

**RECOVERING A BIBLICAL
VISION FOR LIFELONG
DISCIPLESHIP**



KEEPING KIDS CHRISTIAN

CAMERON S. SHAFFER

FOREWORD BY JAKE MEADOR

“This book is a must-read for parents, pastors, and congregations who need help with what it takes to intentionally partner with God’s Spirit to create in children and their families a discipleship that lasts a lifetime. As challenging as it is practical and helpful, it gives clear and compelling ways to foster multigenerational relationships in congregations that nurture a maturity of faith for all God’s children. *Keeping Kids Christian* offers a robust corrective to the viral dechurching of twenty-somethings walking out of the sanctuary and never returning.”

Robbie Castleman, author of *Parenting in the Pew*
and *Story-Shaped Worship*

“Cameron Shaffer has written a generously diagnostic, biblically sound, and consistently edifying book that is as timely as it is helpful. We have needed an accessible, reliable guide to passing the faith down to the next generation(s) that is neither reactionary to problematic modern church practices nor blindly devoted to the better, older ways, and now we have it. Shaffer refreshingly—and rightly!—commends the old-new way of long-standing but recently forgotten Reformed conviction: the centrality of a healthy congregational, pastoral, and parental ecosystem for how God’s garden grows. Pastors, teachers, other church leaders, moms, dads, grandparents, single Christians, older children—it is hard to imagine who doesn’t need this book. I fully expect that those who read it will immediately want to share it, as I do, and that pastors and churches who heed even a little of the solid wisdom found here will be better for it.”

Dr. Mark A. Garcia, president, Greystone Theological
Institute; associate professor of systematic theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary

“I wish I’d had this book when I started a new church plant some thirty years ago. We asked, ‘What will we do with the children?’ We got some of it right, but we would have gotten more of it right if Cameron Shaffer’s book had been there to guide us. With depth and breadth of biblical and theological insight, Shaffer shows that lifelong discipleship matters and it takes a community to make a difference. This book is a wonderful starting point for anyone who is concerned about all generations of faith.”

Rev. Jul Medenblik, president,
Calvin Theological Seminary

“Every pastor longs to help the children of the church remain faithful to the call of the gospel. In *Keeping Kids Christian*, Cameron Shaffer provides a historically aware, theologically rich, and practically wise guide for thoughtful shepherding and parenting of our covenant children. It is written for pastors, but parents would learn much from his counsel as well.”

Dr. Scott Redd, lead pastor, Briarwood
Presbyterian Church

“Cameron Shaffer is an experienced pastor who, in this book, tackles one of the most pressing issues facing the evangelical church today—namely, how we can encourage our children to persevere in their faith as they enter their adult years. Whether or not one agrees with his theological description of covenant children, his advice to parents, pastors, and parishioners is of great value as we face this crucial challenge.”

Sandy Willson, pastor emeritus, Second Presbyterian
Church, Memphis, Tennessee

KEEPING KIDS CHRISTIAN

KEEPING KIDS CHRISTIAN

RECOVERING A BIBLICAL VISION
FOR LIFELONG DISCIPLESHIP



CAMERON S. SHAFFER



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Cameron S. Shaffer, *Keeping Kids Christian*,
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2026. Used by permission.

© 2026 by Cameron Scott Shaffer

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
BakerBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shaffer, Cameron Scott, 1989– author

Title: Keeping kids Christian : recovering a biblical vision for lifelong discipleship / Cameron Scott Shaffer.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2026] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025020238 | ISBN 9781540905055 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540905376 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493452880 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian education of children | Discipling (Christianity) | Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity | Child rearing—Religious aspects—Christianity

Classification: LCC BV1475.3 .S539 2026 | DDC 268/.432—dc23/eng/20250903

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025020238>

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Cover design by James Iacobelli

Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

26 27 28 29 30 31 32 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Scott and Pam.
Thank you for raising me to know and love God.

Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6

CONTENTS

Foreword by Jake Meador.....	11
Introduction.....	15
1. Born into God’s Family.....	21
<i>Discipling Children as Believers</i>	
2. Faithful, Firm, and Fun.....	43
<i>Parenting for Lifelong Discipleship</i>	
3. Leading by Example	66
<i>Pastors as Discipleship Models</i>	
4. Incorporation, Not Accommodation	89
<i>The Power of Corporate Worship</i>	
5. More Than Programs.....	115
<i>Kids Need the Whole Family of God</i>	
6. Keeping the Horse Before the Cart.....	137
<i>Programs Reinforce Parental Influence</i>	
7. Holding On	159
<i>Ministering for Faith Beyond Childhood</i>	
Conclusion.....	177
<i>Built to Last: Discipleship for a Lifetime</i>	
Acknowledgments.....	182
Notes	183

FOREWORD

When Christians talk about parenting, it's easy to approach the conversation in the way an engineer might approach the task of building a complicated machine. Start by finding the right parts. Then assemble them together in a certain way. And at the end you can receive the desired outcome every time.

Applied to parenting decisions and Christianity, this means that we want to know what programs to put our kids in, what schools to send them to, what books to give them, what kind of youth pastor to look for at a church, what media or people to keep them away from.

We want parenting hacks, in other words. We want shortcuts to the desired outcomes that rely on relatively simple onetime actions: Take your kid to youth group at 7:00 p.m. every Wednesday during the school year, and this will produce a Christian kid at the end. That's parenting as engineering, and it has a certain appeal: It's relatively simple. It promises predictability. For many it will feel "safer."

But there's a problem with this approach: Children are not projects to be accomplished or problems to be solved. They are persons. As persons they long for a certain sort of relational presence in their lives and, indeed, merit such presence. What matters is not necessarily what they are taught but what is caught throughout their childhood and adolescence, what the atmosphere and timbre of their home and church teach them about the faith.

Children want to know they are loved, that they belong. They want to feel welcome in the world. To borrow from educators Bill and Maryellen St. Cyr, the question children are constantly asking us without words is this: "Is it good to be me, here with you?" We all want to be able to answer that question in the affirmative, of course.

But if we're going to offer that kind of belonging and connection to our children, it requires something more than engineered techniques and problem-solving. The trick is that answering that simple question—"Is it good to be me, here with you?"—isn't really the sort of thing we do once and then we're done, nor is it something we can outsource to other people to answer for us. Rather, it is a question we are answering constantly through the way we live.

If you're searching for another Christian-parenting-as-engineering-problem book, then this probably isn't what you're looking for. But if you're wanting something that probes more deeply, something that considers more basic questions about what it means to live in love and holiness before the face of God and among our neighbors—including the smallest and most vulnerable neighbors we have—then this book will offer you good counsel.

Cameron Shaffer’s approach to Christian parenting is simply an account of Christian living applied to family life. As he presents it, parenting is not a discrete technical problem that must be solved. Rather, it is an element of Christian discipleship made possible by the same things that make every other aspect of the Christian life possible: God’s active and purposeful love toward us and our response, in faith, to that love.

Parenting is an intense and demanding relationship, of course, and the roles of father and mother make certain demands on us that other titles do not. Even so, the task of Christian parents is simply to show their children Christ—and that is done not through bespoke youth group events or emotional manipulation but through the ordinary life of faith lived before the face of God and among God’s people. Repeatedly Cam resists the attempt to “solve” our parenting woes through technical hacks and calls us back instead to the ordinary means of grace. His confidence in those means is inspiring and encouraging and a great reminder to us that the same means Christ used to call us to himself are the ones he will use to do that for our children.

For too long we American Protestants have been inordinately fond of the “one simple trick,” the life hack, the technique. Too often we have done as the Ephesian church did and forgotten our first love. If we are to return to health, then we must return to that love.

What makes this book so helpful and worthy of your attention is that in it you’ll find a pastor reflecting on how a person given to that love would go about loving and caring for children. Too often we have put the cart before the horse in our thinking about parenting, as Cameron rightly

Foreword

notes. This is a book in which first things are allowed to be first—and then we are allowed to answer the questions we have about that most practical and challenging thing, caring for our children.

Jake Meador, editor in chief of *Mere Orthodoxy*

INTRODUCTION

The single greatest religious shift in American history is underway, driven by children of the church walking away from the Christian faith.

Like many pastors, I have seen this sociological reality play out both in my communities and in the faces of friends and family who have left the faith. Many parents and grandparents in my church are in anguish over children they raised to love Jesus becoming indifferent or hostile to him. And parents in my congregation with young children are watching nervously as their peers reject the faith in droves and their own children enter a world where Christian belief and practice are no longer not even assumed but actively treated as foreign.¹ As both a pastor and a parent of young children, I share the same concern as my friends and congregants—I want my kids to keep their faith in Christ into and through adulthood. This is not just a professional interest; it's deeply personal.

