

Strengthening family and home life is the best way to encourage your children to maintain a lifelong faith. *It Starts at Home* upholds marriage and family as the proving ground for lasting success. Don't let your child's faith fade to memory—learn how you can create a home that will prepare them for lifelong faith.

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CHAPTER 1

Losing Faith

If you've ever been part of a loving, healthy family you have smelled the sweet aroma of heaven. If you've ever lived in a troubled, broken home you have breathed the foul stench of hell. This book is about making your home what God intended it to be—a place of intimacy and joy instead of isolation and pain; a little bit of heaven rather than a foretaste of hell.

The home is the primary context of our spiritual formation—for better or worse. God wired us for flesh-and-blood relationships with a mom, a dad, a spouse, a child, and others who profoundly shape our perception and experience of the faith—whether they intend to or not. This book is our invitation for you to become highly intentional about fulfilling your God-ordained role at home and, in the process, giving your family something better than you might have received.

FALLING ON DEAF EARS

“Your relationship with your parents, and especially your father, has a significant influence on how you perceive God.” While

not the main point of my message, those words hit twenty-eight-year-old Maria like nothing she had ever heard. Visiting our church while kicking the tires of Christianity, she nervously approached me at the end of the service to ask whether I would be willing to schedule an appointment.

A few days later, Maria visited my wife and me to discuss her spiritual journey. She brought a journal in which she had been recording thoughts and notes while attending our church with a friend. She read several pages aloud, giving me insights into her concerns and questions. One particular entry grabbed my attention:

I hear the songs and sermons about God sending His only Son to die for us. I wonder: Why would God do that to His Son?

I glanced at my wife, Olivia, wondering whether Maria's dad had been like hers. Sure enough, he had. A self-centered man, Maria's father had abandoned the family for a series of other women. He failed to protect his little girl, putting her in harm's way. Making matters worse, he often quoted the Bible—or, rather, misquoted it. No wonder Maria perceived the death of Christ as the result of a selfish heavenly Father saying, "Take My kid, don't take Me!" That's what her dad would do.

God is a mystery who can't be grasped by the human mind. That's why He reveals Himself to us using metaphors like a good shepherd and a righteous judge. The most common metaphors of His full reality are that of a loving husband and a caring father. We best understand what it means to relate to God by observing what it means to properly relate to a spouse or a parent. But what happens when we have a warped point of reference for these common metaphors?

Imagine describing a fresh-baked chocolate-chip cookie to someone who has eaten only stale dog biscuits. Or describing a relaxing soak in a warm bath to someone who has experienced only the bone-chilling shiver of a cold shower. Something similar happens to those raised in a troubled home. Words spoken of God, even words from the Bible, can evoke an image completely different from the one intended.

I told Maria that my own dad sacrificed himself for his wife and kids every day of my childhood, working two jobs to feed the family and taking us to church no matter how exhausted he might have been. “Fatherhood is about giving up your life to care for a wife and children,” I explained. “As a father, I have no question that I would literally die for my children. But I would not willingly let someone take the life of one of my kids. That would be asking too much. To me, God willingly giving His only Son means the ultimate sacrifice.”

Still, to Maria it suggested something else.

We continued reading her journal entries. I learned that Maria had spent a lot of time with her happily married friend, and that she desperately wanted the same for herself. But Maria had never even been on a date and viewed herself as unlovable, another consequence of growing up without a nurturing dad.

I gently pointed Maria to the metaphor of God as a loving suitor pursuing his cherished beloved, explaining how humanity had been seduced away by a deceiver trying to keep us from the arms of our rightful husband. “Maria,” I explained, “God made you to be His bride!”

The words connected, and within a few weeks, my wife and I were holding hands with Maria as she prayed to accept God’s marriage proposal. As we lifted our heads, I saw Maria’s joyous tears releasing an inner beauty that had been hiding behind a mask of lonely self-protection.

Maria's story had a happy ending. She grew in her faith, and I had the honor of officiating at her wedding about a year after our first meeting. But the kind of hurdles she faced in embracing Christianity are all too common among the upcoming generation.

