



Passing on faith in the home



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The family occupies a central role in the fabric of God’s social narrative. It is esteemed, not least, as the context in which knowledge of God is taught and nurtured. This can be seen in how God’s commands, from their inception, were to be a living, visible and tangible part of family life: ‘Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem[b] on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates’ (Deuteronomy 6.6–9, NRSV).

For the people of God, passing on knowledge of God and his commands was never for the purpose of mere obedience to a list of arbitrary rules. Integral to transmission, from one generation to the next, was an understanding of the meaning and purpose of God’s redemptive story. The purpose of retelling the story was to imprint it onto the communal consciousness, reminding the people of God of his promises and faithful deliverance – lest they forget. And while the Old Testament recalls many failed attempts to live and retell this story, including a narrative littered with broken and dysfunctional family relationships, the family unit continued to be used by God to tell his story and fulfil his redemptive purposes.

Failure in intergenerational transmission

It would seem that twenty-first century Christian families are facing their own unique challenges

when it comes to successfully passing on God’s redemptive story. Of course, nurturing Christian faith in the home is always with the intended goal that the child – accepting and embracing a living relationship with Jesus Christ for themselves – will choose to stand in the living tradition of the faith. However, generational dropout, declining church membership and falling church attendance in the UK point to signs of a failure in intergenerational transmission.¹

British parents generally appear to be apathetic about whether their children grow up to share their beliefs. Recent ComRes polling, commissioned by the religion and society think tank Theos, revealed that only 31% of the 1,013 British parents interviewed said that they wanted their children ‘to hold the same beliefs about whether or not there is a God or Higher Power as me when they are older’. The polling also evidenced that parents of faith express reluctance and anxiety in passing on their beliefs to their children. Their expressed concerns in passing on their faith included the fear that they will be unable to answer questions posed, or that as a result, their child will be alienated at school. Their greatest concern was that technology and social media would have a greater impact on their child’s future beliefs than they would. The polling also evidenced an apparent indifference shown by Christian parents towards the spiritual outcomes of their children, with 28% of church attenders not minding whether their children shared their beliefs.²

There are also indications that recounting the biblical story is being neglected in Christian

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1. A finding from the Church of England's Church Growth Research Programme Report (2014), for example, revealed that half of the children of churchgoing parents do not attend as adults.

2. O Mark, *Passing on Faith* (London: Theos, 2016), pp. 7, 8.

3. Bible Society, *Pass it On* Research Report (February 2014), p. 22.

4. C Smith and ML Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 56.

5. D Oman, 'Spiritual Modeling and the Social Learning of Spirituality and Religion', in KI Pargament (ed.), *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality, Volume 1: Context, Theory and Research* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), pp. 189, 190.

6. JKA Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), p. 127.

7. For example, studies among university students in Canada and Australia have noted that respondents who recalled a greater emphasis on religion within their childhood homes were more likely to identify with the religion of their parents.

homes. Research carried out by YouGov for Bible Society in 2014 showed that almost a third (30%) of Christian parents say that they never read Bible stories to their children. Indeed, 7% do not think that their child, aged three or over, has ever read, seen or heard any Bible stories. This is in spite of the fact that the vast majority of the parents themselves experienced the biblical story in their own childhood and adolescence.³

The enduring influence of parents

In examining this generational decline, questions invariably arise over how children can be more successfully integrated into the family of faith, and attention inevitably turns to the home, in light of its biblical mandate and its social significance. Issues of concern include whether parents have lost confidence in sharing faith with their children, and, if so, what reasons might account for this; or perhaps the social significance of the home has simply decreased and parents – in spite of their best (or worst) efforts – are simply ineffective in the face of other social and cultural forces.

In responding to these particular concerns, our earlier statistics would seem to indicate that there is a confidence issue to be addressed. However, when it comes to questions over whether the social significance of the home is diminishing, evidence gathered by social scientists over the past 40 years would clearly refute this. Parents and the family instead remain pivotal to the spiritual outcomes of their children. Detailed academic studies, concerned with understanding young people's association with religion, show that young people's self-reported faith identity is still strongly located in the family. The family continues to provide a strong sense of relational and religious belonging, and young people will still choose to remain in general conformity with the values of their parents.

Christian Smith's findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) in the USA, for example, emphatically confirmed the ongoing influence of parents: 'For better or worse, most parents in fact still do profoundly influence their adolescents – often more than do their peers – their children's apparent resistance and lack of appreciation notwithstanding. This influence often also includes parental influence in adolescents' religious and spiritual lives. Simply by living and interacting with their children, most parents establish expectations, define normalcy, model life practices, set boundaries and make demands – all of which cannot help but influence teenagers, for good or ill!'⁴

Smith's sociological observations suggest that passing on 'faith' in the home is, in effect, a given. Parents' values, attitudes, beliefs and practices will inevitably shape the environment of the home and influence the children and young people within it. Such an account challenges the popular script which suggests that 'secular' homes promote rational 'neutrality' while religious ones don't.

Indeed, 'forcing' on children unevidenced religious beliefs is deemed by popular secularists to be morally problematic – at worst, abusive. However, Smith's observations and conclusions clearly affirm that no home is neutral.

Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the power of this secular narrative on parents'

quality relationships are central to successful faith transmission

motivation and practices. It may in fact account for the 16% of parents polled in the Theos research who felt that by passing on their beliefs to their children, they 'may be doing something ethically wrong'. Challenging this narrative is essential to recognising and reclaiming the enduring influence that parents have on the faith outcomes of their children.

