/State\\_of\\_the\\_bible-2022.pdf](https://1s712.americanbible.org/state-of-the-bible/stateofthebible/State_of_the_bible-2022.pdf).

<sup>192</sup> Tom Bisset, *Why Christian Kids Leave the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1997).



faith. His reasons include a need for deep discipleship, an overemphasis on emotional experiences, and cultural pressures to conform to secular values. He also notes that many young adults have intellectual doubts and questions about Christianity that the Church does not adequately address. To address this disturbing trend, Dyck suggests that the Church focuses on the following: deepening discipleship, emphasizing the importance of truth and reason in faith, creating a more authentic and transparent community, and empowering young adults to engage with the culture and make a difference in the world.<sup>193</sup>

In their 2016 study results published in the article “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion – and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” researchers Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, and Robert Jones state that today, nearly four in ten (thirty-nine percent) young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-nine) are religiously unaffiliated – three times the unaffiliated rate (thirteen percent) among seniors (ages sixty-five and older). Although previous generations were also more likely to be religiously unaffiliated in their twenties, young adults today are nearly four times as likely as young adults in the previous generation to identify as religiously unaffiliated. In 1986, for example, only ten percent of young adults claimed no religious affiliation. Among young adults today, the religiously unaffiliated dwarf the percentages of other religious identifications: Catholic (fifteen percent), white evangelical Protestant (nine percent), white mainline Protestant (eight percent), black Protestant (seven percent), other non-white Protestants (eleven percent), and affiliation with a non-Christian religion (seven percent). In the 1970s, only about one-third (thirty-four percent) of Americans reared in religiously unaffiliated households were still unaffiliated as adults. By the 1990s, slightly more than half (fifty-three percent) of Americans who were unaffiliated in childhood retained their religious identity in

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<sup>193</sup> Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith... and How to Bring Them Back* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2010).

adulthood. Today, two-thirds (sixty-six percent) of Americans who report being reared outside a formal religious tradition remain unaffiliated as adults. More importantly, the study found that most Americans who leave their childhood religion do so *before* adulthood. Seventy-nine percent of young adults, age eighteen to twenty-nine, who become religiously unaffiliated, report making this decision during their adolescent and teen years. Those who abandon religious belief reported doing so much later in years prior. Only thirty-eight percent of people over sixty-five, for example, reported leaving their religion during their childhood years.<sup>194</sup>

According to a Barna Group study conducted in 2013, their researchers cite five reasons why Millennials stay connected to Church:

1. Develop meaningful relationships with Millennials,
2. Teach Millennials to study and discern what is happening in the culture,
3. Help Millennials discover their own mission in the world rather than ask them to wait their turn,
4. Teach Millennials a more potent theology of vocation or calling, and
5. Help Millennials develop a lasting faith by facilitating a deeper sense of intimacy with God.<sup>195</sup>

Furthermore, in *Nothing Less: Engaging Kids in a Lifetime of Faith*, Jana Magruder and Ben Trueblood cite a study conducted by Shelby Systems. The study surveyed 2,000 Protestant churchgoers who attended services at least once a month and have adult children ages eighteen to thirty who are still believers. They found “Predictors of Spiritual Health for Young Adults.” Their list includes the child regularly read the Bible while growing up, the child regularly spent time in prayer while growing up, the child regularly served in church while growing up, the child listened primarily to Christian music while growing up, and the child participated in church

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<sup>194</sup> Betsy Cooper et al., “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion – and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” Public Religion Research Institute, September 22, 2016, <https://www.prii.org/research/prii-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>.

<sup>195</sup> “5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church.”

mission trips and projects while growing up. In addition, they found that parents who had successfully passed on their faith to their children typically were involved in the following activities:

- reading the Bible several times a week,
- taking part in a service project or church mission trip as a family,
- sharing their faith with unbelievers,
- encouraging their teenagers to serve in church,
- asking forgiveness when they messed up as parents,
- encouraging their children's unique talents and interests,
- taking annual family vacations,
- attending churches with teaching that emphasized what the Bible says, and
- teaching their children to tithe.<sup>196</sup>

Due to the level of concern over the attrition rate of young adults in the Church today, many online blogs published by academic researchers are also addressing the matter. There are also plenty of other doctoral students conducting research on this current issue and offering recommended solutions. This section outlines some of the recurring themes that other scholars have pointed out regarding young adults and their church participation and faith retention.

In summary, there is evidence of a lack of discipleship for the emerging generation. Young adults in churches tend to see issues differently from their parents' generation; they are significantly more moderate, even liberal. Furthermore, they not only have difficulty articulating what they believe and practice, but they also tend to hold heretical views that are not actually Christian. Young adults tend to be disengaged with Bible reading; they believe in ideas that are being circulated rather than discovering truths for themselves from God's Word. They also doubt their faith and do not seem to get answers from the Church. It also does not help when they see hypocrisy among their parents' generation. Moreover, their negative experiences in their

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<sup>196</sup> Jana Magruder and Ben Trueblood, *Nothing Less: Engaging Kids in a Lifetime of Faith* (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Publishers, 2017).

religious community are difficult to overcome. In addition to all these factors, the economic prosperity that the U.S. has experienced in this generation corresponds with a drift away from faith and religion like the days described in Judges 2.

Compiling the findings and recommendations of the authors cited above, the following list is a consensus of how parents can increase the likelihood of their children remaining active Christians into adulthood: Regularly reading their Bible to their children during their formative years, praying with them daily, contributing to the saturation of their home by playing Christian music, and leading their children to participate in church activities with their gifts and talents. Furthermore, the above findings and recommendations also provide a list of how ministry leaders can increase the likelihood of children remaining active Christians into adulthood: developing relationships with young adults, helping them discern from a godly perspective what is occurring in culture, allowing them to discover their mission in life, teaching them more potent theology, and cultivating a deeper intimacy with God.

*Parents are ultimately responsible for shepherding a child's heart.* According to Tedd Tripp, president of Shepherding the Heart Ministries, parents are ultimately responsible for shaping their children's hearts. Prov 4:23 says, "Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life." Tripp observes that rather than simply controlling their children's behavior, God charges parents to guide them in identifying matters of the heart from which their behavior flows. This mission is the purpose of every parent; they are to direct their children to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, much like God charged Abraham to do in Gen

18:19. The sacred task of parenting is so much more than just providing food, shelter, and clothing. It also means working on God's behalf to guide a child's heart.<sup>197</sup>

However, Tripp also points out that many people have children but do not want to be parents. The American culture has convinced this generation of parents that they should try to quench their thirst for fulfillment. In a self-absorbed culture, children are a clear liability to that end, and many parents are abdicating their sacred responsibility to direct their children to keep the way of the Lord. Thus, today's parents are spending minimal time with their children. The false notion of limited "quality time" has become more attractive than the old, proven fact of the quantity of time.<sup>198</sup>

Tripp claims that the best description of the activity of parents for their children is a concept he calls *shepherding*. Parents are not only their children's protectors and providers but also their children's guides. Parents shepherd their children to understand the "what" of their children's actions and the "why." They must shepherd their thoughts, motives, and actions. This shepherding process is a richer interaction than just telling children what to do and think. It involves investing one's life in a child in open and honest communication that unfolds the meaning and purpose of life. Values and spiritual vitality are not simply taught; they are caught.<sup>199</sup>

Thus, Tripp insists that the central focus of parenting is the Gospel. Parents need to direct their children's behavior as well as their children's attitudes. Children need to understand the external "what" they did wrong, but they should also understand the internal "why" they did it.

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<sup>197</sup> Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 34.

<sup>198</sup> Tripp, *Shepherding*, xv-xxi.

<sup>199</sup> Tripp, *Shepherding*, 12.

Parents should help children see that God works from the inside out. Therefore, the goal of parents must be more than just well-behaved children. Their goal needs to be that their children understand why they sin and how to recognize an internal change. Ultimately, children must internalize the Gospel's transforming message. Children in Christian homes should, at some point, have the opportunity to examine the Gospel's claims and determine to embrace its truth themselves. The earlier in life, the better. Parents should work so that their children come to a place where they embrace the claims of the Christian faith for themselves.<sup>200</sup>

Secular culture, on the other hand, has defined *parenting* as simply providing nurture and care. Biblical parenting goes much further. It also recognizes that God has called parents to function as His agents. Proper, biblical parenting is not a convenient task, but a pervasive task. According to Deut 6:6-7, it is a constant task in every aspect of life.<sup>201</sup>

To summarize Tripp's concerns, if shepherding a child's heart is neglected due to the fragmentation of the family, the distractions of hectic schedules, and the excessive use of screen time, then it is becoming a lost art. Many Christian parents are neglecting their sacred duty today. Consequently, the emerging generation needs to adopt the values, perspectives, convictions, and behaviors of the previous generation of Christians.

The previously mentioned Fuller study by Powell and Clark offers some salient insights on this subject. They discovered that the primary factor for a child's faith to be more "sticky" is when parents model their faith to their children. If parents want their children to be faithful participants in a church, then they must be faithful participants. On the other hand, when parents are not, how can they expect their children to grow up differently? Parents are not attending

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<sup>200</sup> Tripp, *Shepherding*, 198.

<sup>201</sup> Tripp, *Shepherding*, 33.

church regularly in this age of hectic paces and multiple demands on time. No wonder their kids drop out once they can make decisions independently.<sup>202</sup>

The literature reviewed suggests that parents are integral in helping their teenagers' faith last into adulthood. They can help them beat the odds of the spiritual casualties prevalent today. Powell and Clark's research suggests that parents should make faith organic. They should talk about it in the mornings, at night, in the car, and over meals. Parents should share how their faith impacts their everyday lives. Their research reinforces what God already instructed in Deut 6:6-9.<sup>203</sup>

Interestingly, Powell and Clark also discovered that parents permitting independent thought and wrestling with tough faith questions lead to stickier faith for their children as they age. 1 Pet 3:15 is appropriate here. When children have doubts and question believers' hope, their parents must always be ready to offer explanations. The parents should be grounded. Such an approach is far more effective than lectures.<sup>204</sup>

According to the Fuller study, only twelve percent of youth regularly discuss faith/life issues with their mother. Only one out of every eight children discuss their faith with their mom. It is far lower for fathers; only one out of every twenty, or five percent, kids have regular conversations about faith with their dad. Furthermore, only nine percent read Scripture with their parents, less than one out of every ten.<sup>205</sup> An overwhelming number of Christian parents in America today disregard the commands in Deuteronomy 6 to saturate their home with frequent

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<sup>202</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*.

<sup>203</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*.

<sup>204</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*.

<sup>205</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*.

faith conversations, resulting in the dropping out of the church and falling away from the faith just as the emerging generation did in Judg 2:10-15.

Another resource on this pertinent subject is *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* by Christian Smith, Bridget Ritz, and Michael Rotolo. They based their findings on a national sociological study of American religious and nonreligious parents they piloted in 2014 and 2015. With 215 personal interviews with parents who belong to churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, the spectrum included white conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants, black Protestants, white Catholics, Latino Catholics, Conservative Jews, Mormons, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. To compare with their religious sample, they also interviewed an additional sample of twenty nonreligious parents. The parents studied were nationwide from coast to coast. These researchers discovered what the Bible had already stated:

The single, most powerful causal influence on the religious lives of American teenagers and young adults is the religious lives of their parents. Not their peers, not the media, not their youth group leaders or clergy, not their religious schoolteachers. Myriad studies show that, beyond a doubt, the parents of Americans play the leading role in shaping the character of their religious and spiritual lives, even well after they leave home and often for the rest of their lives.<sup>206</sup>

Smith's team says, "The best general predictor of what any American is like religiously, after comparing all of the other possible variables and factors, is what their parents were like religiously when raising their children."<sup>207</sup>

Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo explore the role of children, parenting, and family in religious transmission. They continue to build on their argument that parents are the primary agents

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<sup>206</sup> Christian Smith, Bridget Ritz, and Michael Rotolo, *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>207</sup> Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 6.



responsible for passing on their faith to their children. The authors identify how children and parenting intersect with religious transmission. For example, they note that children's developmental stages and experiences can influence how they understand and interpret religious messages and that parents may need to adapt their approach accordingly. They also highlight the importance of parental modeling in shaping children's religious beliefs and practices and the role of family dynamics in creating a supportive environment for religious transmission. The authors also discuss the challenges parents may face in transmitting their faith to their children, such as competing values and beliefs on the broader culture and the importance of recognizing and addressing these challenges.<sup>208</sup>

Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo also identify other factors contributing to religious transmission, including the desire to maintain cultural identity, provide a moral framework, foster social connections, and offer hope and comfort. Regarding how parents transmit their religion, they observe several strategies that parents use, such as modeling religious behavior, teaching religious beliefs and practices, involving children in religious activities, and creating a religious environment in the home. They also note that parents often adapt their approaches to suit their children's age and level of understanding. They may draw on various sources, including religious institutions, family members, and religious media.<sup>209</sup>

*Habits of the Household: Practicing the Story of God in Everyday Family Rhythms* by Justin Earley is also in keeping with the principles of Prov 22:6 and Deut 6:6-9 – a practical guide for implementation for today's generation. He points out how spiritual themes should invade people's daily lives and that parents are called to everyday spiritual modeling. He says, "I

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<sup>208</sup> Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 105-155.

<sup>209</sup> Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 156-205.

used to think I needed to get the day-to-day stuff done and out of the way to get to the real spiritual work of parenting – some special conversation where the magic would really happen. But now I see that the magic of God’s grace abounds in the places I need it most: *in the normal routines*” (emphasis added).<sup>210</sup> Household habits ought to be considered like liturgies, repeated acts of praise to God. Even in the most stressful times when babies cry and teenagers explore their own way for themselves, parents can still create the most beautiful, sanctifying moments of spiritual parenting. To summarize the author’s point of the book, family habits are going to form; it is the nature of life. Nevertheless, parents should intentionally cultivate healthy habits – spiritual and otherwise – or else bad habits will form. Early says, “Good or bad, a rut is a rut, and our brains love ruts.”<sup>211</sup> He continues, “There is no escaping habits and formation in the family. We become our habits, and our kids become us. For better or worse, the family is a habit formation machine.”<sup>212</sup> Earley also explores the importance of rhythms in a family and how they can help them live more intentionally. Rhythms differ from routines, and parents should develop daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms that reflect the story of God (including a weekly Sabbath rest). Then in each chapter, he covers all areas of Christian domestic affairs – hospitality, daily prayer, reading Scripture, the practice of service, and celebration. He also talks extensively about walking, mealtimes, discipline, marriage, play, and bedtime. Another insightful chapter for parents is how to manage screen time for their children. It is encouraging how Earley emphasizes regularity over perfection. Parents should not worry about whether their devotions are ideal or cheesy; they should just be committed to doing it. He says, “When it comes to family spiritual

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<sup>210</sup> Justin Whitmel Earley, *Habits of the Household: Practicing the Story of God in Everyday Family Rhythms* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2019). 21.

<sup>211</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*. 28.

<sup>212</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 29.

formation, it's not about perfect practice; it's about moving from nothing to something."<sup>213</sup>

Although parents are called to intentionality, there is more than enough grace for inevitable failures.

Several studies have explored parent-child relationships and the role that mothers and fathers play in their children's development. In early childhood, children tend to be more firmly attached to their mothers than their fathers. For instance, in John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's research on Attachment Theory, infants and young children often seek out their mother for comfort and security and may even exhibit anxiety when separated from her. However, as children grow older and become more independent, they form stronger bonds with their father. For example, older children often seek their father's guidance and support.<sup>214</sup> Another study by Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine showed that children's attachment to their mothers is strongest in early childhood. However, by age six, the father's role becomes more important in predicting children's emotional security and well-being.<sup>215</sup> Marcia Carlson's study found that a father's involvement in his children's lives was associated with positive outcomes, including higher academic achievement and fewer behavioral problems. A dad who was absent, too busy, indifferent, stern, harsh, or left his children's spiritual formation to their mother's responsibility affected his children's views of God and the Church negatively. In fact, children even seemed to project their earthly father's flawed characteristics on God, and they did not want anything to do with Him.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Tripp, *Shepherding*, 45.

<sup>214</sup> John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, "The Origin of Attachment Theory," *Developmental Psychology*, 28, no. 55 (September 1992).

<sup>215</sup> M. E. Lamb et al., "A Biosocial Perspective on Paternal Behavior and Involvement." *Parenting across the Life Span: Biosocial Dimensions* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Co., 1987), 111–142.

Interestingly, the differences in attrition rates for church attendance and faith by race, regardless of denominational affiliation, are similar to the disparities in fatherless homes for those races in the United States. For instance, as of the latest available data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), sixty-four percent of Black children under the age of eighteen were living in a single-parent home. This statistic is compared to forty-three percent of Hispanic children, twenty-four percent of White children, and only sixteen percent of Asian children in the same age group.<sup>217</sup> No wonder the share of Black Americans who say they have no religious affiliation has risen more dramatically than whites, Hispanics, and Asians, even though African Americans are among the most devout groups in religious research. This observation is according to Ryan Burge after his analysis of the Pew Research Center study that was conducted in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and racial tensions prompted by the George Floyd incident in 2020.<sup>218</sup> Burge continues that whites and Hispanics tracked in keeping with their fatherless ratios, and for Asians, the rate of unaffiliation was much more modest.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Marcia J. Carlson, "Family Structure, Father Involvement, and Adolescent Behavior Outcomes," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, no. 1 (February 2006): 1137-154.

<sup>217</sup> Paul Hemez and Chanell Washington, "Percentage and Number of Children Living with Two Parents Has Dropped Since 1968," U.S. Census Bureau, April 12, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/number-of-children-living-only-with-their-mothers-has-doubled-in-past-50-years.html>.

<sup>218</sup> Ryan P. Burge, "Black Americans See the Biggest Shift Away from Faith," *Christianity Today*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/black-american-nones-faith-unaffiliation-nothing.html>.

<sup>219</sup> Burge, "Black Americans."

*Parents should ignite the spark of faith and fan it into flame.* Ted Tripp observed that a spark must ignite in a child's soul and be fanned into flame. That "internalization of the Gospel" is a similar theme in many other Christian parenting books. It is built on the concept in 2 Tim 1:5-6 as Paul encouraged his young protégé in ministry to fan his gifts into flames. The Christian faith is not about religious motions and rituals but about a vibrant relationship with one's Lord and Savior. Every young person should experience the spark of divine encounter and then intentionally fan it into bright flames. This point is where parents and the local church come in. Tripp says that every parent and church leader should focus on this spark, which is a genuine transformation of the heart wrought by true salvation, not just religious motions. Furthermore, every parent and church leader should also focus on activities that fan that spark into flames, such as periodic events of heightened spiritual intensity like camps, retreats, conferences, and special services. The Christ encounter must become real for young people and regularly reinforced, not just ideas borrowed from their parents' and ministry leaders.