In the span of twenty-five years, the percentage of Americans identifying as Christian dropped from roughly 85 percent in 1990 to 65 percent in 2015.² For the first time in

American history, less than 50 percent of the nation identifies as Protestant.³ By 2018, the “Nones”—people without a self-identified religious affiliation—were as large a group as Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants, and by 2024 they were the single largest religious group in the country.⁴ This group represented only about 10 percent in 1990, yet it is the single largest religious demographic for Millennials and Gen Z and is on track to outnumber Protestants of all traditions combined by 2030.⁵

Ryan P. Burge in *The Nones* demonstrates that the rise of the religiously unaffiliated is driven by children of religious parents increasingly not adopting their family’s faith. In *The Great Dechurching*, Burge, Jim Davis, and Michael Graham examine how the rise of the Nones was fueled by the disaffiliation of the religious “in name only” crowd and by those who grew up actively engaged in church.⁶

At the same time as this dechurching, a cottage industry of “deconversion” publications has developed: books and podcasts devoted to the individualized experience of former Christians, across the full range of denominational traditions, who share their story of growing up Christian and then repudiating the faith.⁷ While anecdotal by nature, the narrative details easily map onto the sociological landscape charted by Burge, Davis, and Graham.

In response to this shift toward dechurching and deconversion, the church has undertaken a renewed effort to regain lost ground and lost people. Apologists have sprung into action in an attempt to address deconversion stories, insulate adults tempted in that direction, and win back those who have rejected Christianity.

This shift in religious affiliation—and the departure of so many from the Christian faith—is one of the most important

ministerial realities facing pastors and churches. The efforts to share the gospel and lead prodigal sheep back home are noble and important. So yes, evangelism must guide the de-churched home and shepherd the lost into Christ's kingdom, but simply growing the numbers in a church that is leaking like a sieve ignores the deeper problems that produced this situation. The church's kids are leaving it behind, and reckoning with the reason the church has lost so many from its fold and adjusting its practices to retain its children are both absolutely crucial.⁸ The church must act now.

In 2021 sociologists Amy Adamczyk and Christian Smith published *Handing Down the Faith*, which built on well-known sociological research about childhood faith retention.⁹ Sociologists have known for decades that parental influence overwhelmingly determines whether people hold on to their childhood faith as they grow.

Most churches' resource allocation and ministry strategies are dominated by Sunday school, confirmation, vacation Bible school (VBS), kids' ministry coordinators, youth groups, youth pastors, short-term mission trips and service projects, and the like. The apparent venerability of these programmatic strategies provides a sense of their indispensable contribution to faith retention, but none of them reflect the truth that parents are far and away the most crucial factor for passing along a lasting faith to children. A common refrain pastors hear from their children and youth ministry leaders is that they wish parents understood that the ministry needs parental engagement if it's going to be helpful for the kids. This is true, but backward: Children's and youth ministry are supplementary, at best, to what parents are doing at home. In other words, the *vast* energy that churches spend trying to get parents invested in kids' programming so it's effective

is misallocated. Investing in the parents directly is far more effective.

Sociologists have known this since the 1970s, yet the American church somehow continues to overlook it. Adamczyk and Smith both reaffirmed this data and analyzed the parenting styles and practices that were most effective across religious traditions in handing the faith from one generation to the next. These styles and practices are authoritative parenting with faith as a lifestyle (by a wide margin the most important), with channels to express that lifestyle, particularly incorporation into the liturgical and communal practices of the religion. Alarming, they also noted how things like Sunday school, confirmation, and youth group can actually be counterproductive to faith retention.

My goal in this book is to apply observations like Adamczyk and Smith's as well as Burge's to the church's programmatic strategy. In light of what we know about how faith is passed down and retained across generations, how should the church allocate its resources and organize its ministry programs?

In the arena of children and family ministry, there is a long debate and a large publishing industry surrounding ministry best practices, especially when it comes to youth ministry. The nature of the debate is really about where a church's kids' ministry should fall along a spectrum, with fun, welcoming, adolescent vibes on one end and rigorous biblical and theological study on the other. Rather than enter that debate, I want to challenge its whole premise.