CHRISTIANITY'S ORPHANS

The most comprehensive longitudinal study ever done on the religious and spiritual lives of young people, conducted by the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, found that only about 17 percent of emerging adults become more active in religion than they were as teens, while 54 percent back away from active faith.¹ The same pattern has been found in several other studies such as one explained in a book co-authored by Barna Group president David Kinnaman entitled *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*. Kinnaman reported that the increasingly negative perception of Christian faith in our culture has been fueled by the fact that most self-identified unbelievers in America are, like Maria, former church kids. Their study found that “the vast majority of outsiders in this country, particularly among young generations, are actually de-churched individuals.”²

Don't miss the significance of that statement. Perhaps for the first time in church history, many of those most inclined toward belief—our own children—are actively rejecting or passively abandoning the faith. And the problem, in our opinion, is not what's happening at church but what desperately needs to happen at home.

In the opening scene of Charles Dicken's novel *Oliver Twist*

a group of barefoot, ill-kept orphan boys carry their bowls to mealtime while dreaming of various delicious foods. But this day, like every other day, each will receive only one measly serving of an awful gruel. As they take their places on rough wooden benches to receive the day's meager allowance, we are given a glimpse of the table prepared for those who run the orphanage. It is clear that they will be gorging themselves on a feast fit for kings just a few feet away from the half-starved, ill-kept, unloved boys. The most striking part of the scene, however, is the phrase stenciled on a stone wall above the neglected boys: "God Is Love."

Are those three words true? Absolutely.

Does the orphans' experience tell them it's true? Certainly not.

Which do you think they will believe?

No matter how creatively we proclaim God's Word to children at church, they are more likely to believe their experience of the faith at home. That's because incarnation trumps proclamation.

Incarnation literally means "en-flesh-ment." God became a flesh-and-blood human being to reveal Himself to us in a way written words could not accomplish. The gospel of John tells us that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14 NKJV). Christianity is not a religion of lofty ideals or a distant lawgiver. The God of Christianity is someone we "have seen with our eyes" and whom "our hands have handled" because the Father in His Son "was manifested to us" (1 John 1:1–2 NKJV). No wonder nearly every major heresy in church history has been an attack on the doctrine of the incarnation. Satan hates that God became flesh. He also hates healthy families because they serve as flesh-and-blood icons of the unity and love that flows within and from the Trinity. The Scriptures tell us

that when husband and wife become one flesh in the pleasure of marital union, it creates a picture of the beautiful union between Christ and His church. It also reaps the gift of children, filling the world with more fleshy reminders of Satan's mortal enemy.

Life comes from unity with God and others—moving toward others. Death means separation—moving away. Happy homes echo the intimate joys of heaven. Broken, troubled families, by contrast, imitate the loneliness, isolation, and anger of hell.

Do you want to make the devil cringe as if hearing scratching nails on a chalkboard? Then celebrate fifty years of marriage or enjoy laughter with your children around the dinner table. Satan does not fear a religion that merely stencils words on a stone wall, or even preaches them in a sermon. What he dreads is when the Word becomes flesh and blood in the tangible context of a God-honoring marriage and family.

THE ROOTS OF FAITH

I have six kids. I want nothing more in life than for them to embrace my Christian faith. Every generation of believing parents has this same hope for their children. So why, all of a sudden, do fewer kids growing up in Christian families embrace Christian faith?

We spent two years facilitating a dialogue on this problem with a national network of church leaders. We came together in recognition that the next generation is abandoning Christianity at an alarming rate despite some of the best teaching, worship, student ministries, and coffee shops in church history. Churches have never worked harder; yet generational faith transfer is in decline. Something doesn't add up!



Imagine budding flowers representing my children. I gently cradle them in my hand, careful to protect the delicate roots reaching out from the narrowing tips at the bottom of each stem. Aware of their need for the living water of the gospel, I bring them to a watering can called the local church where pastors, Sunday school teachers, and student pastors pour the life-giving nourishment of the good news onto their lives. But the water simply drips off the sides of my hand, failing to penetrate the dangling roots of their thirsty hearts.