David Kinnaman has conducted extensive nationwide studies on Christians aged eighteen to twenty-nine. He and his co-authors, Mark Matlock and Aly Hawkins, identify five practices for young adults who desire to develop a resilient faith. Their insights are important to consider here:

1. To form a resilient identity, one must experience true intimacy with Jesus.
2. In a complex, anxious age, one must develop the muscles of cultural discernment.
3. Since isolation and mistrust are norms, then one must forge meaningful, intergenerational relationships.
4. One must train for vocational discipleship to ground and motivate an ambitious generation.
5. To curb entitlement and self-centered tendencies, one must engage in a countercultural mission.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 46.

*Parents should practice proper methods of childrearing and avoid improper ones.* Founder of the Foundation for Biblical Research, Richard Fugate became the Vice President of Accelerated Christian Education and spent the last several years of his ministry career conducting parenting conferences. He warns that parents only have one chance with their children. They spend the first third of their children's lives rearing them, and that effort can seem painfully wasted unless there are positive results. Just guessing with trial and error will not work; the risks are too high if parents happen to get it wrong. There are no retries. The cost of improper training of children is uncalculatable for both parents and their children. Fugate suggests that since the Bible is the sole source for the best child training system, then its insights are far better than modern experts. By implementing what God instructs in His Word, parents can be confident in their success.<sup>221</sup>

Then Fugate lists what the Bible says about the blessings of proper child training and compares that list to what the Bible says about the consequences of improper child training. By referring to the blessings itemized in Prov 10:1a, 23:24-25, 29:17, and 31:28, and contrasting them to the consequences itemized in Prov 10:1b, 17:21, and 29:15b, he says that the Bible warns with a description of what parents will suffer if they fail to train their children.<sup>222</sup> Fugate's insightful warning accurately describes many Christian parents and their young adult children.

Christian Smith, along with co-author Amy Adamczyk, wrote *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass their Religion on to the Next Generation*. In it, they make many observations. Crucial in the parental transmission of religion to children is having generally warm, affirming relations with them. If parents have emotionally distant and critical relationships with their children, then their efforts will likely fail or backfire. Smith observes the quality of conversations

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<sup>221</sup> Richard Fugate, *What the Bible Says about Child Training* (Apache Junction, AZ: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1996), 8.

<sup>222</sup> Fugate, *What the Bible Says*, 14.

and interactions about religion between parents and children is also more important than the actual content of those conversations and interactions. How parents and children interact has more influence on the outcomes than the actual religious substance. Furthermore, the most compelling conversations about religion with children are child-centered rather than parent-centered. Children can ask questions, and parents try to help their children understand their faith and practices. They do not make demands without explanations, force unwanted conversations, and control discussed topics. Another observation is the crucial role that fathers play in forming children religiously. Dads have extra influence and responsibility in the matter. Parents who share the same religious faith and practice are more effective in socializing their children in their religion than parents who differ. Smith says that religiously similar parents pose a “unified front” in faith transmission. Additionally, two-parent households are more effective in transmitting religious faith and practice than parents who are never married, separated, or divorced.

Furthermore, grandparents are also influential in shaping the religious lives of their grandchildren. They can even substitute for, reinforce, moderate, or even subvert the impact of their parents. Too little religious socialization also tends to undermine the transmission of faith to children. Intentional, consistent, and actively engaged parents are most effective at passing on religion to children, but they are neither hands-off nor overbearing. Weak and sporadic religious socialization tends to produce benign apathy, but relentless and overbearing parental efforts produce distancing and rebellion. Another observation is that parental consistency in word and deed affects the success of religious transmission to children. Perceptions of hypocrisy when parents do not act in congruence with their religious teachings or when parents follow the letter but not the meaning of the law reduce children’s interest in carrying forward the religious faith and practice of their parents. Parental influence that strengthens children’s faith and practice also

has long-lasting effects on their psychological adjustment, romantic lives, and future family functioning as adults.<sup>223</sup>

Regarding the continuity of faith from generation to generation, Vern Bengtson published, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations*. Drawing on over three decades of research and data from four generations of families, the author explores the complex and dynamic nature of religious transmission. His observations agree with Christian Smith; he argues that families are the primary vehicle for religious transmission. He states that various factors shape the process, including family structure, parental influence, and the broader cultural context. He identifies several critical mechanisms through which religious transmission occurs, such as modeling religious behavior, providing religious education, and fostering a sense of religious identity and commitment. Throughout the book, Bengtson emphasizes the importance of intergenerational relationships and communication in religious transmission, highlighting how grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other extended family members can shape children's religious beliefs and practices. He also explores the challenges families may face in transmitting their faith, such as changing cultural norms and values, and how families may adapt their approach to overcoming these obstacles.<sup>224</sup>

Another provocative book on this subject is *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* by Ken Ham and Britt Beemer. They conducted interviews with one thousand young adults, twenty to twenty-nine years of age. They discovered that, contrary to public opinion, youth do not wait until college to develop skepticism toward

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<sup>223</sup> Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents pass their Religion on to the Next Generation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>224</sup> Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Suan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3-20.



Christian principles. They actually begin that process of leaving the Church by the time they are in high school. According to Ham and Beemer, youth check out emotionally during adolescence. Then they finally muster the courage to inform their parents and friends that they are no longer interested in the perspectives that their parents had when their parents were rearing them. Their study found that forty percent of children have doubts about Christian doctrines and the importance of church attendance in middle school.<sup>225</sup> If their parents and ministry leaders do not appropriately address their questions and concerns, then the children begin seeking advice and solutions elsewhere. The authors claim that advice is rarely Christian if it comes from peers, teachers, and the internet. It is essential for those shaping the Christian perspectives of young people to keep in mind 1 Pet 3:15, “If anyone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it.” The authors also suggest that another reason why youth become skeptical about the Bible and the Church before they leave home is due to the inadequacy of most Sunday School and youth group curricula. In church, children typically learn Bible stories. However, in public school, children are taught not only core subjects, but also current events, science, and other practical life skills. Ham and Beemer suggest that church curricula should become more integrated with life – dealing with practical issues using biblical references as an index and guide. In doing so, the children will be more likely to develop a better biblical perception of world issues.

Ham and Beemer also suggest in *Already Gone* that parents and churches provide a solid grounding in Apologetics. Furthermore, they posit that suppose the first ten chapters of Genesis – the foundation for the rest of the Bible – are not taken literally and are explained away figuratively or allegorically. In that case, children eventually assume that the rest of the Bible

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<sup>225</sup> Ken Ham and Britt Beemer, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Publishing Group, 2009).

cannot be taken literally either. If the biblical foundation is shaky, then the entire biblical worldview will eventually collapse under societal pressure. Their book also emphasizes addressing controversial and challenging topics head-on instead of ducking and avoiding them. These controversies include Evolution versus Creation, the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, alleged contradictions in the Bible, the dilemma of the origin of evil and suffering, and the truthfulness of miracles and divine intervention. A strong foundation should be built regarding children's faith and understanding before being challenged by others outside the Christian home and local church.<sup>226</sup>

Another concept that was discovered during this study is the lost practice of *sobremesa* in American culture. Leonard Sweet says, "At the table, where food and stories are passed from one person to another and one generation to another, is where each of us learns who we are, where we come from, what we can be, to whom we belong, and to what we are called."<sup>227</sup> According to this leader, if Christian families in the U.S. could rediscover this worldwide familial exercise, then it would go a long way in facilitating the transfer of doctrine, values, history, and perspectives and faith retention from one generation to the next.

Sobremesa is a Spanish term that literally means "over the table." It is a time of relaxing at the table after a meal and when good conversations occur.<sup>228</sup> When parents practice sobremesa with their children, they not only get to hear from their children what is happening in their world, but they also get to share with their children teaching opportunities as they come up. It seems

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<sup>226</sup> Ham and Beemer, *Already Gone*.

<sup>227</sup> Heath Hollensbe, *The Sacred Sobremesa: A Culinary Tribute to Leonard Sweet* (independently published, 2020), 5.

<sup>228</sup> "Sobremesa: Distillations of Latin Culture through Storytelling," Yale University, February 10, 2022, <https://www.architecture.yale.edu/exhibitions/111-sobremesa-distillations-of-latin-culture-through-storytelling>.

like this practice is institutional worldwide – everywhere except the United States. In French, it is called *café de digestion*. In German, it is called *tischgespräch*. In Russian, the practice is called *chayepitiye*. In Chinese Mandarin, it is called *fàn hòu xián liáo*. In Indian Hindi, it called *khaane ke baad ki baatcheet*. In African Swahili, the practice is called *majadiliano baada ya chakula*.<sup>229</sup>

Though the time after a meal for meaningful conversation is called *tea* in England, the practice has been long since forgotten by their American descendants. American culture is a materialistic culture; physical comfort and possessions tend to be considered more important than spiritual values.<sup>230</sup> This instinctive drive in most American adults causes parents to work long and hard at their jobs and spend less time cultivating family life. As a result, the spiritual formation of their children gets all but abandoned in the mix. The sped-up lifestyle of parents as they attempt to keep up with their peers is robbing many parents of the opportunity to transfer values, doctrine, and principles to their children. That fact is why leaders like Sweet are calling for the practice of *sobremesa* to return to the American Christian family. Its practice is the best way spiritual formation and discipleship can occur according to Deut 6:6-9.

Interestingly, according to many realtors, home stagers, and interior designers, the space for a dining room in the home is now a dead concept. The way American families are eating and entertaining is changing rapidly, leading to major changes in how people feel about dining rooms. According to the demand, it seems that most families are opting to eat on the run instead of gathering to eat a meal together. Those families that do dine together tend to gather in a multipurpose space to eat, like at a bar in the kitchen or in the family room while watching

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<sup>229</sup> Kelly Pitman, “Beautiful and Untranslatable: Words from Around the World,” Language Department, July 15, 2020, <https://languagedepartment.com/blog/beautiful-untranslatable-words-from-around-the-world-14/translate.google.com>.

<sup>230</sup> “Viewpoint: Finding Happiness in a Material World,” The Church of Jesus Christ, March 29, 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/viewpoint-finding-happiness-in-a-material-world?lang=eng>.

television. Builders claim that homes featuring a dining room are less than twenty percent of their inventory.<sup>231</sup> For those older homes with a dining room space, more and more of them are being repurposed to be something more fitting for a busy family’s lifestyle – something more functional like a home office, playroom, or gym. Home professionals indicate that most clients today feel that dining room spaces are wasted, unused spaces and that their money can be used for other priorities in the home.<sup>232</sup> The idea of lingering after a meal for meaningful conversation seems to be all but lost in most families today. The declining interest in dining rooms seems to be evidence of not only rising building costs but also declining interest in value-sharing “over the table.”<sup>233</sup>

To be a Christian means to be Christ-like.<sup>234</sup> Sobremesa contributes to the Christian family experience because the practice is Christ-like. All four Gospels repeatedly record that Jesus spent time lingering with His followers “over the table.” In fact, some of the most quoted phrases by Jesus today were statements that He made while eating food with others. The importance of the meal was in the transformative conversations between Jesus and His listeners.<sup>235</sup> For instance, in Matt 9:10, Jesus went to Matthew’s house and spent the entire evening dining with tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. In Mark 6:42, Jesus fed the

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<sup>231</sup> Kristi Waterworth, “Is the Dining Room Dead?” *U.S. News & World Report*, February 1, 2023, <https://realestate.usnews.com/real-estate/articles/is-the-dining-room-dead>.

<sup>232</sup> Waterworth, “Is the Dining Room Dead.”

<sup>233</sup> Sarah Lyon, “In a Small Space, Do You Really Need a Dining Table?” *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/home/2022/09/14/small-spaces-dining-table/#>.

<sup>234</sup> “What does it Mean to be a Christian?” Compassion International, accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.compassion.com/about/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-christian.htm#:~:text=What%20Does%20it%20Mean%20to%20Behave%20Like%20Jesus%20Christ%3F,others%20is%20behaving%20like%20Christ>.

<sup>235</sup> Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014).

five thousand and then continued sharing divine insights. In Luke 19:5, Jesus invited Himself to Zacchaeus's house as a dinner guest, and the host's new commitments revealed a heart transformation from the conversation. In John 13-17, five chapters that comprise a fourth of the Gospel account, the occasion is one after-dinner conversation between Jesus and His disciples over the table. In fact, most of what is known about the Holy Spirit from Jesus is drawn from that very lengthy conversation. Whether it was at Martha, Mary, and Lazarus's house in Bethany, or breakfast on the beach on the north shores of the Galilee, whether it was at the well in Sychar or breaking bread at the disciples' house in Emmaus, Jesus frequently had transformative conversations "over the table" with His followers. The matter is not so much *what* He ate but *how* He ate it. What Jesus did so frequently during His earthly ministry, He continues to do so today to anyone willing. Like He did on the road in Jericho under the sycamore tree for Zacchaeus, Rev 3:20 says, "'Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear My voice and open the door, then I will come in, *and we will share a meal together as friends*'" (emphasis added). Although meaningful mealtime conversations have become counter-cultural to the American way of life, the above study shows that the practice will impact the next generation if Christian parents will just slow down, prioritize value-sharing with children, and have transformative conversations.

*Parents are held accountable by God to be the gatekeepers of influence.* Richard Fugate continues to contribute to parenting insights in his work. He explains several influences on children, but God holds parents accountable for training their children. Therefore, parents are responsible for controlling what influences their children. For instance, factors at school may

negatively influence children, but parents are responsible for determining where their children go to school. Peers may also negatively influence children, but parents are responsible for determining with whom their children associate (Prov 13:20). Entertainment and social media may also negatively influence children. However, parents are responsible for governing the exposure of those various platforms to their children. Even factors at church may negatively influence children, but, again, parents are responsible for choosing in which church they rear their children.<sup>236</sup> However, Fugate suggests that these guardrails are not being built with absentee parenting that is so prevalent today. No wonder American society is experiencing the consequences instead of the blessings that Proverbs outlines.

Every Christian parent and ministry leader should become more wary of the content bombarding children on their mobile devices today. Producers are reorienting children's values right under their unsuspecting parents' noses without their consent. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that media producers have a pervasive influence on children and adolescents. It is so contrary to parental values that several European countries forbid the targeting of children.<sup>237</sup> However, in the U.S., selling a new set of values to children is simply business as usual. Concerningly, research has shown that children are cognitively and psychologically defenseless against media messaging. They do not understand the notion of intent by the producers, so they accept their claims at face value.<sup>238</sup> In the late 1970s, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) held hearings, reviewed existing research, and concluded that targeting

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<sup>236</sup> Fugate, *What the Bible Says*, 40.

<sup>237</sup> "Children, Adolescents, and Advertising," *The American Academy of Pediatrics*, 118, no. 6 (December 2006): 2563-2569, <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/118/6/2563/69735/Children-Adolescents-and-Advertising?autologincheck=redirected>.

<sup>238</sup> "Children."

children in media messaging was unfair and deceptive. What kept the FTC from banning such a practice was that some people thought it would be impractical to implement such a ban.<sup>239</sup>

However, Sweden and Norway found a way to forbid such a practice for all messaging directed at children younger than twelve years, and Greece, Denmark, and Belgium have similar restrictions.<sup>240</sup> Parents cannot allow children to watch digital content without monitoring it.

According to David Kinnaman, a Microsoft researcher admits that social media is “continuous behavior modification on a mass basis, with everyone under surveillance by their devices and receiving calculated stimulus to modify them... It is a bad religion.”<sup>241</sup> Since the secular culture is constantly planting seeds of doubt about faith, then young adults should develop cultural discernment. They also need safe places to express and work through their doubts, especially as all the messaging in a secular world contradicts the Bible. Churches, then, have an opportunity to serve as the room where young adults can ask, “Why?” Kinnaman insists that the church should be a haven for exiles. Although they need sound doctrine, they also need love and grace for each other, especially seekers on a journey. If the Church fails to disciple this generation, then the digital culture is poised to fill that void.<sup>242</sup>

In his book *Generation Z Unfiltered: Facing Nine Hidden Challenges of the Most Anxious Population*, Millennial/Gen Z expert Tim Elmore seeks to inform parents and ministry leaders of the unique characteristics and challenges those young adults experience today. By helping older adults obtain a glimpse of the world through a young adult lens and understand their perspectives, he also provides insights on how they can guide youth into the adult world.

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<sup>239</sup> “Children.”

<sup>240</sup> “Children.”

<sup>241</sup> Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 79.

<sup>242</sup> Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 81.

Parents and ministry leaders can become caring adults that youth can trust. Elmore probes technology usage, especially portable devices and social media, and suggests ways to protect children from daily dangers. He also provides insightful reasons behind the behaviors of Gen Z but also offers a hopeful perspective to understand their quest for success and maturity.<sup>243</sup>

*Parents should administer discipline properly.* Richard Fugate suggests that discipline needs to be administered appropriately. Although the topic of discipline is where Tedd Tripp and Richard Fugate differ, their insights together provide a complementary approach for parents to consider. Tripp correctly emphasizes that the Scriptures teach that the heart is the control center for life (Prov 4:23, Matt 12:34, Mark 7:21, Luke 6:45). Prov 22:15 also says that foolishness fills a child's heart. A person's actions are merely a by-product of their heart. A child's aberrant behavior is not the issue. As difficult as it may seem, parents should stay focused on their children's behavior. Tripp concludes that behavior modification by external pressures is not biblical parenting. Behavior only alerts a parent about what is the deeper issue. However, behavior is never uncaused. One's behavior – the things one says and does – reflects the heart. If parents are to help their children, then they should be concerned with the attitudes of the heart that drive their behavior. Therefore, parents should design their discipline not merely to correct their children's behavior but also the attitudes in their children's hearts. Getting to the root of a wrong action, a strayed heart, leads to the Cross and underscores the need for a Savior. Such a position informs everything that parents should do in childrearing.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Tim Elmore and Andrew McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered: Facing Nine Hidden Challenges of the Most Anxious Population* (Atlanta, GA: Poet Gardener Publishing, 2019).

<sup>244</sup> Tripp, *Shepherding*, 3.



