

Loving Our Youth to Be Faithful Followers

By Pastor Geoffrey Drew

The time of the pandemic has certainly been a time of great stress for a great many people. Many have lost their jobs, have had family stress, many have become sick, and almost all have suffered from various forms of restlessness after being kept inside the home for what is going on to be seven months now. And nowhere is this more apparent than with our Youth Group. Our students, who have enjoyed their entire lives surrounded by hundreds of their friends during the school year, have grown accustomed to spending the summer playing in town outside with friends, students who have spent their entire lives waiting for the wondrous time of graduation and going off to college, have found that these hopes and social needs have all suddenly been taken away.

But, in addition to all the stresses which have been ours to bear during this time, God's faithfulness has been good, and has been good because many of our students have realized that, while social comforts may not be available to them, the comfort of the fellowship in Church is sufficient to bring them joy. Many of our students have proven God's faithfulness in their lives by seeking opportunities to serve in recording worship songs for our worship service, leaders have stepped up to teach our Sunday School classes faithfully, and many students have sought out and developed meaningful times of discipleship with our Youth Alive Counselors.

Yet, the truth is that while there are many students who have shown that the power of God's Love is strong enough to make faithful disciples in any situation, the impacts of the pandemic have been made clear: some students respond in great faithfulness and seeking for the Lord and some have been able to cope with the sudden isolation and inability to attend church. Just as has been the trend across the country during this time, a portion of our students have not cultivated a desire to attend worship like they used to before lockdown, they do not find fulfillment in participating in youth discussions, they are retreating into a life of lockdown, they are succumbing to the lack of disciplines brought by the absence of structure, and many of our students have ultimately found themselves in a period of depression and the feeling of purposelessness.

For a church to hear that the impacts of the pandemic are so severe for our youth, while we may not be surprised, it certainly is difficult to endure. But for parents of children who suffer such difficulties, such struggles impact the entire family. Therefore, the burning question for all parents is, "How can I increase the faith of my child?" Well, the truth is that God's love still plays a monumental role increasing your

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child's faith, but specifically it is God's love shown through parents which makes the biggest impact.

Being part of the Southern Baptist church affords us with access to a great wealth of research. LifeWay Research, the research division of the Southern Baptist Convention, has, believe it or not, conducted research on this very subject. When analyzing the difference between children who grow up and abandon the faith and children who grow up and adopt the faith of their parents, three primary trends emerge. Of children who keep a lifelong faith, the following characteristics are usually present:

- 1) Both parents remained married through the high school years.
- 2) They attended church at least twice a month during their years in High School.
- 3) At least one person from the church invested in them spiritually for a minimum of 6 months before they turned 16.

Of these three trends, 2/3 of them are directly related to a parent's relationship with their child (demonstrating a commitment to the family and taking seriously the responsibility of bringing their child to church). But, in addition to the research done by LifeWay, in 2016 the Pew Research Center also conducted research on what trends produce children who develop lifelong faith in Christ. Just like the LifeWay study, Pew found that parents played a critical role in the development of children with lifelong faith:

- 1) 89% had parents who spoke about their faith in the home "a lot".
- 2) 89% had parents who viewed faith as instrumental to dictating the way they raised their children.

The summary of this research may be quoted directly the Pew Research study: "Among those raised in single religious background (especially Protestantism), those whose children most steeped in religion most likely to retain parents' faith."

And such things are not merely demonstrated in studies, but are also promised by God in Scripture.

Proverbs 22:6 – Train up your child in the way they should go and they will not depart from it when they are older.

Malachi 2:15 – Did God not make parents one with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring.

Simply put, The Lord divinely ordains that parents play the largest role in maintaining faith in their children.

So what are some practical things that a parent may do to foster the

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development of faith in their children during this time of the pandemic? I have found a few ways derived from my research and ways that were recommended by the professionals at LifeWay.

First, make sure to read Scripture with your child at least three times per week. LifeWay routinely has found that regular bible reading children turn into faithful adults. In fact, it is the top factor. Make sure that you are reading Scripture with your child at least three times per week, and make sure that you commit to this with regularity. Choose a time each week that Scripture will be read together as a family and do not deviate from it. Instead develop your schedule around this decision and let your children see how important it is to you.

Second, pray with your children regularly and seriously. While most parents pray with their children, it may surprise you that this is actually the second highest factor found by LifeWay to produce faithful adults. Unfortunately, the prayer of most parents usually follows the following format: it is done when the family is tired and wanting to go to bed, lacks new needs but rather involves the same few things each night without conviction, and is usually communicated as a compulsory action. Such prayer is good, but can be reduced to a ritual with little power or meaning. Evaluate whether or not this sounds familiar and whether or not you think this sort of prayer carries conviction, “Dear God, please bless mom and help Jimmy with his test tomorrow. Thank you for today. We pray in Jesus’ name, amen.” It probably sounds familiar, but lacks conviction, and certainly your child will pick up on this. Instead, identify times your child needs prayer and pray with them, schedule times of prayer that are not during times you expect to be tired and unable to commit, and try to avoid praying for the “automatic things”, but instead pray for things with purpose, making sure to give the Lord your true hope for deliverance.

Third, ask your children about their time at church/bible study and make sure you know that they attend. One thing that we’ve noticed in this time of pandemic is that, while parents are convinced their children attend church, their children are giving them the slip. They sign in to the service with Zoom or YouTube in one window, but then quickly go to play video games or scroll through social media in the other window. How do I know? The regular pattern I see is this: students sign in to worship/bible study, leave their camera’s off, do not respond to questions, and when the service ends, they stay signed in 20-30 minutes after everyone has left. Clearly an attempt to make it seem as if they are attending is at play. Don’t let your child try to make you think they are doing something they are not. Instead, make sure to watch your children or look in on them to make sure they are participating in the worship services they promised they would. A great way to verify this is to ask them specifically what was discussed in church and what they think about it. Not only will this ensure their

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participation, but it will add a second layer of teaching as they are forced to rethink through the lessons they've learned.

These are not guarantees, but statistics nationwide show that these are effective approaches to help develop faith in your children. It is a tough time, and I know that many of us feel that we are doing the best that we can, but this is most certainly a situation where working smarter, not harder, is the answer. As a parent, if you focus your energy into tried and proven methods of discipleship, it is fairly safe to say that you will impact your child's faith dramatically. Finally, I would like to end with two observations that Paul David Tripp made in his book, *Shepherding A Child's Heart*:

- 1) **You can never know with absolute certainty whether your child is saved.**
In fact, fake faith can carry a person a long way and the heart can certainly even deceive itself.¹ The Barna Research Group has found that by the age of 13, 9 out of 10 young people consider themselves "Christian", but very few actually have any understanding of salvation by grace or require any sort of relationship with Jesus.² It seems that children are certainly capable of sending (and believing) mixed signals.
- 2) **A child's profession of faith in Christ does not change the basic necessities you have to continuously and tirelessly proclaim Christ in the home.** Even if your child should proclaim Christ early and be genuinely saved, your goals and responsibilities will still be the same to train them in the ways of the Lord.³

Stay faithful, and I am confident that you will reap the rewards promised to you in Scripture. The reward of a child who loves the Lord.

God and His grace be with you.

¹ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Pr, 1995), Kindle Location 803-815.

² George Barna, *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2003), p.38.

³ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Pr, 1995), Kindle Location 803-815.