Concerned, I urgently look for another solution. Fearing my children will wither and die unless I find a more effective means of imparting strong faith, I grab a bigger, more contemporary-looking watering can—one with cutting-edge music and a cool-looking student pastor—hoping it will more effectively reach my kids. But the heavy flow of water just splashes onto the ground.

Obviously, the problem is not with the size or style of the watering can. Roots grow only if planted in soil. Yet an entire generation of parents seems to have missed God's design. Faith must be nourished in the rich soil of a God-honoring family. The church's role is to provide the water. But lifelong faith requires deep, abiding roots.

Let's face a few sobering facts. The vast majority of those who ever trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior do so before reaching their eighteenth birthday. The highest portion do so before age thirteen, while less than a quarter do so after reaching adulthood.³ No wonder Jesus told His disciples to bring the little children to Him. It seems there is a limited window of time when we are most inclined toward belief. During those few years, our tender roots seek nourishment in the context of a believing family.

Does that mean a child growing up in a nonbelieving or passive family has no hope? Certainly not. As I mentioned earlier, my wife grew up in such a home yet became an active, passionate follower of Jesus Christ. Her life of faith began *after* turning thirteen when a friend invited her to church. Olivia's single mom had rejected Christianity and never once took her daughter to a religious service. But the story of how Olivia moved from being a dead-faith orphan to a living-faith believer further illustrates the power of God's design.

The minister of the church Olivia attended felt like a failure. His small congregation never grew to the size or influence he dreamed possible. Pastor Randy Piersma led and loved his tiny flock week after week while he wondered whether his call to ministry had been a mistake and questioned his own competence as a pastor.

Pastor Randy's daughter met Olivia the day she came to church with a friend. Before long, Darcee and Olivia became close, and Olivia started spending time at their home, where she observed things she had never experienced in her own household: a loving father treating his wife with affection and respect, kids who enjoyed spending time with Mom and Dad, a family laughing together around the dinner table, and an

emotional stability and playful joy foreign to her own broken, troubled home. Olivia wanted what she saw. The gospel she heard preached in Randy's tiny church became a living picture in Randy's vibrant home, enabling Olivia to bathe in the warm refreshment of God's intended design.

Olivia spent every moment she could at the Piersma home, eventually becoming Randy's unofficial adopted daughter. He even walked her down the aisle in place of Olivia's deceased father on our wedding day. Three decades later, Olivia points to the reality of the gospel she saw in that Christian family as the catalyst for her own lifelong faith.

Anyone who ministers to students will tell you that kids from unbelieving families need more than an hour or two at church to establish deep roots. They need to experience the reality of a God-honoring home. They need someone to invite them into it and give them a tangible vision of things that can only be described in church.

Every child deserves regular exposure to the life-giving warmth of a loving marriage and of parents who lay their lives down for their children. Ideally, that will happen at home. But if not, then they need "free samples" that can give them an incarnational picture of what the words "God is love" really mean.

The next generation may be losing faith. But a small amount of intentionality can help turn the tide. To do so, we need to understand the process of spiritual formation at home.



CHAPTER 2

Spiritual Formation at Home

What do we mean by the phrase “spiritual formation,” and what does it have to do with home?

The Scriptures tell us that men and women were created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27). We were made as icons to reflect our Creator, just as children resemble their parents.

Unfortunately, our original parents fell into a disease called sin that changed everything. You might say we became willing accomplices in our own spiritual *de-formation*. Every one of us is born as something less than we were intended to be, damaged versions of our original design. That’s why God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, providing the means for and initiating the process of restoring us to our original purpose.

Put simply, spiritual formation is the process of becoming more like Jesus Christ. Our spirits, and therefore our entire beings, need to be “re-formed.” Think of a sculptor keeping his eye on a human model as he gradually transforms a chunk of marble into a statue. The same process takes place in our lives.

We are called to keep our eye on the model, Jesus Christ, and to submit to the Divine Artist as He gradually forms us into the masterpieces we were created to become.