On the other hand, Fugate's position on discipline begins with the foundation that each child is born with a sinful nature. Ps 51:5 says, "For I was born a sinner – yes, from the moment my mother conceived me." Hence, no one has to teach children how to lie, cheat, and steal; those vices come quite naturally. Instead, children should be taught not to do those bad things. Under the control of sin, children are born self-centered. They naturally want their desires fulfilled without any regard for anyone else. Parents need to recognize that the natural-born tendency of their children is to satisfy their sinful nature. Fugate insists that this understanding is the beginning of good parenting. For children's good, they should never be allowed to function under the control of their sinful nature.<sup>245</sup>

Fugate believes parents need to restrain their children. Prov 29:15 instructs, "To discipline a child produces wisdom, but an undisciplined child disgraces a mother." God will hold parents accountable if they neglect this sober responsibility. Although Tripp may call it "behavior modification," Fugate contends that, early on, the primary role of parents is to act as the external control over the sinful nature of their children. Furthermore, those external controls should remain intact until parents can teach their children to employ internal controls themselves.<sup>246</sup> Prov 22:15 says, "A youngster's heart is filled with foolishness, but physical discipline will drive it far away."

Fugate claims there are two distinct phases for child training: the "control phase," where parents establish their right of rulership over the child's will, and the "teaching phase," where they can impart what a child needs to know and learn. The latter can only fully occur once the former is firmly founded in the biblical commandment that children obey their parents (Eph 6:1-

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<sup>245</sup> Fugate, *What the Bible Says*, 50.

<sup>246</sup> Fugate, *What the Bible Says*, 51.

4). Since there seems to be confusion among many parents about proper discipline today, then much of the discipline occurring is unbiblical and, thus, ineffective.

*Parents should find a good church partner.* Ministry leaders need to become more intentional about disciple-making. Contrary to the ancient African proverb, a village is not required to rear a child. Christian parents have discovered great success historically by inviting a community of faith in the form of a local church to come alongside them and partner with their parenting efforts. However, Richard Fugate observes that it seems more and more churches today are suffering from “mission drift”; they seem to be wandering from the original purpose for which Jesus founded the Church.<sup>247</sup> Many ministry leaders build their student ministries on the wrong premises – promoting good behavior (fix my kid), providing great experiences (keep my kid happy and safe), and promoting group unity (help my kid make some good friends) – so their results are doomed to fail from the start. Combine these ineffective efforts with the fragmentation of the family, and no wonder so many Millennials and Gen Zers are dropping out of the Church and abandoning their faith once they begin making their own decisions.

David Hertweck, seasoned youth pastor and skilled church consultant, suggests a much better approach and has found great effectiveness in reaching, teaching, and keeping youth and young adults for Christ. Hertweck states that the goal of churches should be creating and sustaining disciple-making environments for every age group of congregants,

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<sup>247</sup> Peter Greer and Chris Horst, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2014), 21.

especially the emerging generation. He advises that ministry leaders should focus on helping youth become Gospel-fluent, Spirit-dependent, and part of a biblical community.<sup>248</sup>

Hertweck claims the danger of celebrating wins with the wrong metrics is that young people will believe that the wrong things count. Because churches tend to emphasize moralism and motivationalism, then young people end up walking away from that emphasis in the church as they age. The sad truth is that they had never really understood the Gospel in the first place. Being fluent in the Gospel means directing people to discover the sin beneath the sin and joining the Spirit's work at redirecting a heart back to God. It does not mean moralism (just making better choices).<sup>249</sup>

Ministry leaders should also introduce students to being Spirit-dependent. The Holy Spirit cannot be relegated to an occasional topic only to be ignored at other times. God's people are people of the Spirit; they should have a vibrant relationship with the Spirit. Ministry leaders should normalize the Spirit in the everyday lives of their students. They need to teach how to live in the Spirit in all areas of life.<sup>250</sup>

Hertweck also suggests that ministry leaders should emphasize biblical community with young people before they become independent. One's biblical community should be Christ-centered, on a mission, marked by a reversal of values, intentionally intergenerational, confronting the rampant individualism in society, affirming their role as image bearers, and pointing people to the metanarrative of Scripture.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> David Hertweck, *Good Kids, Big Events, Matching T-shirts: Changing the Conversation on Health in Youth Ministry* (Springfield, MO: My Healthy Church, 2015), 11.

<sup>249</sup> Hertwick, *Good Kids*, 43.

<sup>250</sup> Hertwick, *Good Kids*, 106.

<sup>251</sup> Hertwick, *Good Kids*, 144.

Furthermore, ministry leaders should keep their churches relevant by adapting to a rapidly changing culture. Kinnaman’s team at Barna Group discovered that sixty percent to eighty percent of all Christian teens and twentysomethings leave active involvement in the church, and many also abandon their faith.<sup>252</sup> Although they were reared in the faith, these young people have grown disenchanted with the church during their emerging adulthood. Kinnaman exposes ways that the Christian community has failed to equip young adults to live “in the world but not of the world” (John 17:16) and to follow Christ during profound cultural change.<sup>253</sup> The church’s failure to challenge them toward serious discipleship is at the root of their disengagement.<sup>254</sup> They fail to see how the church is an agent of genuine transformation and commitment.

Kinnaman says the data shows that most Millennials and Gen Zers believe the following about the Church: It is *overprotective*; it is a creativity killer where risk-taking and cultural involvement are an anathema.<sup>255</sup> The Church is also *shallow*; it conveys easy platitudes, proof-texting, and formulaic slogans that fail to challenge them to commit to using their passions, gifts, and abilities to glorify God.<sup>256</sup> Moreover, it is *anti-science*; faith and science seem incompatible as science appears to welcome questions and skepticism while matters of faith seem impenetrable.<sup>257</sup> They feel that the Church is also *repressive*; religious rules – particularly sexual mores – feel stifling to the individualist mindset of

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<sup>252</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 23.

<sup>253</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 11.

<sup>254</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 31.

<sup>255</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 111.

<sup>256</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 129.

<sup>257</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 148.

young adults.<sup>258</sup> It is also *exclusive*; the formative culture of this generation esteems open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance, which makes the exclusive truth claims of Christianity challenging to swallow.<sup>259</sup> Finally, the Church is *doubtless*; they feel that its response to doubt is trivial and fact-focused as if people can somehow talk them out of doubt.<sup>260</sup>

In response to these less-than-flattering perspectives about the Church, Kinnaman presents three proactive steps for ministry leaders:

1. The Church should reconsider how it makes disciples.
2. The Church should rediscover one's Christian calling and vocation.
3. The Church should reprioritize wisdom over information as people seek to know God.<sup>261</sup>

Kinnaman does not leave the reader on a negative note, however. Admittedly, the faith journeys of the next generation are a challenge to the established community of faith. However, they can also be a source of hope for the Church. Kinnaman also offers creative ideas for pastors, youth leaders, parents, and educators to pass on a vibrant faith. If ministry leaders will muster the courage to tackle these problems, then there is great hope for the future of this emerging segment of the population.

In this age of rapidly increasing secularization, when it is no longer expedient and popular to identify as a devoted follower of Christ, the American Church and its Christian families are in trouble. American society is enduring a perfect storm, and spiritual casualties litter the domestic, ecclesiastical, and cultural landscapes. Endangerment does not necessarily

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<sup>258</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 167.

<sup>259</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 184.

<sup>260</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 198.

<sup>261</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 212.

mean doomed, though! Well-known Christian pastor, author, and radio talk show host Chuck Swindoll observes that if people are ingenious enough to preserve the bison, the whooping crane, and the humpback whale, then Christian parents and ministry leaders should also find the ingenuity to preserve the family and the effectiveness of the Church, especially if they earnestly solicit the guidance of the Holy Spirit and consult the timeless Word of God. However, he warns that effectiveness does not just happen automatically; it results from deliberate intention, determination, and practice.<sup>262</sup> There should be an increased commitment to the principles of God's Word. After all, it is people's authoritative rule for faith and conduct. Careful reading of its text reveals that God has much to say about childrearing. The Bible could be considered A Parents' and Ministry Leaders' Guide to Raising Champions for the Emerging Generation.<sup>263</sup>

In *Growing Young*, Kara Powell and her co-authors, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin, met this problem head-on. They conducted extensive research and now provide churches today with creative ways to attract, engage, and retain youth in their congregations. They also offer hope for the Church today and tomorrow with statistics and practical advice.

As a structure for their book, they introduce the Growing Young Wheel and its six core commitments:

1. Unlocking keychain leadership
2. Empathizing with today's young people
3. Taking the message of Jesus seriously
4. Fueling a warm community
5. Prioritizing young people (and families) everywhere
6. Being the best neighbors

The overriding motivation in these steps is the pursuit of Jesus.

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<sup>262</sup> Chuck Swindoll, *Growing Wise in Family Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Press, 1988), 35.

<sup>263</sup> Martha Peace and Stuart Scott, *The Faithful Parent: A Biblical Guide to Raising a Family* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 2.

The first commitment, *unlocking keychain leadership*, is about pastoral and congregational leaders who can let people in or keep them out. Acutely aware of the keys on their keychain, they intentionally entrust and empower all generations with their capabilities, power, and access. Of the four types of critical leaders – keyless, key-hoarding, key loaning, and keychain – keychain leaders constantly open doors and entrust those ready to lead. Many people list why they serve in church today: a keychain leader impacted them. These leaders should be mature, real, warm, aware of what matters to people, empowering others, and take the long view. They need to be approachable and genuinely caring since authenticity attracts young people.<sup>264</sup>

The second commitment, *empathizing with today's young people*, is about trying to understand the emerging generation internally and externally. Effective leaders should feel them. Because three questions plague every young person – who am I (identity), where do I fit in (belonging), and what difference do I make (purpose) – churches have to respond with grace (identity), love (belonging), and mission (purpose). Youth leaders should emphasize these themes to their young people, so they have a strong faith foundation as they graduate and attend college.<sup>265</sup>

The third commitment, *taking the message of Jesus seriously*, is the anecdote to the pervasive religious framework of young people today – moralistic therapeutic deism. Faith is commonly associated with being a nice person (moralistic), making them feel good about themselves (therapeutic), and they tend to believe that God exists but is not directly involved in human affairs (deistic). Right living is more important to them than right believing, but these behavior-based belief systems are toxic to true faith. Churches making a difference with young

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<sup>264</sup> Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love You Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016).

<sup>265</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

people pay close attention to the red letters in the Bible – the salient words of Jesus. Ministry leaders should insist on keeping it about Jesus instead of the chic, abstract beliefs of today, about redemption and less about formulas, and about life here and now rather than all about heaven later.<sup>266</sup>

The fourth commitment, *fueling a warm community*, is about going deeper than programs and structures and fostering close relationships in the church. Churches should have programs and structures, but they do not have to depend on them to eradicate loneliness and isolation often felt by young people who hail from dysfunctional homes. Warmth will help young people stick to the church. They are okay with messiness; authenticity is the key. Real experiences that feel like a family ought to be will help redefine what an attractive church is to this emerging generation.

The fifth commitment, *prioritizing young people (and families) everywhere*, emphasizes the support that parents need from the church to influence their children's faith development properly. Ministry leaders should intentionally partner with parents to provide fun Bible learning activities to do with their children. Then prioritizing children inherently means prioritizing their parents. In prioritizing young people, they also avoid the message that they must wait to get older before they can participate in the service roles of the church. They especially seem to thrive in the nurseries and technologies of the church, which most churches experience the most need. Hence, since actions speak louder than words, ministry leaders should not just tell their young people that they are a priority; they should also live it. Just as Jesus welcomed children, they

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<sup>266</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.



need to be welcoming, too, which means tolerating their immaturity, restlessness, and poor decision-making occasionally.<sup>267</sup>

The sixth commitment, *being the best neighbors*, recognizes that a church body's love for God is inseparable from its love for people. Selfless mercy is a characteristic that they should possess for those who exist outside the church both globally as well as locally because young people are watching.<sup>268</sup> Churches need to embody these commitments in even greater ways. They should overcome the main barrier to growing young, needing more long-term dedication and discipline to make this further transition a reality.

In *You Lost Me*, David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins state why most young adults leave the Church. That list of reasons was noted above. In their follow-up book, *Faith for Exiles*, Kinnaman and his co-authors state why some young adults stay in the Church. The two books together provide insightful windows into this emerging generation and were crucial resources in this study. Their concept of “digital Babylon” is not a physical place but a pagan-but-spiritual, hyper-stimulated, multicultural, imperial crossroads that is the virtual home of every person with WI-FI and a data plan. The problem with this arrangement is that screens have a way of discipling people and shaping their perspectives. Since today's culture is not Christian, young adults should be trained and equipped to counteract the secularization from those screens. The Church has an opportunity to become more intentional about developing young Jesus followers who are resiliently faithful in the face of cultural coercion and who live a vibrant life in the Spirit.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

<sup>268</sup> Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

<sup>269</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 30.

Vern Bengtson also notes that the role of families in religious transmission has become more important in recent years as formal religious institutions have become less influential in many people's lives. He suggests that religious organizations should pay more attention to the role of families in religious transmission and work to support families in this regard. In addition to discussing the role of families in religious transmission, the author also reflects on the broader implications of his research. He argues that his findings have important implications for understanding the nature of religion and spirituality and the role of family relationships in human development and well-being. He also explores the challenges that religious discontinuity can pose for families and offers suggestions for how families can respond in productive and supportive ways. He emphasizes the importance of maintaining open communication and respecting individual autonomy while finding ways to foster a sense of shared values and identity across generations.<sup>270</sup>

Ryan Burge also contributed to a more recent book co-authored with Jim Davis and Michael Graham entitled *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why are They Going, and What will it Take to Bring them Back?* In it, the authors state that U.S. is currently experiencing the largest and fastest religious shift in its history, greater than the First and Second Great Awakenings and every revival in the U.S. combined, but in the opposite direction.<sup>271</sup> They explore the dechurched through a detailed sketch of demographics, size, core concerns, church off-ramps, historical roots, and the gravity of what is at stake, of which young adults are a significant part. The authors also explore what can be done to slow the bleed, wisely engage the issues, and hopefully re-church some of those who have departed. In the Breakpoint review of

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<sup>270</sup> Bengtson, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith*.

<sup>271</sup> Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why are They Going, and What will it Take to Bring them Back?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2023), 2.

this informative book, John Stonestreet and Shane Morris observed that U.S. church membership, as a percentage of the population, is now at a record low – down more than twenty points in the twenty-first century.<sup>272</sup> It is not just due to the decline of mainline Protestantism, but it also due to the fact that Evangelicals have sunk to pre-1980s levels while the religiously unaffiliated have swelled to nearly a third of the population. Stonestreet and Morris continue by stating that anyone who hopes to halt and reverse church decline must remember what the main point of faith is. It is not to entertain people; the gimmicks some leaders are using neither attract serious seekers nor make true disciples. Counterintuitively, part of the trend of decline may be churches that ask too little of those who darken their doors. Low expectations of those in the pews and widely embraced individualistic assumptions have led to few Americans finding time for church; people can find better content on YouTube and Spotify.<sup>273</sup>

On the other hand, based on their review of *Dechurching*, Stonestreet and Morris indicate that when Christianity becomes a way of life, when it demands people's allegiance and following Christ restructures their priorities, pursuits, beliefs, and behaviors, then they find meaning and purpose in church. But churches that do not raise those expectations are leading millions away from Jesus, not by demanding everything of them, but by demanding nothing.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> John Stonestreet and Shane Morris, "What's Behind America's 'Great Dechurching?'" Breakpoint, August 23, 2023, <https://www.breakpoint.org/whats-behind-americas-great-dechurching/>.

<sup>273</sup> Stonestreet and Morris, "Great Dechurching."

<sup>274</sup> Stonestreet and Morris, "Great Dechurching."

*Ministry leaders have an indispensable role.* Although many authors have written on the shortcomings of twenty-first-century Christian parenting and ministerial leadership, a refreshing approach to addressing the problem is to observe what parents and ministry leaders are doing correctly and then emulate their best practices. Randy Jumper provides an excellent model. In his dissertation project *Meshed Ministry: Retaining Young Adults During Their Complex Migration into Adulthood*, this young adult pastor at First Assembly of God in North Little Rock, Arkansas, shares experienced insights on curbing young adult attrition and reinforcing young adult retention in local churches. Warning that those churches that do not intentionally address the needs of young adults miss the mandate to facilitate lifelong followers of Jesus, he coins the phrase “meshed ministry,” which builds on four complementary modalities: (1) Adaptable Engagement, (2) Interlaced Structures, (3) Elastic Shaping, and (4) Breathable Sanctuaries. These modalities represent ways of ministry rather than specific steps to implement. They accomplish transformative, attrition-fighting ministries.<sup>275</sup> Using mesh fabric as a metaphor, he explains the application of this novel textile for these four modalities.

*Adaptable Engagement* is when a meshed ministry to young adults expands and contracts by adapting to their needs. It enables a church to flex as young adults push against established structures and critically distance themselves from their community of faith. *Interlaced Connectivity* is when a meshed ministry to young adults avoids building a separate ministry from the overall local church. Replicating connection points for all age groups (intergenerational) establishes redundancies to mitigate loss. Thus, the more connections a church attaches to its young adults, the stronger its network. *Elastic Shaping* is when a meshed ministry to young adults provides non-restrictive shaping of this age group into lifelong followers of Jesus. Non-

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<sup>275</sup> Jumper, “Meshed Ministry.”

restrictive dialog methodologies, biblical learning, and practical life skill development accomplish this environment. *Breathable Sanctuaries* is when a meshed ministry to young adults is free from pressure and allows them to move around in a place of restoration and a haven free from conflict. It moves the conversation from aesthetic manipulations to gospel “terraforming” and creates safe places in a world of complexity and change to come, discuss, and share. Such a ministry built on these modalities will be transformative for young adults as they migrate from adolescence into adulthood.<sup>276</sup>

In another dissertation, *Lifters and Gifters: Keeping Millennials and Boomers Together to Build the Church*, Rich Wilkerson, lead pastor at Trinity Church in Miami, Florida, shares experienced insights on keeping young adults engaged in the local church. He states that one of the great needs of the Church today is to keep together the primary funders of the church, the “gifters,” and the primary workers in the church, the “lifters.” Church leaders should practice this effort to grow healthy, thriving, life-giving, Spirit-inspired congregations. Wilkerson defines gifters as those forty years of age and older who are the primary funders of the work of God in the local church context. He defines lifters as those thirty-nine and younger and the primary servant leaders and volunteers in the local church context. The church needs those who give to the ministry and those who lift the ministry working harmoniously to advance its mission. With many biblical examples of intergenerational partnerships like Moses and Joshua, Naomi and Ruth, and Paul and Timothy, Wilkerson shows how the older and younger generations, gifters and lifters, work together to ensure the continuation of the mission of God.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Jumper, “Meshed Ministry.”