The question is not whether to have a youth group that is either silly or studious; it is how to justify having a youth group at all if the goal is to help kids retain their faith. This is not tinkering with or adjusting the details of a framework

for discipleship; it is the case for an entirely different approach.¹⁰ The prioritization of this framework fueled the great dechurching, and while there may be a place for these programs in a church's ministry, they should be downgraded in importance and treated as risky for faith retention.

I am a pastor, not a sociologist or psychologist. The following chapters utilize sociological and psychological data, but I'm interested in the church's practice. I'm a Protestant, Reformed, Presbyterian, and evangelical minister, which means I unashamedly hold to the Scriptures as the only rule for faith and practice, and I believe the church is conscience-bound only by what God has revealed in his Word. My vocation is pastoral ministry, so while my writing is informed by sociological insights, I will be writing on ministry practices. And since God's Word is the church's final authority, one of my goals will be to show the overlap between what sociologists have noted and what Scripture reveals. I unapologetically hold to Reformed theological convictions, but the following arguments for practices in the church apply to any denominational context.

This book's aim is to help fellow pastors and ministry leaders think through how the church can work in their context to ensure that their kids stay Christian, though it is written in such a way that interested laypeople can learn by "listening in." This is not a parenting book. While parenting is the most important aspect of kids staying Christian, the focus here is on how the church can go about its work of ministering to children. Like with children and youth programming, the insights for ministry to parents will also splash over to provide some understanding into how to better parent. Similarly, the practice of family discipleship and the crucial role of fathers in particular for faith development are not the focus of this

book, though information related to these topics will surface. This is a *how* book, not a how-to book, even if it is replete with concrete examples. The aim is to provide a model for lifelong discipleship, not specific programmatic guidance.

The book's focus is on how the church in its ministry practices can retain its children and proactively head off the great dechurching. The following chapters will discuss the different sociological observations in conversation with theological analysis, with recommendations on the practical application. To that end, this book lays out the biblical foundations for how childhood conversion happens to help churches minister to families and kids (chapter 1). The crucial role parents play in faith retention will be explored, with consideration to both sociological research and scriptural wisdom (chapter 2). Pastors must know the principles of parental influence as well as teach and model them in warm, authoritative ways in order to equip parents to sincerely model that same warmth and authority in the daily rhythms of faith (chapter 3). Rather than isolating children in age-segregated programming, churches must intentionally incorporate them into their gathered worship and their broader life (chapter 4), ensuring they are known and discipled as full members of the family of Christ (chapter 5).

Finally, this book will emphasize the importance of fostering a faith ecosystem rather than relying on programs (chapter 6). As children grow into adulthood, the influence of their parents continues, but churches also have a role in supporting them through key life transitions (chapter 7). By taking this approach—one that integrates theology, sociological insights, parenting, pastoral leadership, and church community, resting upon the good grace of God for the salvation of our children—we can recover a biblical vision for lifelong discipleship.

Chapter 1

BORN INTO GOD'S FAMILY

Discipling Children as Believers

On Easter morning in 1996, I was sitting in the back pew of the church alongside my family. I was a young boy and had grown up in a Christian home where the Bible was faithfully taught. The biblical story of Jesus Christ was part of the fabric of my life and was just as true for me as the sky was blue, the grass was green, and any other obvious facets of kid life. But that morning as I listened to my pastor, I realized that if the biblical story was real, then I needed to respond to it in some way. I bowed my head and said a prayer asking Jesus to save me from my sins. That was clearly a moment of faith, but it is also true that I cannot recall a single prior moment when I didn't believe the gospel.

In order to understand how our kids remain Christian, we need to first grasp how they become Christians. The church is often caught between two competing, unhelpful impulses on childhood salvation. The first is that since salvation is a

work of God by his grace alone, the influence of the church and family on a child's salvation is only incidental or providential, not something to be intentionally worked toward. The other is that a child's Christian identity can be assumed or planned through their participation in a family or church, as if God's direct and miraculous involvement in their heart were an inconsequential afterthought rather than an absolute necessity that is beyond our power to compel.

Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." On the one hand, we need to avoid any mechanistic, naturalistic impulses concerning our children's faith and depend upon God's grace for their salvation and perseverance therein. On the other hand, we need to acknowledge that God has established regular, ordinary means of producing that faith and work to foreground these in our churches, our families, and the lives of our children.