How does this “re-forming” occur? It can happen when we spend time alone with God through solitude, prayer, fasting, and other contemplative habits. It also takes place during corporate worship or when we imitate Christ by caring for the poor and loving our neighbors. Most of us associate these kinds of practices with spiritual formation, and God does mold us through such routines. But they are not the primary context of our spiritual formation.

I can learn about Jesus when I read the Bible and feel close to Jesus when I pray. But I *become* like Jesus (spiritually formed) when I give my life to a spouse, a child, a grandchild, and others whom God places in my home. These are the specific people for whom I am called to turn the Word into flesh amid the day-in and day-out reality of life.

It is much easier to sit in church listening to a sermon than to bite my tongue during an argument with my wife. The first nourishes my spirit. The second humbles my pride.

I love listening to worship music and reading inspirational books. I hate apologizing to my children after losing my temper. The first reminds me who God is. The second reminds me who I am, a sinner in need of repentance.

Spiritual formation occurs most effectively in those moments when I obediently submit to the Sculptor’s chisel and follow the apostle Paul’s admonishment to become like the One who “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. . . he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:7–8).

In short, my marriage and family are the first and primary contexts within which I am called to be like Jesus in the lives of others.

Most of this book outlines principles and practices that can help you make spiritual formation real in your marriage and with your children or grandchildren. Before developing an action plan, however, we thought it important to clarify the destination, to envision the end before determining the means. How, exactly, do we define success when it comes to spiritual formation at home?

I often ask groups of adults to tell me the first thing that comes to mind when I say the word “success.” As you might imagine, I receive a wide range of answers such as “achievement” and “money” and “happiness” and “status”—each person replying based upon what he or she or their culture considers important. I then hold up a hammer and ask, “What is success for this hammer?” Amazingly, everyone gives essentially the same answer, “Driving nails into wood.” Next, I show them a pen. “What is success?” “To write.” Why is it so easy for us to define success for a hammer and a pen? Because we judge success for such objects straightforwardly as “fulfilling the purpose for which they were made.”

Defining success for marriage and family requires the same criteria. Marriage, parenthood, and grandparenthood were designed for a particular purpose. As with the hammer and the pen, we need to ask ourselves, “What did the Creator have in mind when He made these things and how does that purpose clarify their success?”

SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN MARRIAGE

Traditional wedding vows include a sacred oath. They recognize that every marriage, as designed by the original Matchmaker, is intended to reflect a much bigger reality than joint checking accounts and shared household chores. Consider the following words that have opened millions of weddings over the past few centuries: “Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is between Christ and his Church. . . .”⁴

A mystical union? Christ and His church? Heavy stuff. But a good reminder that giving ourselves to one another in marriage is a picture of what our Lord did when He gave Himself to us.

Relatively few today realize that marriage is about more than two people finding happiness in this life. It is designed to serve as a picture of that eternal “happily ever after” between God and His beloved bride, the church. Therefore, we can define the target of spiritual formation in marriage as follows:

***Marital Success:** Every marriage is intended to be a picture of the marriage between God and His people as we selflessly give ourselves to another through mutual submission and loving intimacy. (Eph. 5:29–33)*

When we exchange rings, we promise to become part of a story much bigger than the subplots of our individual lives.

When we snap wedding photos, we record a union that is intended to become a picture of the union between God and His beloved people.

We promise to remain faithful and devoted to each other “till death do us part,” not just because lifelong marriage is the best path to lasting health and happiness. We do so because, in God’s eyes, the two of us cease to exist as autonomous individuals with separate identities and agendas. We become one.

Sadly, those who abandon their vows damage more than their own hearts. They also destroy the beautiful masterpiece that every marriage is intended to reveal to the next generation.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN PARENTING

Did you know that traditional wedding vows list parenthood as one of the primary purposes for which matrimony was ordained? To quote: “It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.”⁵ From the earliest days of the church, the Christian faith has upheld marriage and parenthood as central to God’s purpose for humanity. So we must ask: If parenthood is part of our purpose, then what is the purpose of parenthood?