<sup>277</sup> Richard Wilkerson, “Lifters and Gifters: Keeping Millennials and Boomers Together to Build the Church,” (DMin dissertation, Southeastern University, 2019), 12.

Wilkerson also insists that leaders should intentionally exert more effort to retain the Church's lifters (Millennials and Gen Zers). They tend to harbor perceived grievances against the Church. Regardless of the truthfulness of their perceptions, grievances can cause a breakdown in communication and cooperation. The key to solving this problem is ensuring this emerging generation forms strong and lasting relationships within the church, especially intergenerational ones. Those relationships are more vital than peer relationships. If the lifter does not feel a real and close connection with God, then they are likely to go elsewhere to find it.

There will be areas of conflict between these two age categories. The usual culprits of the stress points are money, music, and production. However, Wilkerson says that wise ministry leaders should encourage cooperation between the two groups so the local church can continue undistracted from these landmines. Historically, the Church has always been able to move forward because the older generation trained and nurtured the younger generation. In time, the one handed off leadership roles to the next.<sup>278</sup>

Jacob Al Hassan's dissertation should also be considered here. In *The Pauline Concept of Discipleship as a Model for Addressing the Youth Dropout in the Twenty-First Century United States of America Church*, he states that with over five million young adults dropping out of the Church and the faith in the last decade, the Christian community should rethink its discipleship methods to impact the youth today. He suggests that the root causes of the spiritual casualties that litter the ecclesiastical landscape are discipleship assumptions and strategies rooted in modern mechanistic mass production paradigms that do not work in the local church context. A

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<sup>278</sup> Wilkerson, "Lifters and Gifters."

better approach for lasting faith formation would be to embrace personally crafted, one-on-one, relational, fatherly and motherly mentor relationships.<sup>279</sup>

Al Hassan states that Paul understood the concept of one-on-one relational mentorship because his determined efforts significantly impacted the lives of young adults like Timothy, Titus, Luke, Onesimus, and a host of others. The author observes that Paul's influence on these emerging leaders was so impactful that his departure from active ministry following his arrest and execution did not negatively affect the growth of the first-century Church. Al Hassan expands on his thesis by identifying the great principles of Pauline discipleship of young adults, including love, relationship, fathering, and mentorship, to address the many reasons youth disconnect from the Church and faith today.

The last dissertation reviewed for this project is Steve Pulis's research entitled *Spiritual Vitality of Assemblies of God Post-High School Young Adults*. After collecting data from a stratified sample of young adults across the United States, he based his work on examining factors contributing to the continued spiritual vitality of young adults who remain in the Church. The results identified elements from spiritual formation factors, social considerations, and youth group experiences that produced statistically significant correlations with higher retention levels and spiritual vitality among those surveyed. He concludes that the aggregated effect of intentional youth group experiences that provide the opportunity for the internalized guidance of the Spirit, instead of specific youth group programs, have the potential to create a journey that would ensure spiritual vitality for young adults after they leave high school.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Jacob Al Hassan, "The Pauline Concept of Discipleship as a Model for Addressing the Youth Dropout in the Twenty-First Century United States of America Church," (DMin dissertation, Southeastern University, 2020), 13.

<sup>280</sup> Stephen Pulis, "Spiritual Vitality of Assemblies of God Post-High School Young Adults," (DMin dissertation, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2014), 27.

### *Summary*

The combined insights from so many informed ancient and contemporary researchers are constructive for parents and ministry leaders today. The Scriptures give clear instructions on childrearing and discipleship that leads to retention. Saturation of godly themes in the home and in the local church is critical to success. By interpreting the passages of the Bible for their times, the ancient Church leaders also had great insights for parents and ministry leaders. They taught that parenthood is a holy vocation because of its holy partnership with God's creative activity, a family is a small church, parents are to shepherd their children's hearts, character training is more important than knowledge gains, and virtue is paramount. Moreover, contemporary authors suggest not only effective strategies for childrearing and discipleship but also solutions for the problem the American Church is experiencing today. Since parents are ultimately responsible for childrearing, they should ignite the spark of faith in their children's hearts, practice proper childrearing according to biblical standards, administer discipline properly, and find a good church with which to partner regarding their children's spiritual formation and discipleship. The suspected causes of the young adult exodus from the Church are being met with some suggested cures. In the next chapter, this research explores the methods by which a Human Subjects Study was conducted to add to the discussion about young adult retention.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE PROJECT NARRATIVE AND FIELDWORK**

#### *Introduction*

This project sought to identify the cause(s) of the young adult dropout problem in the American Church and discover possible measures that Christian parents and ministry leaders can implement to achieve a higher retention rate. The previous chapter explored biblical passages as well as reflections from early Christian leaders and insights from current ones. To fill the information gap between timeless biblical principles and current literature, the field study for this project investigated young adults who dropped out of the Church and young adults who remained. It also studied parents of those young adults and ministry leaders who have observed young adults and how they relate to the Church. This chapter explains that fieldwork.

#### *Perspective and Type of Research*

A qualitative approach to the research was used to accomplish the goals of this project. The analysis leaned heavily on existing interviews, surveys, and observations from credible sources referenced in the rationale for the project (Chapter One) and the literature review (Chapter Two). Data were also gathered from over one hundred semi-structured interviews with selected participants and cross-referenced with the presented information in Chapters One and Two. The project assembled and evaluated the material from all the interviews and then aligned it with the previously published data to reveal the root causes of young adult attrition from the Church and to present a possible cure.

### *Questions for the Research*

To examine the home life of young adults, and to what extent the principles in Deut 6:6-9 were employed, and to examine their local church experience, and to what extent the principles in Matt 28:19 and Acts 2:42-47 were practiced, the following questions were asked to young adults ages twenty to twenty-nine:

1. If you continued following Christ as an adult, then please answer the following questions. If not, then please skip to the next question.
  - a. What practices were followed in your home that might have contributed to you continuing in your faith?
  - b. What practices were followed in your church that might have contributed to you continuing in your faith?
  - c. What other factors in your environment besides home and church might have contributed to you continuing in your faith?
  
2. If you discontinued following Christ as an adult, then please answer the following questions. Then proceed to the last question.
  - a. What practices were neglected in your home that might have contributed to you discontinuing your faith?
  - b. What practices were neglected in your church that might have contributed to you discontinuing your faith?
  - c. What other factors in your environment besides home and church might have contributed to you discontinuing your faith?
  
3. In retrospect, what advice would you offer other parents rearing children today to help them be more successful in contributing to their children continuing to follow Christ and participate in church when they become adults?

Similarly, to examine the home life of parents of young adults, and to what extent the principles in Deut 6:6-9 they employed, and to examine the church experience of parents of young adults, and to what extent the principles in Matt 28:19 and Acts 2:42-47 were practiced, the following questions were asked to parents of young adults:

1. If your child(ren) continued following Christ as an adult, then please answer the following questions. If not, then please skip to the next question.
  - a. What practices were followed in your home that might have contributed to your child(ren) continuing their faith?
  - b. What practices were followed in your church that might have contributed to your child(ren) continuing their faith?
  - c. What other factors in your child(ren)'s environment besides home and church might have contributed to them continuing their faith?
  
2. If your child(ren) discontinued following Christ as an adult, then please answer the following questions. Then proceed to next question.
  - a. What practices were neglected in your home that might have contributed to your child(ren) discontinuing their faith?
  - b. What practices were neglected in your church that might have contributed to your child(ren) discontinuing their faith?
  - c. What other factors in your child(ren)'s environment besides home and church might have contributed to them discontinuing their faith?
  
3. In retrospect, what advice would you offer other parents rearing children today to help their children to continue following Christ and participating in church?

For ministry leaders who have had extensive experience working with young adults in the church or a parachurch ministry, the following questions were asked:

1. For all the young adults you have observed continuing to follow Christ:
  - a. What observations can you make about their home life that might have contributed to them continuing their faith?
  - b. What observations can you make about their church experience that might have contributed to them continuing their faith?
  - c. What other factors in their environment besides home and church might have contributed to them continuing their faith?
  
2. For all the young adults you have observed discontinuing to follow Christ:
  - a. What observations can you make about their home life that might have contributed to them discontinuing their faith?
  - b. What observations can you make about their church experience that might have contributed to them discontinuing their faith?
  - c. What other factors in their environment besides home and church might have contributed to them discontinuing their faith?

3. What critical success factors do you attribute for:
  - a. The retention of young adults in your church?
  - b. The growth and effectiveness of the young adult ministries in your church?

The above questions used in the semi-structured interviews with all the selected participants were provided in advance to them so they could devote forethought to their answers. The field research also differentiated between the church participation of young adults and the faith of young adults. Whether a person could maintain a passionate relationship with Jesus without participating in a local church was considered. The study attempted to understand if there is a symbiotic relationship between faith and religious expression that includes regularly gathering with others who share similar faith views and practices. In most cases, the interviews morphed into a discussion beyond the preset questions, resulting in information that contributed significantly to the results of this study.

### *Context of the Research*

The Human Subjects Research commenced in the fall of 2021 and concluded in the spring of 2023 with over one hundred selected participants. The study was done nationwide, from New York to Los Angeles and Seattle to Miami, to have a balanced representation of the entire country. The study was also very diverse, including participants from various religious backgrounds, from Catholic to Pentecostal/Charismatic, with Protestant Mainline and Evangelical denominations in between both ends of the spectrum. It also included participants who were White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian. The diversity of the study also featured families and churches located in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Additionally, it included individuals and families in a range of religious fervor, from passionately committed to coolly indifferent.

The educational backgrounds of the young adults were also diverse, with participants from homeschool, private school, public school, local community college, Christian college, state college, and trade school. Although more participants were from White, suburban, Pentecostal settings, deliberate strides were taken to compensate for this narrow sphere of relationships. Participants from different ethnicities, urban and rural contexts, and Catholic and Mainline Protestant settings were purposely selected. The study was intentionally all-encompassing to provide a more accurate reflection of the state of the Christian family and the Church and how young adults grapple with their faith in those contexts.

#### *Instrumentation Regarding Data Collection for the Research*

Since online survey platforms tend to be impersonal and do not allow for secondary follow-up questioning, all the semi-structured interviews were conducted by in-person and telephone appointments in search of the particular data to be analyzed in this project. None of the interviews were recorded, but careful notes were recorded and saved in digital files for later compilation, review, analysis, and comparison. Interview formats ranged from informal to formal.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted on four other continents – Europe, Africa, South America, and Asia (as well as Canada and Mexico in North America). Although the data from those interviews were not included in this project due to its scope limitations, the information provided a valuable depth of perspective and comparison for the American content.

Some ministry leaders in the survey were also referred to this project by denominational officials. Families and individuals in the survey were also recruited by church and community

leaders for the research. Finally, at the end of each interview with a ministry leader, they were asked if they would refer me to others who may be willing to participate in the study. Thus, the survey pool grew broad and diversified, and the field opened to some well-known and insightful leaders. Each interview was conducted voluntarily with full disclosure regarding its purposes. Selected participants received no compensation for their time, effort, and insights.

In all the interviews, “active listening” was practiced, which embodied empathy and intuition. The exercise involved going beyond simply hearing the words of the participants; it sought to understand the meaning and intent behind their words. Such techniques included being fully present in the conversation, showing interest and practicing good eye contact (for in-person interviews), noticing and using non-verbal cues, asking open-ended questions to encourage further responses, paraphrasing and reflecting on what had been communicated, quietly listening to understand rather than frequently interjecting, and withholding judgment and advice.<sup>1</sup> Such techniques kept the interviews positive and made the participants feel comfortable, secure, and at ease. It seemed the participants felt heard, and their input valued.

### *Assumptions in the Research*

The study assumed an initial hypothesis; there is a direct correlation between Deut 6:6-9 and Judg 2:10-15 as well as Matt 28:19 and Heb 2:1. It also supposed that a lack of godly saturation in the home and a deficiency of thorough discipleship in the local church leads to a greater likelihood of the next generation falling away and suffering distress. Due to a conviction based on 2 Tim 3:16, the data were considered through that lens.

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<sup>1</sup> Arlin Cuncic, “What is Active Listening?” Very Well Mind, November 9, 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-active-listening-3024343>.

The study also anticipated that all the participants respond candidly and were not manipulated into their responses with ulterior motives. Finally, the study expected that the persons interviewed would remain anonymous so all their answers could be truthful. Thus, the study withholds the names of young adults, parents, ministers, churches, denominations, and other institutions. Since confidentiality was assured to every participant, consent forms were not provided during the interviews.

### *Survey Methodology for the Research*

In the qualitative investigation and analysis, the survey questions for individuals, families, and ministry leaders were broad enough to avoid hints of a particular ecclesiastical perspective. Care was also taken to avoid leading the participants in the questioning. Referrals from other participants were also followed to discover other willing participants for the survey. The data were analyzed, and the results are reported in Chapter Four.

Measures were also taken to determine if there was a correlation between the commands in Deut 6:6-9 and Matt 28:19 and the consequences in Judg 2:10-15 and Heb 2:1 for the individuals, families, and ministry leaders interviewed. With these passages in mind, follow-up questions were asked to determine any connections. Open-ended questions were presented, and participants expressed their subjective experiences. The focus of this research is the degree of godly saturation in the Christian home, the degree of disciple-making emphasis in the local church, and the complementary relationship that the home and the church have for the retention of young adult participation in the Church and their faith. Thus, the interview questions in this study lent the opportunity to gain data regarding young adult perspectives.

### *Approval by the Institutional Review Board for the Research*

The interviews for this study were conducted under the auspices of Southeastern University, which has a policy that applies to research involving living human beings whose physical, emotional, or behavioral conditions, responses, and speech are considered for investigative purposes. The policy also applies to the use of interviews designed to elicit or obtain nonpublic information about individuals or groups. Approval was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to protect the rights and welfare of the human research subjects recruited to participate in the interviews for this project. This approval process included the IRB's review of all the research involving participants in this project before its initiation. The IRB followed widely accepted ethical principles and other guidelines in carrying out this critical responsibility. The IRB also approved all the questions for the participants before the interviews began. As a prerequisite for IRB review, this approval process also included completing the online training course designed by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program. The participants in this study were guaranteed that their shared information would not be disclosed or made public, so consent forms were not provided.

### *Data Analysis of the Research*

Once all the interviews were completed, notes were reviewed to identify categories of responses. All the interviews were compared in the mass of raw data in search of common themes. The replies from the Human Subject Research were also compared to the observations recorded in the literature review. The method for displaying the data was narrative text. Digital and other automated tools were not employed to maintain the highest possible tactical involvement.



*Summary*

The field study for this project investigated a wide range of participants by category: young adults who dropped out of the Church, young adults who remained in the Church, parents of all those young adults, and ministry leaders who are in positions to observe families and individuals and how they relate to faith and the Church. The interviews conducted reaffirmed the validity of the problem presented in Chapter One and the cogency of the claims in the Theological, Biblical, and Literature Reviews found in Chapter Two. They also provided some fresh ideas for Christian parents and ministry leaders to consider. In the next chapter, the interview data will be carefully analyzed and compared to what Scriptures have been studied and what previous ancient and contemporary authors have already stated.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE PROJECT EVALUATED**

#### *Introduction*

After the Human Subjects Research (HSR) portion of this project explained in the previous chapter was conducted, the opportunity for improvement in the American Church today was confirmed. Young adults are dropping out at too alarming a rate, and many of them are abandoning their faith. Although the Bible addresses the retention of the next generation, and other leaders throughout history have expounded on those principles with great insights, a gap exists between what God commanded in His Word and how Christian parents and ministry leaders execute those commands today. It is little wonder there is a serious problem. It is evident from the interviews that Christian parents and ministers seem to be attempting the same shortcuts Eli, Samuel, David, Solomon, and other parents tried in Scripture. They are suffering similar outcomes – a botched handoff of a spiritual legacy to the next generation. Despite the Church’s best resources, young adults are still dropping out. Driving the research in this study is a discovery of a biblical observation: parents who neglect the commands in Deut 6:6-9 are more likely to have children who suffer the consequences mentioned in Judg 2:10-15, and ministry leaders who disregard the command found in Matt 28:19 are more likely to have young adults who experience the drifting away described in Heb 2:1. Chapter Five will contain conclusions for the research results, along with recommendations to initiate positive change for young adult retention in the Church. However, this chapter will analyze the qualitative data from the interviews and interact with the Bible and previous ancient and contemporary leaders. New information that adds value to Christian families and the Church will be shared.

*Key Findings from the Human Subjects Research*

When young adults in the HSR who have chosen to disconnect from the Church were asked why they arrived at their decision, several similar responses emerged as all the data from their interviews were compiled and analyzed.

Some participants stated they began to have questions about their faith and felt their parents and ministry leaders could not provide adequate answers or support for their doubts. When several of those interviewed left home and went to college, they were immersed in an environment where fellow students and professors disparaged the Christian faith and the Church in which they were brought up. When those claims seemed to make more sense than the beliefs and values those young adults had been taught, their parents and ministry leaders got frustrated, and the attempts at apologetics by those parents and leaders could not match the rationale with which those young adults were bombarded away from home.

Other participants responded that faith matters seemed to be limited to church experiences; their parents never talked about God at home. Several respondents could not recollect ever seeing their parents read the Bible. Although several respondents reported their families saying grace at mealtimes, they could not remember their parents ever praying with them apart from those instances. Family devotions were not practiced in the home. When those young adults interviewed encountered challenges in life, faith had not been established as a foundational element in their worldview.

Interviews with young adults who separated from the church also revealed that many of them feel its messages and practices are outdated and irrelevant to whatever they face. Hymns written in a previous generation did not match the kind of music they grew to appreciate on their digital playlists. The theology in the songs being sung often created confusion about what they

were expected to believe. The sermons that ministry leaders preached explained doctrinal matters but failed to provide solutions to the problems they were encountering. The young adults found answers to life's perplexing challenges readily available in online blogs when they did an internet search on those topics.

Some HSR participants admitted they like their ministry leaders and still believe in God. However, their demanding schedules with college assignments, work, and social activities leave little time for church participation. Those young adults do not dislike the church and have good intentions of returning to it someday, but they confess they have just gotten out of the habit.

Other participants pointed out that they feel disconnected from their church's community and no longer feel a sense of belonging and purpose there. They spent so much more time with their friends in high school than with their friends at church. This relational change led to a sense that they have more in common with their school friends than with their church friends. They ceased to fit in with the social life, interests, and topics of conversation at church functions. When they began to question why they should attend church, they could not convince themselves of any good reasons to continue. Many of them reported they have moved on, and church is no longer part of their routine.