Social learning in the home

In responding to this trend of generational dropout, questions also arise as to whether there is evidence of 'best practice' that can be learnt around how to more successfully pass on faith. These questions are not directly concerned with the theological framework that gives meaning and motivation to faith transmission. Instead, they are heavily focussed on the social context of the home, and observing and describing ways and means by which beliefs and practices might be more successfully transmitted.

Social science tells us that no child is immune from the social learning that takes place in the home. According to the Social Learning Theory, this happens through both 'observational learning' (retention and replication of knowledge) and 'spiritual modelling' (shaping of behaviours and attitudes), and is directed through four main processes: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. In the Christian home, this social learning might look something like this: attention is given to the reading of scripture, and retention is encouraged through regularly repeating this practice; in addition, Christian character is modelled and reproduced, and, through mutual encouragement within and outside of the home, the motivation is provided to repeat these attitudes and practices.

Importantly, the theory of social learning, when understood in light of faith transmission, shows us that it is not just about the head knowledge that is passed on. It is also about the knowledge of the story that is embedded in the narrative and embodied in the practices of the home. In light of this, James Smith encourages us to be concerned with the 'ethos of our households – the unspoken "vibe" carried in our daily rituals'. Doing so would

more fully embrace an holistic understanding of the learning of faith that takes place in the home; this learning is not just about the information that is passed on, but is as much about the routines and day-to-day practices that occupy the household. As he suggests: 'You could have Bible "inputs" every day and yet still have a household whose frantic rhythms are humming along with the consumerist myth of production and consumption. You might have Bible verses on the wall in every room of the house and yet the unspoken rituals reinforce self-centeredness rather than sacrifice.'⁶

Passing on faith: What makes a difference?

When it comes to best practice, it is possible to evidence through research factors in the home that correlate with an adolescent or adult successfully retaining the religious beliefs and practices of their parents. As such, successful transmission is often 'measured' using indicators of shared affiliations, attitudes and values, beliefs and practices between parent and offspring, e.g. church attendance.

The Theos report, *Passing on Faith*, assimilated the findings of 54 published studies, which together point to key characteristics of family life and the practice of faith therein that contribute to successful transmission. What we know from studies in child development and well-being in general is that it is within secure, loving, attentive and stable family environments that children flourish. Spiritual flourishing is also evidenced in the same type of environment.

It is unsurprising therefore that quality relationships are central to successful faith transmission. Parent-child relationships that are close, affirming and accepting – between both the mother and the child *and* the father and the child – have a positive impact on faith transmission. The frequency and quality of parent-child communication and interactions also influences future religiosity. A young person who feels close to their parents is less likely to leave or switch religion. Accordingly, relationships that are secure and stable – with evidence of strong childhood attachment – are shown to affect the long-term stability of religious beliefs. Research also points to particular types of relationships that are noted to be significant, e.g. the influence and impact of grandparents.

In a similar vein, the style of parenting makes a difference to the spiritual outcomes of children. Authoritative parenting, it would seem, is more conducive to religious transmission than authoritarian or permissive parenting. This is where the exercise of discipline and control is accompanied by warmth, nurture and responsiveness. This echoes the emphasis in the New Testament on Christian formation in the home being done through reasoned discipline and instruction (Ephesians 6.4).

Along with the quality of the relationships in the home, the quality and consistency of the practices in the home make a significant difference to spiritual outcomes.⁷ As we have already noted, theories around social learning indicate that modelling is key, and parents need to 'be' and 'do' what they want their child to become. Also, where parental unity is evidenced – in both the marital relationship and in shared beliefs and practices – this has a positive impact on faith transmission, as noted, for example, in the stronger impact of two churchgoing parents. The shared faith commitment of both parents is seen to strengthen family bonds and contribute positively to a child's well-being and development. Divorce and separation, on the other hand, is strongly associated with religious disaffiliation

It can be evidenced that the outworking of faith in the family provides a stabilising influence in the home; a greater emphasis on religion leads to more cohesive family relationships and the stability of beliefs and practices of adolescents. Catherine Stonehouse reminds us that, 'foundations for faith are being laid through the everyday interactions of children and adults.'⁸ Also, the spiritual formation that takes place in the home is not just one-way; parents accompany children on their spiritual journey as they themselves live out and are formed on their own.

The simple things

Beyond the mandate to do so, there are no sure-fire 'steps to success' when it comes to passing on faith. As with every other human endeavour in the journey of discipleship, what we do affirm is that nothing is beyond the scope of God's grace. Yet when it comes to the nurturing of faith in the family, Lawrence Richards reminds us of the 'simple things' – incorporated into the pattern of family life – that are important: 'Where there is love that communicates belonging, a respect that invites participation, a sharing that facilitates modeling, common activities that demand Christian interpretation of life, and a trust that encourages responsible choice, there is a relational context in which faith can be born, and grow, and flower.'⁹

There may appear to be nothing ground-breaking about these insights; it may indeed be understood as a very normal and natural part of family life. Yet these simple things take at least the investment of time and relational commitment that ensures that faith is not a family 'add-on', but the fulcrum around which family relationships, rituals and practices revolve. Exercising them also involves guarding hearts and homes from being shaped by pervading secular narratives. Instead, children's heart orientations – as well as their parents' – are to be shaped by the counternarrative of God's redemptive story.

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8. C Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids: BridgePoint Book, 1998), p. 63.

9. LO Richards, *Children's Ministry: Nurturing Faith within the Family of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 274.