When either mechanistic or fatalistic approaches dominate discipleship of kids, faith retention weakens, and many children do not continue in Christianity or the church into adulthood. Scripture teaches that salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit, not something we can manufacture, and pastors must begin there to properly orient the church's efforts for lifelong discipleship. The Bible presents faith as a covenant reality—children are already part of the church community and should be discipled as such, rather than being treated as outsiders who must become Christians later even as the church seeks their sincere profession of faith. This view shapes the kinds of tools and approaches the church uses to guide children toward lasting faith and establishes a biblical foundation for the approaches to be discussed throughout the rest of the book.

How Does God Save? His Holy Spirit

How does a child become a Christian? That question has many layers to it. It could be rephrased as “How is a child saved?,” which in turn can be further distilled (or expanded!) to “How does a child come to possess saving faith in Jesus Christ, in which their spiritually dead heart is regenerated with his life as they are united to him and justified?” How does someone go from being spiritually dead to being born again in Christ?

John’s Gospel takes up this question right from its prologue. In John 1:12–13, the apostle affirms that anyone who receives Jesus and believes in his name becomes a child of God. He draws a distinction between groups of people: those who reject Jesus and those who receive him. The implication is that everyone starts in a position of nonacceptance and that receiving Jesus is a necessary condition of becoming a child of God. In other words, we don’t *start* as children of God but *become* children of God through Christ. “Become children of God” is both John’s shorthand describing the act of salvation and the highest blessing of salvation: fellowship with God our Father as his children.

Becoming children of God necessitates a rebirth as his children. And this birth occurs “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (v. 13). What causes someone to receive Christ and become a child of God? John rules out three possibilities. First, it is not genetic or biological. People are not saved on the basis of their physical makeup or lineage. Second, it is not something conjured up or willed by the person needing to be saved. There’s nothing inherent in us that empowers us to will our own salvation, the movement from death to life. Third, it’s not the will of man, literally “husband”

in Greek. Salvation is not something we can marry into. Or, to put a fine point on it, salvation is not a social benefit. Joining the right group, whether a family, church, neighborhood, or nation, does not unite someone by faith to Jesus.

Reception of Christ and becoming a child of God happens by the act of God himself. On this level, there is nothing anyone can do to save another person, including our beloved children. We wait with humility and patience upon the sovereign will and mercy of God.

John 3 expands on this idea in the famous nighttime encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus asserts that he knows Jesus is from God, but Jesus quickly corrects him: “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). Nicodemus claims to know Jesus, but Christ is telling him that in actuality he doesn’t. Nicodemus needs a transformation, to be born again, in order to truly see Jesus for who he is. The Greek phrase *anōthen*, typically translated “born again,” has a double meaning and can also be understood as “born from above.” Nicodemus doesn’t take it that way and responds, perhaps sarcastically or even overliterally, “How can someone be born again and reenter his mother’s womb?” (see v. 4).

Nicodemus is no dummy. The real issue here is that he hasn’t considered that he is lacking something to know and see Christ. Jesus pushes back yet again and more clearly explains that new life has to come from above. He goes on to explain in verses 13–14 that since he is the Christ who descended from heaven, he is the one who is able to provide this renewed life from above. To be born again is to have the life of heaven, the life of Christ, dispensed by Jesus in his ministry.

People need to be renewed in the life of Christ, via the Spirit of Christ (vv. 5–6), in order to enter the kingdom of

God. Like begets like, and any new life apart from this reality is just the same old life in the flesh. Life in the Spirit of God is necessary to see and enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus heads off any misconception that being born again or from above can happen in any way other than through the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit. He explains that the born-again or born-above life is given from the Spirit, and the Spirit is like the wind. (Here Jesus uses another word with a double meaning, *pneuma*. “Spirit,” “wind,” and “breath” in Greek all use the same word.) The Spirit acts and goes where he wills. We can't see or control or channel the wind, and in the same way, the Holy Spirit does as he pleases in providing people renewed life.

In other words, to become a child of God, saved by being united to Jesus, people need to be born of God, which occurs only through the sovereign prerogative of the Holy Spirit. We are saved by Christ giving us his Holy Spirit, who is the provision of Christ's life to us.