Some young adults who were interviewed disagree with their church's doctrine and point out that their different beliefs and values cause them to no longer want to be involved. Most of those interviewed in this category espouse more liberal views than their ministry leaders, who hold conservative views. These young people are more concerned about environmental issues and do not care about gender dysphoria. However, they feel their church leaders are more concerned about gender and marriage issues and care less about climate change and the environment. The respondents also expressed a distaste for the political overtones which they felt

were featured in the sermons. Furthermore, those interviewed cannot connect the death of Jesus with their moral condition; they do not think their behavior is evil enough to deserve a substitutionary death by God.

Several participants identified negative experiences with ministry leaders, other church members, their own families, or events that ultimately caused them to disengage from their church. Some of them left in the aftermath of a church split, citing that there was more peace at their workplace than at church. Others left when their youth pastor was dismissed without a clear explanation. Some of them were disillusioned because their parents were leaders in the church, but at home, their lifestyles exhibited compromise. Hypocrisy was the main culprit for this last reason for disaffiliation. Several of those who have disconnected became cynical because they felt their morals were better than some of those in their local church. A few of them dropped out when their parents divorced. The disruption in these young adults' homes affected their participation at church, and they eventually got out of the habit of going.

These participants' responses can be measured against the Deut 6:6-9 command of parental spiritual formation and the Matt 28:19 command of ministerial discipleship. On further probing and secondary questioning in the interviews, there is also a strong correlation between the lack of biblical saturation in the home, deficiency in the cultivation of devotion by the church, and the ultimate decision by these young adults to drift away from organized religion. Sadly, several of those interviewed initially started attending sporadically, and no one cared enough to follow up and check on them. Interestingly, there was also a correlation between those who dropped out and their families eating together infrequently, eliminating the potential for having meaningful mealtime discussions about important matters in life. Establishing a more stable spiritual formation would have benefited them in their formative years.

Interestingly, a measure of guilt was a common theme among those disaffiliates as they experimented with activities they knew their parents and church leaders would disapprove. When asked the follow-up question about their stress and anxiety levels and overall life satisfaction, the young adults in this category admitted to a higher level of pain and confusion. Although church participation is technically separate from faith, the respondents also recognize there is a definite connection; they expressed that it is much more difficult for them to consistently live a life that pleases God without the support the church community provides.

Not all the news is negative. Fortunately, some young adults interviewed have chosen to remain connected to the Church. They were asked why they had stayed, and several of the following answers emerged as all the data from their responses were compiled and analyzed.

Some participants stated they began having questions like everyone else when they entered puberty. However, their family had provided them with a solid faith foundation; they could find their answers in the Bible or felt comfortable asking their parents. Because their parents and ministry leaders understood the issues these young adults were questioning, they were readily provided the answers they needed. They never thought about disconnecting from the church.

When these church-connected young adults went off to college, they were confronted by skepticism like every other Christian. However, the antagonism toward Christianity they faced in school did not phase them because they had been provided a strong faith foundation in their formative years. These young adults could see through the shallow rationale of those who challenged them, and their faith was unwavering. The tenets of the Christian faith just make more sense to them.

Other participants responded that matters of faith were consistent between their home life and their church. Their parents talked about God at home, and family devotions were a regular exercise. Respondents fondly recalled their parents praying with them before dropping them off at school, as they got in bed at night, and when facing decisions or challenges. Their parents modeled Bible reading and personal prayer and taught their children the same habits. Most of the young adults interviewed had encountered significant life challenges like everyone else, but their faith was a strong foundation that provided them a base on which to stand.

Some participants who have remained faithful in the church responded that they find a sense of belonging and community. As they navigate life's challenges, these young adults feel supported by the close relationships they share with some of the other members. Other participants stated that their involvement in the faith community helps them grow personally and spiritually. The church provides them with a sense of purpose and direction.

HSR participants who have remained in the church and the faith also share that the values and beliefs of their church align with their own. Those shared values provide a sense of continuity and consistency in their lives. Many participants point to all the opportunities their church provides for young adults to serve inside and outside their church. They gain a sense of fulfillment and purpose through all the volunteer work, ministries, and outreach programs.

Other participants express how they feel supported and encouraged by their ministry leaders. When they show up for church services, ministry leaders know their names. Even in large churches, volunteer leaders recognize who they are even if the paid staff do not. These young adults are grateful for the guidance and mentorship they receive from other church members as they are in a season of making big decisions about careers, marriage, location to settle down, and lifestyles. Like everyone else their age, life gets busy; school and work have

their demands. However, with their faith foundation, these young adults can prioritize their commitment to the church and fit everything else in life around it.

Several participants identified the comfort they find in their church's familiar rituals and traditions. These activities also provide a sense of continuity and stability in their lives. The symbols have meaning, and the services make sense.

Most of the participants in the HSR study who have remained in the church and the faith could point to negative experiences about their faith journey. Parents are not perfect, and ministry leaders make mistakes, but when these young adults encountered Christians whose talk did not match their walk, they were just determined to avoid that kind of lifestyle themselves. They seem to recognize that hypocrisy is everywhere, especially in the world; they are resolved not to hold the church to a different standard and be affected by it. These young adults intend to rise above people's problems and imperfections and keep their eyes on Jesus.

When some respondents raised concerns about the matters their churches emphasized, whether social interests or doctrinal issues, they felt heard by their ministry leaders. Their concerns were not dismissed. As a result, these young adults feel there is an open door for them to contribute to the vision and values of their family and their church.

Again, all the responses of these participants can be measured against the Deut 6:6-9 command of parental spiritual formation and the Matt 28:19 command of ministerial discipleship. On further investigation and secondary questioning in the interviews, there is also a strong correlation between the biblical saturation in the home, the cultivation of devotion by the church, and the ongoing decision by these young adults to remain active in their church. The parents provided a solid spiritual foundation because of their steadfast leadership. Respondents all have friends outside of the church, but their genuine friendships share the same faith, values,



and good conduct. These young adults also feel like their parents and the church are on the same page, partners working together to help create a safe environment for them to grow spiritually. When these young people went to college, they searched and found a community of faith like the one they had back home. Although they faced the same temptations that everyone else faced at college, they felt strong enough not to yield to temptation, attributing their prayer life, community of friends, and relationship with their parents as key factors to their spiritual success. Overall, the young adults in this category referenced blessings in their lives far more frequently than those who have disconnected from the Church. Without exception, they attribute their unwavering faith to their praying family and church community's support. No one should not be surprised; according to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center that analyzed survey data from the United States and more than two dozen other countries, people who are actively engaged in religious congregations tend to be happier than either religiously unaffiliated adults or inactive members of religious groups.<sup>2</sup>

When ministry leaders who participated in the HSR were asked about their observations regarding young adults who stay connected or become disconnected from the Church, the factors that either attract or repel them became quite evident as all the data from their responses were compiled and analyzed.

Interestingly, pastors of churches with a low retention rate of young adults state the same factors as pastors of churches with a high retention rate of young adults. Both ends of the spectrum mentioned authenticity and relevance. Some ministry leaders feel that young adults drop out of church because they find it inconsequential or fake. These leaders hear that exiting

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<sup>2</sup> Conrad Hackett, "Religion's Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement, and Health Around the World," Pew Research Center, January 31, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/01/31/religions-relationship-to-happiness-civic-engagement-and-health-around-the-world/>.

young adults feel the Church is presenting an unrealistic and narrow view of life and not addressing real-world concerns.

However, other ministry leaders feel that young adults eagerly remain in the church because they find it genuine and applicable to their life situations. In their church, these leaders deliberately create space where young adults can be their true selves, ask honest questions, and explore their doubts and uncertainties. Their young adults are responding positively. These leaders report that the church speaks to their real-world concerns and issues and offers a compelling vision for living out their faith. Although most of the ministry leaders surveyed state that they do not know the practices in the homes of these young adults, it is interesting to see a correlation between how well their church lives out the Acts 2:42-47 model of ecclesiastical discipleship and how well their young adult retention rate is.

Other factors shared by both categories of pastors – those with a high attrition rate and those with a high retention rate – are the relationships and community. Ministry leaders with a high exodus count among young adults note that their young adults drop out of church because they do not feel connected to the community or have meaningful relationships with the other members. They report that some young adults feel the church is not a safe place to share their struggles and doubts or that they do not fit in with the existing group. However, ministry leaders with a low exodus count among young adults note that their young adults remain in the church because they value the sense of community and relationships that they have built with other members. These leaders report that their young adults find the church to be a supportive and caring intergenerational network of people who share their values and beliefs and provide encouragement and accountability. The responses of these ministers demonstrate that their churches are better obeying Jesus's command in Matt 28:19.

The participants experiencing a significant dropout rate complain that their young adults struggle to make time for church activities and commitments. Their balance of work, school, social activities, and other responsibilities causes their young adults to disconnect. They also point out that these concerns are competing priorities; the young adults are not prioritizing the Church over the rest of life. On the other hand, the participants experiencing a low dropout rate claim that their young adults remain in the church because they are committed to their own spiritual growth and development. Young adults find their local church to be a place to learn more about their faith, deepen their relationships with God, and cultivate spiritual practices such as prayer and Bible study.

Another factor that pastors with little to no young adult participation point out is disillusionment. Their young people have had negative experiences at home or church. Those occasions of judgment, hypocrisy, or abuse from parents, ministry leaders, or other members cause them to feel like Christians are not living up to their standards, ideals, and values. On the other hand, ministry leaders with high young adult participation point out all the opportunities they provide to serve and be part of the church's mission. They have observed that young adults strongly desire to positively impact the world; they do not want to be spectators out of the action. They find fulfillment and purpose in using their gifts and talents to serve others.

The pastors interviewed who are frustrated by a lack of interest from young adults in their churches admit that some of those dropouts may have had intellectual and theological questions that have gone unanswered by the Church. Interestingly, few of these pastors showed any regret or assumed any responsibility for not addressing those questions. Perhaps they assumed parents should have handled these faith matters in the home. Further observation reveals that some of the

pastors interviewed were too busy administrating the church; they did not have time to field the questions of their younger members.

However, pastors who boast about the interest of young adults in their churches state that they are excited about their churches' mentoring and leadership opportunities. Older adults serve as role models and guides. They lovingly help young people navigate the challenges of adulthood. The church has also carved out opportunities for young adults to lead and serve in various capacities within and outside the church. They find the local church a safe space to develop their leadership skills.

As all the data from the ministry leaders were compiled and analyzed, the aspects of the Church that either attract or repel young adults were very apparent. There are obvious reasons young adults stay connected or disconnect from the Church when they begin making decisions independently.

One of the themes that emerged from the interviews is the indispensable role Christian fathers play in their children's spiritual development as they mature. There is an apparent correlation between a healthy paternal relationship and faith retention. A high percentage of those HSR participants who remained in the church expressed that they had a healthy relationship with their fathers. Conversely, many respondents who are disaffiliated from the church admitted to an unhealthy relationship with their fathers. A dad who was absent, too busy, indifferent, stern, harsh, abusive, or left his children's spiritual formation to their mother's responsibility tended to negatively affect his children's views of God and the Church.

In the quantitative analysis of this portion of the study, according to the responses of pastors who lead predominantly Black churches, their attrition rate is well above sixty percent,

consistent with the high fatherless rate in the Black community.<sup>3</sup> According to the responses of pastors interviewed who lead mainly Latino churches, their attrition rate is less than their Black counterparts. However, it is still well above forty percent, consistent with the fatherless statistics cited in the literature review. Likewise, according to the responses of pastors who lead mostly White churches, their attrition rate is less than those of Black and Latino churches but still well above twenty-four percent of fatherless children. According to the responses of pastors interviewed who lead churches that are predominately Asian, their attrition rate is well above sixteen percent. However, it is still far less than any other significant racial distinction. The Asian population suffers less fatherlessness than the other people groups in the comparison study. Although other factors like family, church, and cultural dynamics contribute to the average sixty-six percent attrition rate across all races and denominations, fathers play a key role in their children's spiritual formation, according to the numbers. Two-parent homes in this HSR study fared better than single-parent homes regarding the faith retention of the children. Anecdotally, most of the ministry leaders interviewed have observed that kids are much more inclined to stay in Church whose fathers are actively present in their homes and visibly involved in their church. They serve as positive role models.

Several ministry leaders from various states in the U.S. suggested that up to ninety-five percent of their committed young adults come from homes where both their mom and their dad are serving the Lord and serving in the local church. In fact, one young adult pastor from a church in Arkansas pointed out that the primary distinguishing characteristic between young adults who stay in a church and those who drift out is how engaged their parents are in their faith

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<sup>3</sup> According to the *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 68, no. 13 (November 27, 2019), the U.S. fatherlessness epidemic has particularly ravaged the Black community. Nearly 70% of all Black babies in America today are born to unmarried mothers, and 64% of all Black children grow up in a single-parent home.

life. Thus, another youth pastor from a church in Pennsylvania commented that it can be frustrating to his colleagues because they cannot control what happens in the home. It is difficult to compensate for any spiritual vacuums when those kids are dropped off at the church.

The literature review explained the concept of *sobremesa* – the practice of extended conversations “over the table” at mealtimes when values can be shared. The interviews with parents of young adults who remained in the church and interviews of those young adults themselves revealed that families had rules that governed the dinner-time conversations. First and foremost, devices were never allowed at the table, according to most of the interviews. In fact, more than one family required devices to be placed elsewhere (in a basket) during the meal and after-meal conversation only to be retrieved when children were dismissed from the table. Furthermore, children were never allowed to leave the table until their parents dismissed them. Television viewing was also strictly prohibited during the meal. According to some young adults interviewed, the dining room table was considered almost a sacred space. Their families protected that interaction time, and fond memories include the many meaningful conversations there.

Something else emerged as this HSR study unfolded; many young adults serving passionately in the church today were not reared by Christian parents or taken to church during their formative years. They do not fit the Deut 6:6-9 and Matt 28:19 “formulas” for spiritual formation and disciple-making. In one group interview that consisted of all young adults who were not reared in a Christian home, they now have a solid foundation for their faith and show no signs of their Christ followership being threatened by the next storm in life. Their experience could inform other ministry leaders today.

These young adults typically found themselves in a crisis and desperately needed a reset. The alternatives they had tried before did not suffice. Somehow, they found a Christ-centered church. They claim that the pastors of their church became the spiritual father figures they never had, so those leaders filled an emotional void. One young adult in Virginia said, “Google brought me, but the people kept me.” To her, church members felt like the family she never had. The intergenerational aspect of the church was needed. Another young adult from Minnesota likened his experience to an upward spiral. As he drew closer to Jesus, He gave him more love for the Church. As he got more involved in the Church, he drew closer to Jesus. Another young adult from Texas, who was a bit older, admitted that the Church was the most stable factor in his life during his tumultuous transition from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, while most churches were boring and answering questions no one was asking during his search, once he found a vibrant, Spirit-filled church, his experience moved from static to dynamic. He also realized there was more to church than just attending; he saw himself as an indispensable part of the body, which is significant considering 1 Cor 12:12-31. He felt needed; he understood that if he neglected to serve according to his gifts, then the Body of Christ would not be as healthy as it could be.

Another young adult interviewed from Puerto Rico said that her friends from high school, at work, and other social gatherings are all superficial and self-serving. On the other hand, all her relationships at church are genuine and altruistic. The common denominator is the connection between the young adult community and the older generations. The genuine encounters with God at different church-sponsored events significantly impacted her spiritual formation. Those experiences are woven together, the next one building on the last one. Another one from Florida claimed that she had tasted and seen that God is good. She is grateful that her church is a mission

to the up-and-coming generation. This respondent explained that the older generation learned the “language” of the young generation in her church. Other churches of which she had been a part in the past expected the youth to use old terminology that is not used elsewhere in society.

Those exceptions to the rule led to the considerations in this study about God’s grace and people’s free will. Youth and young adults eventually found God despite their parents who did not follow Christ, focus on spiritual formation, or attend church. On the other hand, the opposite scenario was true; some children eventually fell away from God despite having godly parents who focused on spiritual formation and attended a church that focused on discipleship. After several more interviews, some scriptures help frame this factor of God’s grace and people’s free will.

Rom 8:29-30 says, “For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like his Son... And having chosen them, God called them to come to Him. And having called them, God gave them right standing with Himself. And having given them right standing, God gave them His glory.” Despite the neglect and failures of parenting and ministry leadership, some young adults interviewed demonstrated that some people will find God and follow Him because His hand is on them. He has been directing their path. They feel Jesus called them to follow Him as He did to a wide diversity of men and women in the Gospels – from tax collectors to zealots and from wives of wealthy officials to former demoniacs (Luke 8:1-3). Furthermore, Eph 1:5-11 says, “God decided in advance to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ... We praise God for the glorious grace He has poured out on us... He chose us in advance, and He makes everything work out according to His plan.” This divine choice was Paul’s testimony. Like Jesus did when Paul was on the road to Damascus, some of



the young adults interviewed claimed that Jesus chose them to follow Him regardless of their upbringing.

Those verses are about God's grace that transcends human activity. However, at the other end of the spectrum is the free will God has ultimately afforded to humanity. After all, Adam and Eve chose wrongly despite having the perfect parent. Numerous passages suggest that human beings have the freedom to make choices and decisions that are not predetermined or controlled by the sovereignty of God. Several Bible verses were mentioned when the interviews with young adults and their parents were conducted. For instance, Josh 24:15 says, "Choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." Deut 30:19 also says, "Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!" Rom 10:9 says, "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, then you will be saved." Rev 22:17 also says, "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' Let anyone who hears this say, 'Come.' Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life." All these verses imply that following Jesus is a choice that individuals must make for themselves, and the young adults interviewed all had to make that choice. Because of some of the exceptions that the HSR revealed, no formula guarantees success; the biblical principles of childrearing and discipleship just increase the odds that a child will continue serving Jesus into adulthood. Young people ultimately must choose whether they will continue the faith instilled by their parents and ministry leaders.

Another interesting theme that emerged from all the interviews with young adults, their parents, and their ministry leaders is that young adults actively serving in the church (not just passively attending) increase their likelihood of remaining in the church and their faith. One church in Montana has an axiom: “Gear toward the young, lean into the wisdom of the wise.” Their pastor claims they even design their morning worship services like youth conventions. Their young people have roles in the church so that when they graduate high school, they feel necessary for and included in the mission of the church. Because “involved people are invested people,” then involved young people are invested young people. Interestingly, when they are invested, they are far less likely to drift away. On the other hand, one Oklahoma pastor said churches with two separate identities – a youth church and an adult church – tend to see young people drop out because they fail to transition from one group to the next when they age out.