In short, God designed the home as the primary place that children receive spiritual instruction and, as we discussed earlier, experience the tangible embodiment of spiritual realities. So we define the target of spiritual formation in parenting and grandparenting as follows:

***Parenting Success:** Those blessed with the gift of children and grandchildren are called to inspire and nurture Christian faith and godly character in the next generation as life’s highest calling. (Deut. 6:6–9; Ps. 78:1–8)*

Real success can be achieved only through discipline. That's why the Christian tradition has a long history of emphasizing what have been called "spiritual disciplines." Spiritual formation at home is a little-by-little, long-term process rather than a one-time event. We cannot overemphasize the importance of this point for parents and grandparents.

Anyone who has ever tried to teach a young child to ride a bike understands this principle. It would be crazy to place your three-year-old daughter on an adult bike and give her a shove down the driveway. No matter how much you cheer "You can do it!" she will crash and cry within a matter of seconds. Instead, you buy her a small bicycle with training wheels so she can get the feel for riding in safety. Once she's gained confidence, you will likely remove the training wheels. But you still run alongside or behind her, letting go of the seat only a few seconds at a time and allowing her to take a few harmless falls onto the grass. Not until you feel she has had enough experience within the relative safety of your guidance do you relinquish control to her wobbly instincts.

We need to apply this same perspective to a child's spiritual formation. Our goal is much bigger than getting our sons and daughters to pray a one-time prayer of salvation. As important as it is to guide our children through that step when they are ready, the job is by no means complete. They have only begun the wobbly ride of lifelong faith. God intends moms, dads, grandpas, and grandmas to consistently guide children toward their God-intended purpose of becoming like Christ. A large part of that process, as we will discover, is to nurture a bias toward right belief and to help them acquire a taste for right character—both of which require patient, diligent, intentional effort over the long haul.

Hammers, pens, and families all have a clear definition of success, which is to fulfill the purpose for which they were made. That's why we define spiritual formation at home as the process of intentionally fulfilling the God-ordained purposes of marriage and family life.

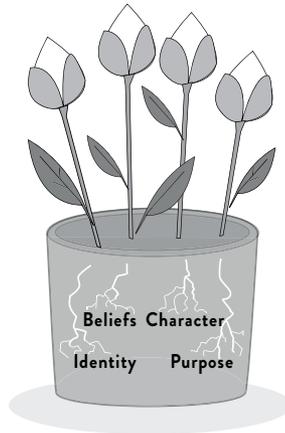
WHAT STARTS AT HOME?

Spiritual formation begins at home, but it does not end there. The home cannot be the church any more than the church can be the home. Christianity is a communal faith to be experienced through corporate worship, under pastoral leadership, and amid what many call “doing life” with other believers. God never intended a family's faith to occur apart from local church engagement. But neither did He design the church to replace the home. Left to do the entire job by itself, a church can impart enough of the faith only to inoculate kids against taking it seriously. Church and home, like a watering can and the soil in a flowerpot, are both essential to the job.

So why the title *It Starts at Home*? Because what happens at home sets the course for all that follows, for better or worse. Anyone who has come to faith later in life knows the importance of sorting through the good and bad of what they learned and experienced while growing up. That process often requires replacing flawed lenses with clarifying truth. It also involves the hard work of breaking bad habits and learning disciplines that would have been much easier to master during the pliable years of childhood. Tiger Woods became a great golfer because he started the disciplines of golf at a very young age under the guidance of a highly intentional dad. In a similar manner, spiritual formation at home is the most natural and productive context

for faith and character formation because the longer one aligns his or her life with the truth, the more “second nature” it becomes to believe and behave according to God’s design.

So what, precisely, starts at home? There are four roots to lifelong faith that grow best in the rich soil of family life.



Root One: Beliefs

We live in a manner consistent with what we believe to be true, whether or not those beliefs align with reality. Our foundational beliefs about God, ourselves, and the world around us take shape in the context of the home.

Root Two: Identity

Little boys were made to become responsible, self-sacrificial men. Little girls were created to become godly, selfless women. These identities must be modeled and affirmed to counter the sexual confusion rampant in our day. We all need to see and experience what it means to be made in God’s image as a male or a female, a process heavily dependent upon the model and influence of a godly marriage.

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