

Raising Christian Kids in a Secular World Prov. 22:6; Deut. 11:18-21; II
Tim. 1:5, 3:14-15

One of the primary responsibilities of Christians is to pass along the faith to the next generation. In case you haven't noticed, we haven't done this well for some time now! Fewer and fewer of our young people continue in church after they leave home. They used to come back when they had children. Today? Not so much! And fewer and fewer of our kids are in church or Sunday School regularly. When my wife worked with the children's Christmas pageant this year, she found a number of kids who didn't even know the basic Christmas story! What's happened?

When we baptize children, we ask their parents, "Do you intend this child to be (Jesus') disciple, to obey his word and show his love? And, will you be a faithful member of this congregation, giving of yourself in every way, and will you seek the fellowship of the church wherever you may be?" I think most of our parents who take these vows have good intentions about raising their children in the faith, but stuff happens...and faith-training doesn't get done.

This challenge of passing on the faith to our children is not new! Listen to this well-known proverb from the Book of Proverbs, chapter 22.

*⁶Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray. (Prov. 22:6)*

Now this is a proverb, a wise saying that is generally true. It's not a concrete promise. But generally, children trained well in any area of life, including faith, benefit from that training. Or, consider this command to pass along the faith: ¹⁸*You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead.* ¹⁹*Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.* ²⁰*Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates,* ²¹*so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.* (Deut. 11:18-21)

“You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul.” Notice the pattern begins with putting God's word into our own hearts and souls. Then we pass along God's words to our children. To do that, the passage mentions planned, more formal times of teaching our children, as well as spontaneous, responsive times, *“When you are at home, when you are away, when you lie down, and when you rise.”*

While the primary responsibility for teaching faith to children lies with parents, the church also has an important role to play. One of the things I love about the Presbyterian service of Baptism we talked about earlier is the question asked to the congregation, *“Do you, the people of the church,*

promise to tell this child the good news of the gospel and help him/her know all that Christ commands, and, by your fellowship, to strengthen his/her family ties with the household of God?"

Let's start with some of the ways GPC tries to fulfill this vow and responsibility. It begins with the nursery for our youngest members. Then there is worship, children's church, kids club, youth club, Vacation Bible School, middle school and high school youth groups, confirmation classes, music opportunities, Christian camps like Krislund Camp, and the teen Workcamp. That's a lot of opportunities, and I've probably missed a few! In these programs, our kids learn the content of the faith, but there's more. They experience the faith through their interactions with each other and through opportunities for service. They meet adult role models they can turn to with questions or during difficult times. And kids can make Christian friends that support them and help strengthen their faith. I remember how grateful Bonnie and I were for youth groups and small groups where our kids could talk about their faith during times when they weren't likely to talk with us about those things! I think GPC is doing a good job of providing opportunities for our children and youth to grow in faith.

But, as we read in Deuteronomy, the primary responsibility for raising children in the faith is placed on the home. Here's an example of how it works. The Apostle Paul is writing to Timothy, a young Christian pastor he

is advising. He says, *I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.* ¹⁴*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it,* ¹⁵*and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.* (II Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15)

Here, the passing along of faith worked well. It began with a Christian grandmother named Lois. Grandparents, you play an important role in faith formation, too. I remember my own grandparents, how I greatly admired them, especially my grandfathers, and wanted to be like them. And I am like them in some ways to this day! I also remember my grandmother sitting down with her Bible in the morning each day and reading a passage of scripture along with a devotional book. So grandparents, look for opportunities to pass along the faith! Your grandchildren are watching, and surprisingly, even listening to you!

Back to parents. It can be very challenging to pass the faith along to our children today. In the first place, although the church offers a variety of good programs that teach Christian faith, there are many things competing for our children's time! Unfortunately, it sometimes seems like parents put the training of their kids in everything else ahead of faith formation. Sports, drama, music, dance, and academics all come first. When there is a

conflict between these activities and church activities, do you even question what your child will do? Ironically, the faith and character-building that takes place at church is likely have more life impact than even the best soccer, theater, and even academic skills! It's not easy, but one place to begin the responsibility of faith formation is to do a serious assessment of your priorities with your children's time.

And then there are things you can do at home to help your children learn the faith. You can have a daily or weekly family devotional time. You have opportunities for regular prayers at meals and bedtime. Let those prayers grow from memorized prayers to include things your children would like prayer for. You could debrief worship, Sunday School, or Youth Club with your children, and discuss the sermon with older kids. (That might even generate questions for the preacher!) You can mark the church seasons, like Advent or Lent, with special activities or readings. You could memorize key Bible passages, such as the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, the Golden Rule, or the fruits of the Spirit. Families could engage in regular service in the community as a response to God's goodness to us, or go on a mission trip together.

In addition to planned times of instruction or discussion, be alert to the unplanned times that drop in your lap. When a child is afraid, talk about how our faith comes to bear in times of fear. Talk about how you deal with

fear! Or, with discouragement or loss. When a child has been hurt and is tempted to lash out in revenge, talk about how, as followers of Jesus, we don't take revenge, but instead trust God to work out justice.

We have some resources here to help with these things in the church library and in the Phyllis Dowd children's library. Cheryl has a couple books at the CE table today you can look at. And there are lots of things available on-line, including books, videos or CDs, Christian music, and websites.

Keep in mind that knowledge about the faith, while important, is not the ultimate goal. We want children to know and love Jesus, and to begin following him in the way they live, and we want his Spirit to shape their hearts and desires in ways that will last a lifetime.

At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the US men's and women's 4x100 relay teams heard a sound that no relay team ever wants to hear. Ping. Ping. Ping. That's the sound of a metal baton hitting the track surface as a result of a failed handoff. These failures cost both teams medals, and shoddy baton-passing had also cost them dearly at the previously Olympics. You can have literally the fastest runners in the world, but if they can't master passing and receiving the baton, they won't even get to finish the race.

As parents, grandparents, and fellow church members, we must pass the baton of faith along to the next generation, as it was passed to us, and to those before us, and so on. Now let me add a caveat here. Just because a child or young adult doesn't embrace the faith doesn't mean their parents did a poor job of passing along the faith to them. It isn't that simple! People have volition- wills that they exercise, and some choose not to take on the beliefs, lifestyle, and responsibilities of Christian faith.

Nevertheless, it is our job to make sure our children understand the faith, and experience God's love and grace in our families and church communities. How are you doing with that? What more might God be asking you to do?