One pastor from upstate New York claimed the youth ministries department of a local church should not be considered just an arm of the Body of Christ; it is part of the central core of the local church. He commented that older people tend to give more than younger ones, so sometimes, they may possess a sense of entitlement. Their older congregation members want to dominate the culture. If leaders succumb to that pressure, then their reach into the next generation is over. Ministry leaders should make decisions based on whom they are trying to reach rather than on whom they are trying to keep. Another ministry leader interviewed in Georgia said their church’s slogan is “Honor yesterday but inspire tomorrow.”<sup>4</sup> They are attempting to appeal to both ends of the age spectrum. Since eighty-six percent of all Christians accept Christ before they turn thirty,<sup>5</sup> the culture war in the church is fought in that generation.

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<sup>4</sup> Jentezen Franklin, Mentoring Moments Round Table Discussion, (lecture, Free Chapel, Gainesville, GA, May 7-8, 2023).

This leader said that even though the older people cannot understand that culture, ministry leaders should be firm and lead through it. Otherwise, they will wake up one day and realize they conduct far more funerals than weddings and baby dedications. Their church is shrinking because they have failed to replenish it with an emerging generation. Another pastor in Maryland suggested local churches consider having a young team performing stage duties like worship, emceeing, and preaching. He said the young people cannot be seen as the church of tomorrow; they must be visibly seen as part of the church of today. He coined the phrase, "Youth ministry is not youth ministry unless youth are in the ministry." Anything less is merely glorified babysitting. This pastor also pointed out that when Paul recognized he was getting older and needed to empower the next generation to lead, he told his young apprentice, Timothy, "Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity. Until I get there, focus on reading the Scriptures to the church, encouraging the believers, and teaching them" (1 Tim 4:12-13). Those in the church cannot think less of young leaders just because of their age. Paul instructed young leaders to teach the Scriptures to the rest of the Church.

Another pastor in Florida said the church is not a place for young people to spectate and wait their turn. These young adults may not have the capacity to make a significant financial contribution and carry the budget of the church. However, they do have a ministry contribution that can carry the ministry of the church. The largest tech companies in the world are MAAMA (Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet (formerly Google), Meta (formerly Facebook), and Apple). Just like they strive to maintain their relevance by investing in their future by budgeting significantly

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<sup>5</sup> "Evangelical Beliefs and Practices," Pew Research Center, June 22, 2011, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/06/22/global-survey-beliefs/>

for ROI,<sup>6</sup> the most vital churches in the U.S. are maintaining their relevance by investing in their future by budgeting significantly for *EROI* (*eternal* return on investment) and focusing on leadership development for the emerging generation of leaders.<sup>7</sup> Young people follow those young leaders, which keeps their churches vibrant and relevant.

The HSR study also discovered that future-oriented churches are intentional about everything future, including branding, communications, graphics, marketing, music, leadership development, mentoring, and programs. One ministry leader from Louisiana observed that since missionaries must learn the language of those they are attempting to reach, then ministry leaders should learn the “language” of youth and young adults to reach, teach, and keep them. She insists that the emerging generation must join their mission field. Every successful business has a target market. The leaders of those businesses assess their particular needs and direct their resources accordingly to meet those specific needs. They are focused: their target market determines their vision, mission, and strategy. In the same way, every thriving church has a target market. She said it cannot be a “one-size-fits-all approach.” Future-oriented churches assess the particular needs of young adults, and then they direct their resources accordingly to meet those specific needs. They focus on the next generation, and this target market determines the church’s vision, mission, and strategy. She said their church’s systems should be evaluated on how best they retain young adults.

One question arose during the Human Subject Research: What about those in the same family when some kids stay in the church and some drift away? They are reared by the same

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<sup>6</sup> Leonard Sweet, “Culture, Context, & Mission,” (lecture, Southeastern University, Lakeland, FL, February 16, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Chris Hodges and Lee Domingue, GrowLeader Round Table Discussion, (lecture, Birmingham, AL, May 2-3, 2023).

parents and in the same church. The parents and church also did everything right because some of their children stayed even though others wandered. All the inputs are the same, but the outputs are different. Several parents referenced the power of influence on impressionable children in their formidable stages. Parents pointed out that they felt it depended on their children's peers. All other factors considered on level ground, if their children found friends at church, then they tended to stay there, but if their children found friends outside the church, then they tended to drift out. Like sheep, they blindly followed their peer group (flock). This parental observation confirms Prov 12:20. It says, "Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble." Just as the Christian community is indispensable for keeping a student's passion for the Lord fervent (Heb 10:25), the non-Christian community works just as powerfully in the opposite direction. The HSR study exposed one of the reasons for the high drop-off rate: Christian kids surround themselves with friends who do not share the values and perspectives of their Christian parents and church. A couple of parents interviewed in Virginia who are living with regret warn others to guard the time their children spend with peers. These concerned parents agree with Chrysostom: Parents might have to prevent their children from associating with those who believe differently and have different values and perspectives.<sup>8</sup>

Another couple interviewed in Vermont pointed out how both parents in a family should be on the same page regarding their childrearing strategies. During the interview, they pointed out that Paul said in 2 Cor 6:14-15, "Don't team up with those who are unbelievers... How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever?" Although this verse explicitly mentions a believer not being coupled with an unbeliever, the couple claimed the principle is similar; moms and dads who are not spiritually compatible tend to have more issues regarding discipline, expectations,

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<sup>8</sup> Saprykina, "St. John Chrysostom."

and standards for their children. The lack of unity in these areas affects their children negatively. This couple observed that children whose hearts are filled with foolishness (Prov 22:15) tend to side with the more lenient parent who expects lower moral standards. As these children got older and could make decisions for themselves, the unbelieving parent tended to have more influence than the believing parent. Furthermore, according to this couple's experience, the Bible did not have a prominent place in their homes. It was talked about from time to time by the committed parent, but the children never saw it opened and studied by either of the parents. Now that their young adults are wayward, this couple is living in regret that they were not strict enough disciplinarians during the formative years of their children's lives.

According to some ministry leaders and drifting youth interviewed, it also seems that more and more parents today tend to concern themselves with the physical provision and protection for their children while relegating their spiritual formation responsibilities to the Church. It was observed that the parents themselves are not familiar with biblical concepts, so they hope that ministry leaders trained in such matters can help their kids with spiritual development. However, the students are subject to public school eight hours a day. According to a survey published by Common Sense Media, students are online with social media for over 5.5 hours daily.<sup>9</sup> Church participation has been reduced to an hour and a half a week, and more and more students only attend a church service twice a month.<sup>10</sup> These ministry leaders asked rhetorically how the Church can compete with the world regarding spiritual formation when students are subject to public education and secular media over four hundred hours a month and

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<sup>9</sup> Melinda Wenner Moyer, "Kids as Young as 8 Are Using Social Media More Than Ever, Study Finds," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/well/family/child-social-media-use.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Skylar Spradlin, "Being the Church: Church Attendance Isn't the Goal," Lifeway Research, April 10, 2023, [https://research.lifeway.com/2023/04/10/being-the-church-church-attendance-isnt-the-goal/#:~:text=At%20what%20point%20does%20someone,a%20regular%20churchgoer%20\(24%25\)](https://research.lifeway.com/2023/04/10/being-the-church-church-attendance-isnt-the-goal/#:~:text=At%20what%20point%20does%20someone,a%20regular%20churchgoer%20(24%25).).

are only subject to ministry leaders in a local church for as little as three hours a month. That ratio causes the effectiveness of influence to be impossible. With only forty-five percent of those who regularly attend church reading their Bible more than once a week, according to a recent Lifeway study, biblical illiteracy is at an all-time high in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> Christian families noted in the HSR study that their church is falling further and further behind on spiritual formation and disciple-making for the next generation. According to the ministry leaders interviewed in this study, what happens in the home regarding discipleship determines the stickiness of youth in the Church and their faith. These pastors said the Church partners in that endeavor but only supplements home practices and disciplines.

Another one of the fascinating ideas that came out of the interviews is the crucial role that grandparents play in the spiritual formation of young people. One aging couple in Toronto who spends much of their time in the U.S. reported that even in the transient society that characterizes Americans today, and even though grandchildren are often brought up a considerable distance from their grandparents, families still have state-of-the-art tools like FaceTime, Zoom, and WhatsApp to keep in touch with each other frequently. This couple speaks to their out-of-country grandkids a few times each week because they believe that influence can be achieved on a screen just as effectively as in person.

Another concept apparent from the interviews is that parents continue to parent their kids beyond their eighteenth birthday. The same grandparent couple mentioned above observed that their friends who have successfully reared young adults to continue in their faith and church participation claim that eighteen years of age is somehow the finish line for parenting is simply

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<sup>11</sup> Ed Stetzer, "The Epidemic of Bible Illiteracy in our Churches," *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2017/bible-engagement/epidemic-of-bible-illiteracy-in-our-churches.html>.

delusional. They said that although parenting children in their twenties is no longer about teaching them life skills, it still involves other factors, and the stakes are much higher.

Parents interviewed who have successfully rescued their young adult venturing down a wrong path recalled taking swift action that was unpopular at the time among their friends; their parenting strategies were called into question. Nevertheless, they were relentless because their child's soul was at stake. More than one parent interviewed remembered having to confiscate cell phones if their young adults were accessing inappropriate content. They had to monitor texts if people who possessed contradicting ideas were undermining the home standards. They also had to require break-ups if romantic relationships infringed on their child's spiritual development. On two occasions in Iowa, parents remembered withdrawing their children from one educational institution and enrolling them in another so that their child could avoid old peer groups and form new peer groups. They advise that parents must have a "whatever-it-takes approach" in the spiritual fight for the souls of their children. The devil can be ferocious, but so can parents with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The general rule that emerged from the interviews with successful parents is that if young adults still live at home dependent on their parent(s) provisions like a bedroom, food, and health insurance, then they are still dependent, regardless of their IRS status. As a dependent, they are not only required to submit to the rules of the household and continue honoring their parents, but they are also subject to the enforcement of those rules, whatever it takes. Their dependency in some areas of life is evidence that they are not ready for independence in other areas of life.

Parents interviewed also spoke about aligning their adolescents' physical independence with emotional maturity. As stated earlier in this study, psychologists suggest that many youth and young adults do not reach full emotional maturity until about twenty-five. However, some of



the parents interviewed pointed out that some of their undiscerning friends allow their children to have considerable independence at eighteen, as evidenced by sending them out of state to attend college or to go on long dates by themselves with their romantic significant other. During that six-year gap between eighteen and twenty-five, many of their impulsive decisions may have lasting negative implications for the rest of their lives. However, the parents in this HSR study did not succumb to such cultural pressure. They insist that physical independence should be delayed since emotional maturity is delayed.

Some parents interviewed in Washington insisted that their children attend community college for the first two years while still living at home to grow up a little more before living in a college dormitory. They reported that most eighteen-year-olds do not yet know what career path to pursue, so their children can take general education courses that will transfer to a four-year college at a fraction of the cost. If their children change their majors, then the courses that will not transfer will not be a wasted expense. Other parents in Arizona spoke about a gap year when their high school graduate interned at their church or a local ministry while still living at home. Other parents spoke about enforcing a delay in romantic relationships until they mature. They suggested that if a child is not ready to explore marriage with another person, then they are not ready to pair off and date. The emotional attachment is a waste of time due to the high likelihood of a break-up and a distraction from the late stages of spiritual formation. Again, these parents observe that just because a child turns eighteen does not mean they have to rush to experience the adult responsibilities they will have to assume for the larger balance of their lives. They are only a kid once; these parents encourage them to take their time and grow through the various stages of maturity. One parent said maturity is a crockpot, not a microwave, and life experiences will certainly “taste” better if practiced that way. Some critics may accuse these involved parents

of “enabling” their young adult’s dependence by continuing their proactive parenting. However, even before adolescence, these parents begin letting out the tether line more each year. This commonly accepted approach is just continuing that practice longer.

Those young adults interviewed who joined the church after they emerged from adolescence into adulthood, those who were not reared in a Christian home with parents who shaped their spiritual formation, also had something of tremendous value to offer ministry leaders today. When they came to faith and joined a church as youth or young adults, there were ministry leaders and older volunteers who filled the void created by the neglect of their parents. There is certainly biblical precedence for this crucial role. In 1 Cor 4:15-16, Paul said, “For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. *For I became your father in Christ Jesus* when I preached the Good News to you. I urge you to *imitate me*” (emphases added). These young adults who are not yet parents themselves wisely suggested that ministry leaders partner with parents in discipling young people to stay faithful to Jesus and remain in the church. That parent/church combination is God’s best. However, ministry leaders should step in as Paul modeled for those young people who do not have parents concerned about their spiritual formation. After all, he added, “I urge you to imitate me.” Amid the crisis of Millennial and Gen Z attrition that the American Church is suffering, these young adults claim there is a great opportunity for ministry leaders to spiritually adopt young adults and disciple them to become all God intends them to become.

One of the themes discovered in this study is that denominations and their respective local churches should do a better job at disciple-making, especially for their young adult population. One leader in Missouri noted that knowing to make disciples of Jesus and knowing *how* to make disciples of Jesus are two different things. Several ministry leaders interviewed at a

conference in Alabama are passionate about their strategic disciple-making methods. Called by various names – assimilation process, leadership pipeline, growth track – churches that are successfully making disciples have adopted a process by which people are taken through steps of their spiritual growth journey – learning the value of the church community, where to serve according to their gifts, how to get involved in a small group, and how to practice such classic spiritual disciplines as prayer, reading their Bible, fasting, sharing their faith, and giving generously. Studies have shown that students who have been truly disciplined tend to remain in the church and stay involved in serving in some way.<sup>12</sup> Those interviewed agree with Kinnaman’s goal of a church’s discipleship ministry today: to develop Jesus-followers who are resiliently faithful in the face of cultural coercion and who live a vibrant life in the Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

During the Human Subjects Research, an executive at a high-tech firm living in California expressed concern and disappointment over his twenty-nine-year-old son’s decision not to find a home church when he moved away from home and relocated with his job cross-country to Virginia. It was not how this young adult was reared. Nevertheless, the young man’s father contacted a local pastor where the son lived and asked the pastor to build a relationship with the son. A few months later, when a men’s conference was planned, the father called the son and asked him to register. It would be a spiritually intensified event beyond the usual Sunday morning church service. The son was reluctant and non-committal about registering, but the father was persistent. Finally, the son registered when the pastor extended a personal invitation to him. The father sent the following email to the conference hosts after the event.

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<sup>12</sup> Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 47.

Good evening, Pastor. I want to thank you for everything your church has done in an attempt to reach my son and to help him rediscover his faith. We can definitely see progress! Earlier this year when I asked my son if he was going to sign up for the men's conference at your church, he was not sure. But we thank God that he finally decided to register. Then Saturday evening after the conference he exchanged several text messages with my wife in which he declared his renewed commitment to Jesus and to church participation! More than that, he has also signed up for an online discipleship program that is at a seminary level! Wow, we never thought that this change would be so quick! Thank you, Lord, for bringing our son back to the path that You have established for him (Ps 139:14-18). It's been eleven years of waywardness for my son in his backslidden state, but we are so excited about him seeking the Lord again! He is back! We just wanted to thank you for your part in his journey. Blessings to you!<sup>14</sup>

This spiritual victory exemplifies what can happen to young adults when parents do not give up on their childrearing efforts, ministry leaders pursue this emerging generation, and churches plan spiritually intensified events as an important aspect of their discipleship strategies to complement their Sunday morning worship services. Today, this particular young adult is an active member of the church, serving with his musical talents on the worship team, giving significantly to missions, and enjoying a wide circle of like-minded friends.

Many volumes have been written that expound on the biblical principles of successful childrearing. This HSR study attempted to capture a healthy sample of that writing in a qualitative analysis of ancient and contemporary works and report those findings in the Literature Review. However, the wide range of interviews that provided the qualitative study in this research expanded the scope of insights and provided even greater value.

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<sup>14</sup> Name withheld by request, "Thank you!" Email received by Harold McDonald, June 20, 2023.

*Summary*

The discovery that drives this study is that Christian parents who neglect the commands in Deut 6:6-9 are more likely to see their children suffer the consequences that are described in Judg 2:10-15. Similarly, ministry leaders who disregard Matt 28:19 are more likely to see the youth under their charge experience the negative effects mentioned in Heb 2:1. After all the interviews were conducted, it became more and more apparent that the truths of God's Word are just as relevant today as they have ever been. According to those who participated, parents of young adults in the Church seem to agree. Ministry leaders of young adults also tend to agree. The young adults themselves who have remained in the Church appear to agree. Moreover, those from some faith communities that do not conform to the doctrines of the Catholic, Protestant Mainline, Evangelical, and Pentecostal/Charismatic denominations also agree. They are doing Deut 6 and Matt 28 better, and they are experiencing the success of the principles. It works. Now, while young adults who have drifted from the Church may disagree that the truth of God's Word is relevant, according to their heartfelt conversations during the interviews for this project, they still seem to be suffering the distress that is referenced in Judg 2 for attempting to conduct their lives with a worldly set of values and principles that are opposite to God's best. Godly principles are not up for a vote; they work whether dissenters of the Church agree. The connection between Deut 6:6-9 and Judg 2:10-15 explains the unnecessary misery many young adults are experiencing today. They could find relief if they saturate their lives with the principles of God's Word and live accordingly. Moreover, the connection between Matt 28:19 and Heb 2:1 explains the unnecessary exodus that many churches are experiencing today. They could mitigate the problem if they exercised true discipleship practices.

The gap in the Church's understanding this research discovered is the breakdown in the execution of the Deut 6:6-9 and Matt 28:19 principles by Christian parents and ministry leaders. Furthermore, while they hope for the output that the latter portion of Prov 22:6 promises (when the children are older, they will not leave the path), it appears they are not as thorough in implementing the input God commands in the earlier portion (direct your children onto the right path). The next chapter will conclude by offering best practices for Christian parents and ministry leaders based on this project's biblical and theological foundation, literature review of ancient and contemporary leaders, and Human Subjects Research.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

#### *Introduction*

The discoveries of the Human Subject Research outlined in the previous chapter confirm the biblical foundation and literature review for proper childrearing and discipleship. The uniqueness of this study is the exploration of the collaboration between Christian parents and ministry leaders as they focus on the spiritual development of children. The effective execution of these principles will be successful; those children are more likely to remain in the Church and the faith as they get old enough to account for their own decisions.

The literature review of contemporary works and the Human Subject Research uncovered a deficiency in church and faith retention among young adults as they transition from childhood through adolescence into adulthood. Christian parents and ministry leaders must change course to alleviate this dilemma. This research shows these parents and leaders should revive God's original instructions, rediscover the ancient practices Christian parents have modeled and ministry leaders have taught through the ages, and re-employ the proven principles that a few faith groups are efficaciously practicing today. The saturation of godly themes in the home according to Deut 6:6-9 and Prov 22:6 is the key.

The Bible provides instructions for Christian parents to emphasize the spiritual formation of children in the home and for ministry leaders to focus on the discipleship of children in the local church. If they both do their task effectively, then the Bible promises a greater number of their children will retain their faith. Conversely, if they neglect their tasks, then the Bible warns that a greater number of their children will suffer consequences when they fall away.

Considering the fragmentation of the American Christian family and the missional drift that many churches in the U.S. are experiencing regarding targeted young adult ministries, the following metaphor is insightful. In 2015, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) issued a consent order against Fiat Chrysler (now Stellantis) due to several defects in their vehicles. At first, the company executives denied these concerns. However, after a public outcry, they eventually agreed to recall more than 1.5 million vehicles. This costly measure highlights the importance of quality control in the automotive industry and the negative results of cutting corners.<sup>1</sup>

Fiat Chrysler eventually bounced back after the changes it made. The company addressed the underlying issues and invested in its research and development regarding safety and quality control. It is a much stronger and more relevant company today after acknowledging their need for improvement and taking the necessary steps to get there. The public demand for its products returned. Fiat Chrysler has continued to announce sales increases since 2016, including a six percent increase in Quarter Two of 2023 over the same period the previous year.<sup>2</sup>

The point of this illustration is that if two-thirds of an auto manufacturer's car production had such severe defects that they were rendered useless in the open market, then the company would have to evaluate its systems and change its processes seriously to remain relevant and profitable. In the same way, Christian parents need to acknowledge that many of their children are not carrying their spiritual legacy into the next generation, and ministry leaders and denomination officials need to recognize that two-thirds of their young adults are departing from

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S. Auto Regulator Expands Probe of Fiat Chrysler Vehicles," Reuters, July 10, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-fiat-chrysler-nhtsa-idUSKCN0PK21T20150710>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Miller, "Stellantis Post It's Sales Numbers for the U.S. in Qw 2023!" Mopar Insiders, July 4, 2023, <https://moparinsiders.com/stellantis-post-its-sales-numbers-for-the-u-s-in-q2-2023/>.



their churches. The faith for many people in the emerging generation is defective. Christian parents are failing in their God-given responsibility to invest in their children's spiritual formation, and the Church is failing in its mission to make them disciples. Consequently, the research suggests that the Church is becoming increasingly irrelevant to young adults as they age. Like the executives at Fiat Chrysler, Christian parents and ministry leaders should stop denying reality, humbly acknowledge their need for improvement, courageously take steps to address their underlying issues, and wisely invest in their research and development capabilities in intergenerational ministries. They must be honest about the lack of success in producing fully devoted followers of Christ in the emerging generation. They should also stop blaming outside influences and abdicating their responsibilities. The research also suggests that many ministry leaders and their respective denomination officials should pay more attention to developing ministries specifically focused on young adults. Although the denominations researched invest ample resources in their children and youth ministries, for some reason, those resources stop once their kids graduate from high school. Furthermore, ministry leaders and denomination officials should reconsider how long they focus their efforts on youth ministries. Instead of trying to accomplish their mission of making disciples by the time a child reaches eighteen, which the research discovered, they should consider extending their mission to the time one reaches full emotional and spiritual maturity, which could be up to twenty-five years of age.

The Bible Engagement Project exemplifies one denomination's attempt at discipleship and retention. The Assemblies of God developed this free program that users can download as an app on a smartphone. It is designed for children, youth, and adults. Young adults may find it beneficial during their critical transition years.<sup>3</sup> However, the current, outdated process of

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<sup>3</sup> Bible Engagement Project, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://bibleengagementproject.com/About>.

spiritual formation and making disciples of Jesus in most denominations still needs to be evaluated and changed. If they make those necessary improvements, then the Church will experience the same kind of turnaround that Fiat Chrysler experienced once that company addressed their deficiencies. The sacred mission of the Church is worth that effort.

### *Goals Assessed*

This project aimed to explore the cause(s) and cure(s) for what I have observed anecdotally over a four-decade career as a youth pastor, young adults pastor, and lead pastor in various cities in North America. I began this study by attempting to acquire and review everything published regarding the concerning trend of the young adult attrition rate in the American Church. With six major polling organizations – Pew, Gallup, Barna, Lifeway, Rainer, and Fuller – confirming an approximate sixty-six percent attrition rate from the Church in America among young adults eighteen to twenty-two years of age, this study compiled that empirical data into one work. Then, the research transitioned to a rigorous study of academic books and articles that expound on successful Christian childrearing principles.

I then conducted an analysis on the key Scriptures that reference childrearing. The assumption in the approach to this study was that the Word of God is not only the God-breathed truth that serves as people’s authoritative rule for faith and conduct, but it is also an “owner’s manual” of sorts for people attempting to get the most out of life. It seems God has spared no effort in instructing Christian parents and ministry leaders how to rear and disciple children so that they maintain their faith through the adolescent transition into adulthood. A correlation also

seems to exist between how careful Christian parents and ministry leaders follow those biblical instructions and how successful they retain their children in the Church and the faith.

The biblical foundation and literature review would not be complete without a comprehensive survey of parents, ministry leaders, and young adults at all church participation levels, from passionately involved to adversely dropped out with spectating and indifference in between. Their firsthand experiences and observations needed to be identified and documented. The interview responses proved to be indispensable for the insights discovered in this study.

With the three-part approach to this study – a comprehensive biblical and theological foundation established, an in-depth literature review, and a cross-country Human Subjects Research – and how all three parts interact, the value of this project exceeded expectations. The results provide inspiration and guidance to Christian parents and ministry leaders.

### *Lessons Learned from the Research*

The research in this study began with the perplexing question of why so many young people are leaving the Church once they are old enough to make their own decisions. A secondary question is what Christian parents and ministry leaders can do to mitigate this problem. All the participants interviewed in the study responded with anecdotal observations from their own unique perspectives but did not offer any empirical proof to support their claims. Most of their responses were consistent with the statistics published by the referenced polling organizations regarding today's young adult dropout rate in the American Church.

### *Synthesis of the Research within the Ministry Context*

Christian parents should realize that children do not automatically develop into strong, long-lasting followers of Christ on their own. According to Scripture, spiritual formation requires daily conversations in the home throughout a child's developmental years. It tends to be a long, thankless, and tiresome task. It should be considered an investment of time and effort that does not show many dividends in the short term, but it will certainly pay off in the long run. Parenting does not have to be perfect, but it should be consistent and authentic. When Christian parents understand this weighty spiritual responsibility and carefully lead their children as the Bible prescribes, their children are likelier to remain in the church and the faith.

Ministry leaders should also recognize that a significant asset for the local church is under-tapped. Young adults have so much to offer in the present and the future, but they still need to become fully devoted followers of Jesus by themselves. Spiritual discipleship requires intentionality in the local church throughout a child's developmental years; it is not automatic. Like the parents of young adults, the efforts of ministry leaders are also long, thankless, and tiresome. However, these labors should be considered an investment of time and effort that pays off in the long run, even though the results may seem inconsequential in the short term. Young adults are not looking for heroes; they long for leaders who will mentor them like parent figures (1 Cor 4:15). When ministry leaders grasp this charge and lead parents and children as the Bible prescribes, young people will likely remain in the church and the faith as they grow into adulthood.

### *Considerations for Future Study*

With new convictions derived from the principles outlined in this study, Christian parents can develop creative strategies to make the most of their children's spiritual formation during their developmental years. Furthermore, ministry leaders can take these principles and develop innovative methods to help their young people experience the most in discipleship. Other leaders and churches can adopt and implement the discovered tactics. Admittedly, this study is only foundational. Although I performed an exhaustive review of ancient and contemporary literature and the salient biblical passages about childrearing, another study should build on this one. Regarding the measurement of spiritual formation in the home and discipleship in the local church, an objectively empirical mechanism needs to be developed instead of the subjectively anecdotal one used as the basis for this project. I will be anticipating a next-generation study.

### *Limitations to the Project*

When Brandon Shields, Derik Idol, and Steve Pulis presented their dissertations to their three respective institutions, they pointed out that the reports from other research organizations about the young adult dropout rate from the Church may be flawed and inflated. They claim those researchers may have based their surveys on church attendance instead of true discipleship. Students who attended a youth group only a few times during high school may have been considered along with the more faithful students in those studies. If those students never realized their faith commitment, then the numbers in those findings could be skewed. Those people most likely are not participating in a local church today. On the other hand, for those students who were taught the disciplines of following Christ at home, and for those students who benefitted

from a life-giving church that reinforced those practices, the “stickiness” is much higher.<sup>4</sup> I based this study on the statistics published by reputable organizations, acknowledging the difference between church attendance and discipleship.

After establishing a biblical foundation, reviewing all the literature, conducting the interviews, and accumulating four decades of ministry experience, I believe there is still a problem with attrition in the Church, regardless of denomination, as the emerging generation replaces the existing generation. Thus, this conviction was the impetus for this study, regardless of the perceived imperfections of the other studies. If the findings of Shields, Idol, and Pulis are accurate, then the dropout rate may not be as high as the six referenced polling agencies suggest, but the problem is still something about which all American Christians should be concerned.

Furthermore, an objective tool to assess and measure discipleship could not be found during this research. There are many facets to becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus and growing to become more like Him. It is also subjective from one person to the next. More researchers need to conduct further study that better defines spiritual formation and discipleship. Additionally, they should conduct further study to better analyze the retention factor for those who benefitted from parental spiritual formation and ecclesiastical discipleship. They need to determine the “stickiness” of those who were taught how to imitate the Teacher’s life, inculcate His values, and reproduce His teachings. They should also discover how the heartfelt relationship with Jesus affects a commitment to following Him. Such studies would benefit ministry leaders as they develop curricula and create programs for influencing youth.

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<sup>4</sup> James Brandon Shields, “An Assessment of Dropout Rates of Former Youth Ministry Participants in Conservative Southern Baptist Megachurches” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008) 8-10; Derik Wade Idol, “An Assessment of Dropout Rates of Former Youth Ministry Participants in Self-Identified Evangelical Churches with 500-2000 in Weekly Attendance” (D.Ed. diss., Liberty University, 2022), 4-5; Pulis, “Spiritual Vitality,” 9-12.

Admittedly, this research is intended to sound an alarm. It is a fact; the young adult attrition rate is too high, and the future viability of the Church in America is threatened. However, how do Christian parents and ministry leaders do the spiritual formation that I have urged? What are the essential elements of proper childrearing and children's discipleship? No doubt, other researchers will add significant value to the Church by providing such resources.

### *Concluding Remarks*

I conducted a three-part approach to study young adults and their attitudes toward the Church and faith, which include an expansive biblical and theological foundation, an in-depth literature review, and a nationwide Human Subjects Research project. As a result, this research provides a practical explanation of the causes of, and cures for, the current attrition rate in the American Church among the emerging generation.

As this dissertation concludes, there is certainly no reason to be discouraged by the current published statistics about the spiritual indifference that describes this generation of Millennials and Gen Zers. On the contrary, there is motivation to seize an opportunity to change the trajectory. *Christian Headlines* columnists John Stonestreet and Kasey Leander observe,

As rates of disbelief in God and rejection of Christian doctrine rise, young people are grappling seriously with a search for meaning, truth, and belonging. This is a critical moment to reach what is the loneliest, most agnostic and most distraught generation on record... The opportunity in front of the Church right now is to relate to teens, especially in the midst of their loneliness, while also challenging the wrong ideas about faith, truth, and life that they have embraced.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Stonestreet and Kasey Leander, "Is a 'Surge of Faith' Happening with Younger Americans," *Christian Headlines*, May 1, 2023, [https://www.christianheadlines.com/columnists/breakpoint/is-a-surge-of-faith-happening-with-younger-americans.html?aps=227528c37b907b4391cdef5f7f59a020af489a036d3c07a4ce4767e7de2a788a&utm\\_content=729744\\_20230502\\_80&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=lst\\_cw\\_news\\_commentary\\_update&utm\\_source=newslatter&bt\\_e=6EvtuyBrIdzeibeJkO%2BYlm6xmmcYxb5YadINRXqU3rtZY0Lk5YIbCPsdPBRregTB&bt\\_ts=1683025543445](https://www.christianheadlines.com/columnists/breakpoint/is-a-surge-of-faith-happening-with-younger-americans.html?aps=227528c37b907b4391cdef5f7f59a020af489a036d3c07a4ce4767e7de2a788a&utm_content=729744_20230502_80&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=lst_cw_news_commentary_update&utm_source=newslatter&bt_e=6EvtuyBrIdzeibeJkO%2BYlm6xmmcYxb5YadINRXqU3rtZY0Lk5YIbCPsdPBRregTB&bt_ts=1683025543445).

Young adults are looking for parents and mentors to direct them and allow them a chance to discover their divine design. The following best practices synthesize all the insights that I gained from this research. They offer a comprehensive strategy for Christian parents and ministry leaders to improve the retention rate of young adults in the Church and the faith.



## Best Practices Recommended to Christian Parents

1. Assume the primary responsibility of the spiritual formation of your children. You are the main pastors for their souls. Shepherd your children's hearts. Partner with the Church in your sacred responsibility, but do not relegate that holy task to ministry leaders at your local church. They can only supplement your role but not substitute for it. Continuity of faith occurs when the family is the primary vehicle for religious transmission.
2. Guard your own heart and remain faithful to your spouse, your childrearing partner. Make sure your words match your actions. Maintain congruence. Children have a front-row seat to observe their parents' faith. They are not looking for perfection, but they are looking for authenticity. They need to see consistency in their parents. Hypocrisy is the primary cause of young adult disillusionment with faith. Values are caught, not just taught.
3. Direct your children's hearts on the right path. Initiate and set them straight from the very beginning. Make sure they "taste and see that the Lord is good." Instill godly concepts in their souls while they are impressionable. Make sure godly perspectives, values, and behavior become second nature to them. Make faith an organic part of the family's lifestyle.
4. Focus on intrinsic motivation, not just extrinsic. Child spiritual formation is all about heart transformation, not behavior modification. Reinforcement by physical discipline is important but ensure that a spark of divine intimacy ignites in your children's hearts. Then fan it into flame daily so your children possess their own blazing experience. Young children may borrow from their parents' experience, but eventually, they must have a real Christ encounter themselves. However, if you are not on fire for God, then they will be less likely themselves. Distinguish the difference between religion and relationship.
5. Do not stop too short on your childrearing. If your children are still dependent on your provision, then they are also still dependent on your protection. Although there is a gradual release as children mature, maturity must be complete emotionally as well as physically. Parents must recognize delayed maturity and extended adolescence.
6. Saturate your home with godly concepts. Prayer with your children should begin their day, and then it should also end their day as they tuck into bed. Prayer should also occur at other times in the day as challenges come up and as meals are served. A mealtime grace should not be perfunctory but regarded as an opportunity to connect their heart to God once again genuinely. Bible story reading should occur at least once a day. Your children should observe you reading your own Bible as an example to follow. Teach them Bible memorization and do it along with them. Use errand running in the car as an opportunity to discuss biblical principles. Decorate your home with godly themes. Make your home a small "church." Consider healthy spiritual habits in your family to be like "little liturgies." Then, when services and other events occur at your local church, make sure your family is there participating, too. Jesus must be central in all your family emphases, not just relegated to Sundays. You are a church that tends a family; you are not just a family that attends church.

7. Have regular conversations with your pastor and other ministry leaders about your expectations for their discipleship methods for your children. Ensure their programs are relevant and inspire your children to remain excited about church.
8. As your children grow and encounter others, they may come home with questions about their faith. Do not avoid these questions. Instead, use them to reinforce why your family believes what they believe. Prepare yourself to answer their questions. Ensure they get answers from you instead of schoolteachers, media screens, and peers.
9. As teenagers explore their own independence, which is a natural process (critical distancing), they may express ways of living out their faith that is different from yours. Make sure you base your differences on principles, not styles. Choose your battles wisely. Build bridges to their heart, not barriers to their mind.
10. Keep your priorities in check. There is always more work to do and money to be earned, but it is an unquenchable thirst. Parenting is a sacrificial endeavor; there is no room for self-centeredness in a godly family. Children are much more satisfied with their parents' time than children's toys (especially parents' toys – bigger houses, newer cars, and nicer clothes). Establish boundaries and guard them vigilantly. Your children's formative years are very brief compared to the rest of your life when you can pursue tangible things. Materialism is actually a by-product of the curse of American prosperity.
11. Parents are the primary educators for their children, not school and Church. Those institutions can supplement, but they cannot substitute. This education is all-encompassing; it is mental, physical, social, and spiritual. When kids spend considerable time away at school, they pick up much more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic. Due to frequent exposure, they also pick up ideas contrary to their parents' values and perspectives. Worldviews also get shaped. In light of eternity, it is not worth it. Wisdom is better than knowledge. School can only offer knowledge, but parents offer wisdom. It is better to have both, but if one must choose, it is better to have less knowledge and more wisdom. Schools can offer information, but only parents can teach virtue.
12. After graduation from high school, keep your children at home a little longer. Do not worry; you will not enable them to be dependent forever. This additional time will allow you to continue the final phases of their faith formation. Their minds are still vulnerable. Consider a gap year, an associate degree from a community college that will transfer, or an internship at a church or other religious nonprofit organization. Do not rush your children to adulthood; let it unfold naturally on the timeline God has designed uniquely for them.
13. Do not be afraid of controlled, measured physical discipline. Children must experience the *immediate* connection between a mild, temporary sting and a bad attitude or immoral decision. A paddle, wooden spoon, or switch should be readily available on each floor of the home and in each car for swift application when necessary. When disciplining your children, do not just focus on the behavior, but focus on the heart; for behavior is merely a by-product of the heart. Parents should never apply discipline when angry and never raise their voices or use their hands. Children should always associate the instrument of discipline with an

inanimate object, not a limb extension of their parent. Failure to discipline children will bring the discipline of the Lord.

14. Parents must maintain the charge, command, and order in their home. Children need to know who is in charge, and parents need to ensure that their children do not grow up with a sense of entitlement. Assigning household responsibilities is part of being a contributing member of a family. Establish an understanding at home of what it means to become a positive asset to a community.
15. Consider yourself more than just a tangible benefactor when your children have children. You have a strategic role in the spiritual formation of your grandchildren. Your legacy is the godly values and perspectives that you will pass down to them.
16. Instill in your children a proper fear of the Lord. They should not be terrified of the power of God, but they certainly should have awe, reverence, and respect for Him. They should be made aware of the potential consequences of waywardness and rebellion.
17. Determine to want children. This attitude begins before they are even conceived. Then it continues throughout their developmental years. Regard them as a gift, not a liability. Love childrearing as much as child-making. Ask God how many children He thinks you should have, not the faithless opinions of the world. Then, once you have them, allow them to accompany you on errands, at work, and at the table. Do not be so quick to usher them off to babysitters, nannies, and another table away from the adult conversation. If you invite them to be with you during their dependence, then when the time comes, they will be more inclined to invite you to be with them during your dependence (old age). View them as arrows that you aim and shoot to hit their target in their generation.
18. Do not buy into the lie that quality time is better than quantity of time. For childrearing to have the most promising results, both are required. Values transfer requires a crockpot mentality, not a microwave.
19. Think of your home as a self-contained nest. Whoever coined the term “It takes a village to rear a child” has misled many parents to bring in other voices to help them rear their children. Instilling values and perspectives is not a shared responsibility; no one else will be held accountable for how your children turn out as adults. Do not abandon your children while pursuing your own interests; focus your time and energy on them becoming all God has intended for them. Your children should never be unaccompanied latchkey kids.
20. Be discriminate about the spiritual diet of your family. Be careful what you allow them to consume on screens, in school, and from friends. Trash is cheap and easy but also damaging in the long run. Defend your family against ungodly messaging that is targeting your children. Fight for the protection of your children’s souls. Monitor the incessant messaging from screens. Do not live in gullible denial. Keep your mind clean and work toward the cleanliness of your children’s minds.

21. If your children begin making a series of poor choices, then fight with a whatever-it-takes attitude to prevail. The strength of rebellion must be matched and overcome with the strength of parental vigilance. Always act in abounding love, but act; take measures that will turn your children's hearts back to the Lord. Do not let the problem grow; nip it in the bud. You are not your children's friend; you are the guardian of their souls. Pray like it all depends on God but fight like it all depends on you. God has not called you to passivity in those times but resistance. Be tenacious and relentless; your children's souls are worth it.
22. While your children are still at home, determine to live a quiet life focused on your children behind closed doors. There will be time to make a name for yourself when your children are mature adults. For now, do not divide your home with the world's attention; it is a ruthless dictator that is never satisfied with enough time. Let your children's character be the source of your credibility in the community, not your own skills and talents.
23. Make sure the soil of your children's hearts is well-maintained. Cultivate it daily so that it is receptive to the seeds of the Gospel and that those seeds grow up and become strong. Make sure the roots of faith go down deep and that rocks, shallowness, and thorns are dealt with so that they do not inhibit the seeds' growth.
24. Dedicate your children unto God. Like a dedicated line set apart for something other than usual ordinary use, children are to be set apart from the ways of the world. Do not be afraid of distinctions and always trying to fit in. Character training is the best training. Because of the eternal ramifications, Christian parenting is different from secular parenting.
25. Show considerable affection to your children and frequently remind them how much they are loved. Due to children's cognitive limitations to only the concrete and lack of comprehension of the abstract, parents are models by which children form their views of God. Even as adults, they will still pray to God with images of Him shaped by their parents' role models. Teach them about their purpose and how they can make a difference in this complex world.
26. Determine to be respected most by those who know you best. Instead of living to impress the world while overlooking your own children, live to impress your own children by your consistent virtue, and the world will be impressed as a by-product.
27. Protect your children from harmful forms of entertainment. The senses, especially sight and hearing, are gateways to children's souls through which external influences can enter and take root. Monitor your children's screens; do not take their innocence for granted. You have the right as the leader responsible and accountable for what happens in your home. Consider enjoying wholesome forms of entertainment together.
28. In today's hyper-stimulated culture, where outside influences constantly expose children to sexualized messaging, learn to discuss sexuality with your children as their drives awaken. Do not avoid the topic just because it seems awkward. If they do not learn about sex from their parents, then they will learn from someone else. Determine who will shape their views of human intimacy with the healthiest perspective.

29. Purpose to present virtuous role models to your children and discourage the wrong inspiration that sports figures and movie stars present. The world's standard has a different measuring stick for success and popularity. Usually, the world's iconic figures are morally bankrupt and spiritually impoverished. Teach that virtue is the measure of a person, not their appearance or abilities. If you expect a certain behavior, then introduce your children to adults who will model that behavior.
30. Talk about the current issues with your children. As everyone else is talking about them, your children listen and shape opinions. Weigh in. Why is abortion wrong according to Scripture? Why are homosexuality and gender dysphoria wrong according to God's Word? Why is political corruption wrong according to the Bible? Your children will hear the news, but make sure they get the commentary on the news from you, not the liberal news outlets.
31. Choose your friends carefully. Usually, they will be other believers from the same church you have chosen in which to raise your children. Establish a web of trusting adults who share the same parental values as you do. They will assist you in mentoring your children just by their example and proximity to them. Expose your children to them by scheduling opportunities for interaction. Frequently, children will look to other adults to inform them of their opinions. This community will help your children's faith stick.
32. Make sure Christian music is the sound of choice for your home. Music from pop culture tends to communicate values and perspectives contrary to those held by Christian parents. Music is one way that secularists introduce ideas contrary to Christian parents.
33. Be quick to ask forgiveness when you make mistakes. Do not make excuses; just own it. Children are not looking for perfection; they just want authenticity.
34. Honor a sabbath each week. Avoid workaholism. One entire day each week, plan a day away from work and other responsibilities and just recreate together with your children. Invest time doing fun things together as a family. In so doing, you will tie positive emotional threads to your children's hearts.
35. Since the greatest predictor of what children will become religiously is what their parents model themselves religiously, then make sure you are modeling a lifestyle you want your children to emulate. If you want them to pray daily, then let them see you do it daily. If you want them to read their Bible daily, then let them see you read it daily. If you want them to actively participate in church at least once a week, then you actively participate at least once a week, and be sure to take them with you to serve together.
36. Choose a church for your family that is vibrantly alive, Jesus-focused, biblically based, Spirit-empowered, and life-transforming. That environment stands the greatest chance of your children remaining in the Church and finding it relevant. Seek life transformation, not mere compliance with religious forms. Do not choose a church because of the traditions you like; your children will not share your appreciation for those traditions. Choose a church that will inspire them to pursue Jesus passionately, even if it is not a style that is your comfort level. Help your children develop a lasting faith by facilitating a deeper sense of intimacy

with God. Teach them a more potent theology for their calling. Help them discover their own mission in this world and make a difference.

37. If your young adult does move out of your home to attend college, join the military, travel, or work, then keep in constant contact. Tie emotional threads to their heart through frequent, loving FaceTime calls. Ask questions about their faith, church participation, and friendship choices. Discern if any intervention is necessary. Refrain from assuming everything is fine or avoiding conversations because it might feel awkward. No one's carnal nature can be trusted.
38. A steady diet of daily family devotions and weekly church services is important to children's spiritual formation. However, every parent should also deliberately take their children from time to time to spiritually intensified activities and events like conferences, retreats, and camps that will fan their children's spark of faith into raging flames.
39. Consider yourself as one with whom God has chosen to partner in His creative activity. Just as you and your spouse created a soul physically, God expects you also to create that soul spiritually. Your most holy task as parents is to make sure your children internalize faith in God themselves. Physical and spiritual childbearing belong together. You are responsible for shaping your children's unrefined character to become a living icon of Christ.
40. Since two-parent homes fare better than single-parent homes regarding the faith retention of their children, then stay together! Furthermore, fathers, avoid succumbing to the natural instinct of delegating the primary role of childrearing to your wives. Fathers play a vital role in their children's spiritual formation by God's design. Lead your home privately as you lead in the other sectors of your life publicly, especially as your children reach adolescence. Additionally, do not just attend church; get actively involved in serving in the church. You shape your children's view of God the most.
41. Determine to be on the same page as your spouse regarding your childrearing strategies. Be spiritually compatible with each other regarding discipline, expectations, and standards for your children. In the areas that you differ, be sure to take the time to work it out so that you can agree. Do not let your children divide you; God has made you one in marriage.
42. Practice *sobremesa*. Eat meals together as a family daily. Then, after at least one meal a day (usually dinner in the American context), do not rush away to various tasks. Linger and discuss important subjects "over the table." Make the dining room the central place in the home, not just an afterthought in the floor design. Seize this opportunity for values and perspective transmission. Plan ahead with a devotional thought and prayer. In doing so, do not allow devices at the table during and after the meal. Store any potential distractions in a basket until after the mealtime conversation.
43. In our materialistic culture, acknowledge that there is never enough. Establish some work boundaries and stop the relentless grind. Learn to be content; if you are not satisfied with what you have, then you will never be satisfied by what you want. Cultivate family life and enjoy your children. Children do not want toys from their parents as much as they want time with their parents.

44. Are your children's grandparents (your parents) spiritual people? Do they possess biblical values and perspectives? If so, then do not overlook their strategic role in helping shape your children's biblical worldview. The heritage that they must pass on goes beyond your generation; it also extends to your children's generation. Encourage them that they have not yet finished their responsibility to leave a legacy.
45. Conduct spiritual warfare for your children daily. They face a real enemy with spiritual weapons arrayed against their soul. Pray fervently for them. Stand on guard and be vigilant. Ask the Lord to give you strength, wisdom, and discernment. Then when God reveals to you hidden things of concern, do not hesitate to take swift action, working with the Lord to rescue your children.

## **Best Practices Recommended to Ministry Leaders**

1. The most important way to strengthen children's faith formation is to engage parents and support families. Do not just pastor individuals; shepherd families. You are not the primary caregiver; you are the secondary. However, your supplemental role is crucial. Think long-term and focus on the importance of spiritual formation in the home. Partner with parents.
2. Supplement parental spiritual formation in the home with a discipleship curriculum in the local church. Research what the children under your care need to become fully devoted followers of Christ for life. What can you develop to help children overcome the foolishness in their hearts so that they become more like Christ? Focus on making disciples, not just winning converts. If you have anchored children in your church to Jesus, then they will be less likely to drift away when parents can no longer force them to attend church.
3. Making church fun is important; it should not be boring to children. Nevertheless, fun and games cannot replace discipleship. Shape people's lives while their "mud is still wet;" much greater effectiveness in discipleship occurs when people are young and impressionable and not yet set in their ways. Make sure that by the time they are adults, they possess all the components of being a true disciple; you have fully trained them. Focus on helping youth become Gospel-fluent, Spirit-dependent, and in biblical community.
4. Invest in the future, not just the present. Since compound interest is so powerful, then early investing is strategic. Likewise, since children are so much easier to shape spiritually, then early investing is also strategic. Do not just invest in those who provide for the budget now; also invest in those who will provide for the budget in the next generation. Children are not to be held in a "holding pattern" until they get older. Your mission is to reach, teach, and keep young adults for Christ. Reach them now so you do not have to rescue them later.
5. If children come from homes characterized by a spiritual vacuum and their parents neglect their God-given responsibility for faith formation, then ministry leaders should be prepared to spiritual parent children like Paul did for Timothy. Parenting is not a short-term commitment; be prepared for long spiritual development and a discipleship process.
6. Instill in the children under your care a proper fear of the Lord. They should not be terrified of the power of God, but they should certainly have awe, reverence, and respect for Him.
7. Make sure your church is vibrantly alive, Jesus-focused, biblically based, Spirit-empowered, and life-transforming. That environment stands the greatest chance of young adults remaining in the Church and finding it relevant. Seek inner life transformation, not mere outer compliance with religious forms. Help the children in your church develop a lasting faith by facilitating a deeper sense of intimacy with God. Teach them a more potent theology of their calling. Help them discover their own mission in this world and make a difference with their lives.



8. Think of ways to motivate young adults to keep meeting together throughout the week, especially in an age-appropriate weekly meeting designed just for them. Carve out occasions for them to meet as a cohort and reinforce each other's faith. Positive peer pressure is real. Encourage fervency for the Lord. When sheep wander, pursue them. Extend your youth ministries past high school graduation age and stay engaged with them.
9. Seek intergenerational interaction. Your young adults can learn many life principles from more experienced followers of Christ. Seasoned saints have much to offer an emerging generation, and God expects them to pass on their spiritual heritage.
10. Cultivate true *koinonia* in your church. Follow the Acts 2:42-47 model for relevant doctrine and authentic community. Contrary to their post-truth reputation, young adults long for mentors who have earned their trust and can teach them the truth.
11. View your spiritual legacy like a baton that you successfully pass to the next generation. Be sure the emerging generation has a very tight grasp on it before you slow down and bow out of the race. Stay engaged and become the greatest cheerleaders for them.
12. Remember, you are a shepherd charged with the awesome task of watching over souls. You are to lead the flock, feed the flock, and protect the flock. This flock includes vulnerable young adults. Wild prey in every form lurks to pounce on them and steal their spiritual life. Post yourself vigilantly at the gate. God is your boss, and the sheep are actually His. He will hold you accountable.
13. Do not be afraid to address the contemporary social issues that are confronting youth today. It is important to them. If the Church does not provide perspective, then someone else will provide it from a secular worldview. However, avoid falling into the trap of politicization. The Church is not Republican, and conservative politicians are not necessarily Christian. Make faith relevant to their lives and incarnational in society. Also, listen to the concerns of the youth. Be open to dialog. Shape their views with grace. Help them become cultural apologists.
14. Address biblical illiteracy. No wonder youth will drift away without a good grasp of God's Word. Doctrine is the anchor by which young people will remain in the Church. Be advised they will not get sufficient teaching just from your sermons. Find ways to facilitate the family altar in the families that attend your church. Empower parents with the resources they need to rear their children effectively. Introduce creative ways to inspire Bible reading and personal and familial prayer.
15. One of the main reasons young people are fleeing the Church is the hypocrisy of its leaders. Make sure you characterize your life by integrity. "Be sure your sins will find you out," and when they do, young people will be right there observing and making decisions. Be who you say you are. When you mess up, acknowledge it in humility. Invite accountability structures in your life. Whatever you do, do not let these young people down by a moral failure on your part. Some will not be able to recover, and it will have eternal consequences for their souls.

16. When youth ask questions about their faith and the issues dominating the news, do not avoid them or be dismissive. Do not judge them, even when they make poor decisions. Be a safe place for honest inquiry and restoration. The Holy Spirit convicts, but people condemn. Judgment will drive youth away from the church. Take the opportunity to reinforce why your church believes what they believe. Prepare yourself to answer their questions. Ensure they get their answers from their parents and you instead of schoolteachers, media screens, and peers. Make sure you also equip parents to field their questions with the right answers.
17. Create service opportunities in the church for youth and young adults. Schedule them on worship, children's, production, and welcome teams. Help them realize that they are needed and that their views are heard. Allow them ownership of their local church's mission. Provide mission opportunities outside the church both at home and abroad. Youth ministry is only youth ministry when the youth are involved in the ministry. Anything less is merely babysitting.
18. Allow your ministry to adapt and flex as young adults push against established structures and critically distance themselves from their community of faith. Listen to their concerns and accommodate them before they vote with their feet and disconnect.
19. There will be areas of conflict between the older saints who pay all the bills for your church and the younger people who provide all the energy and service. Usually, the stress points are over music, money, and production. Encourage cooperation between the two groups because both are needed for the mission of the church to advance.
20. Sheep wander, but shepherds chase them. If a young adult begins to check out, then intervene early and compassionately. Frequently, they are still confused when they begin attending less; they have not made up their minds for sure. However, the longer a shepherd waits, the more those young people's opinions become galvanized. At some point, it will be too late to convince them.
21. A steady diet of weekly church services and age-related meetings is important to children's discipleship. However, every ministry leader should also deliberately plan from time to time spiritually intensified activities and events like conferences, retreats, and camps that will fan children's spark of faith into raging flames.
22. For young adults who did not grow up with parents teaching them about the things of God, be willing to become a spiritual father figure to them. As you teach spiritual concepts, fill the emotional void caused by the vacuum in their home. As they endure what could be a tumultuous transition of adolescence, you decide to become the most stable factor in their life. Young adults are not looking for heroes; they are looking for leaders who will be their spiritual guides, providing spiritual provision and protection.
23. Do not be satisfied by static rituals in church. Make sure your congregation is a vibrant, Spirit-filled church featuring dynamic and transformational experiences. Youth are looking for something real, not something traditional.

24. Make sure the youth and young adults feel they have an important role in the church. Treat them as an indispensable body part in the Body of Christ. Do not be afraid to allow them ownership of major responsibilities in the local church. Learn the “language” of the young people and view your church as a missions agency to the emerging generation. Just because older people give more does not mean that they are entitled.
25. Do not create a church with two separate identities – a youth group and adult worship services. It will be more difficult for young people to transition from one community to another. Make adult services youthful by the music style. Honor yesterday but inspire tomorrow. Since youth attract youth, then populate your stage with those who look like them.
26. Always make decisions based on whom you are trying to reach, not on whom you are trying to keep. Otherwise, you will slide into irrelevancy sooner than you think.
27. Invest in young people by budgeting significantly for *EROI* (*eternal* return on investment) and focusing on leadership development for emerging leaders. Be future-oriented about branding, communications, graphics, marketing, sermons, and programs.
28. Determine your target market and then direct your resources accordingly to meet the needs that are specific to that market. If you intend to make a difference in the emerging generation, then what resources are you directing toward young adults to meet their spiritual yearnings and make church relevant to them?
29. Develop an intentional disciple-making strategy for the young people in your church. Youth will not become disciples alone; they need a mentor. Learn what a true disciple is and the steps necessary to become one, then lead young people to achieve that ideal. Teach them the value of the church community, where to serve according to their gifts, how to get involved in a small group, how to stand on their faith and lead others, and how to practice such classic spiritual disciplines as prayer, reading their Bible, fasting, sharing their faith, and giving generously. Develop Jesus-followers who are resiliently faithful in the face of cultural coercion and live a vibrant life in the Spirit.
30. Strongly emphasize the importance of family, tradition, and community in your church. Encourage families to practice Deut 6:6-9 and warn them to avoid Judg 2:10-15. Teach corporate, familial, and individual practices that will help reinforce the identity as a community of faith from generation to generation.

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