Any ministry practice for children or approach to discipleship of them must absolutely start here. We cannot control or channel the Spirit but must instead act in humble patience, trusting in God's grace to provide salvation. Our children are born again as children of God, not by their being special, not by our efforts to disciple them, not by their belonging to the right church or youth group, but from above as the Holy Spirit acts according to the counsel of his wise and holy will.

Conversion Comes by Faith in Christ

To convert to Christianity means, at this first layer, to be united to Jesus. Throughout the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul, this language of being united to

Jesus, “in Christ,” is a dominant way of describing the nature of the Christian’s relationship to Jesus. We are “in” him, and he is in us. We are tied together—he is the vine, we are the branches, and we abide in him, meaning that he is the source and flow of our life. When we speak of becoming a Christian and converting, this is what we must first mean: participating in the life of Christ because we have been united to him.

This is not something we can create on our own but is the mystical work of the Holy Spirit. “In Christ” is the real and true being and status of the Christian. No one is conceived being united to Christ, but we are transferred from spiritual alienation to union with Christ by the work of God. This happens by faith, which is the gift of God to sinners. John 1 says that to become a child of God, one needs to receive Christ. That means welcoming and embracing him. In John 3 Jesus clarifies that becoming a child of God—rebirth from above by the Spirit’s work—comes through looking to the Son. Jesus compares himself to the bronze serpent Moses raised in Numbers 21. At that time, God was punishing his disobedient people by sending venomous snakes among them. Moses erected a bronze staff, which looked like a snake, on a hill. Anyone who had been bitten by a snake would be healed and spared if they looked at the staff.

There was nothing magical about the staff, nor was God setting up weird conditions for salvation. The point of that exercise was to remind us that the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life. The people of Israel, like us, did nothing to earn that salvation. Those poisoned by the snakes were invited to trust God for salvation; all they had to do was look at the staff. All they had to do was trust that God would save. And all we do is rest upon and trust the

promise of God for salvation. Faith is receiving and resting upon what God has promised.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that true salvation—not from poison but from sin, death, and judgment—comes in the same way. Just look; just trust. In our case, we look not to a raised serpent but to Jesus raised on a cross for our salvation. Simply having faith in Jesus, receiving and resting upon him as he is offered in the gospel, is the instrument by which the Holy Spirit grants rebirth from above to people.

Conversion happens by faith—true belief and trust in Christ. Our churches and ministries tend to be really good about one part of faith: “You’ve got to believe, and it has to be your own and not someone else’s faith! Salvation is by faith, so you have to believe for yourself.” This is absolutely true but is only one-half of reality, and left by itself it can lead to warped practices and outcomes.

The danger pastors sometimes fall into is functioning as if we can persuade people into faith. Now, Christianity is reasonable and rational, and we should strive for persuasiveness and rationality in showcasing our faith, especially to our children. However, many children’s and youth programs, especially youth retreats and mission trips, have an element of manipulation to them, where we plan to say just the right things in just the right way at just the right time in order to compel people into faith. Confirmation classes can be especially dangerous in this regard. Godly parents who really hope their kids come to faith, children who desperately want to please their parents and fit in with their friends, pastors and teachers who want their faithful labors to bear obvious fruit—these create the perfect storm for pressured, false confession of faith. We tell kids what we believe, what they should believe, and what words to say or projects to do,

and then treat them at the end of that time as if they have sincere faith because they went through a class.

But faith cannot be manufactured, either by us laboring for our children or by our children themselves. Being reborn as a child of God does not happen by the flesh, by the will, or by our social connections. It happens from God. The Holy Spirit works faith in us; faith itself is a gift from God, whereby we are enabled to believe as our wills and minds are renewed in the likeness of Christ. The gospel and salvation are the gracious work of God alone, from start to end and in the middle. Knowing God—having faith—comes from God himself in our being reborn from above.

Our ministries need to always foreground the gracious, undeserved, and unmerited work of God, including his work in drawing us to himself by faith. The need for genuine, saving faith should never be presumed. Without that faith our children are not united to Jesus; only through it are our kids “in Christ” alongside us. Devoted labor, ministry, and parenting should occur for the sake of planting and nurturing faith, but any confidence in our kids staying Christian (i.e., staying united to Jesus) needs to start here. Otherwise we rest upon sociological or social status and then see generations walk away from Christianity. Otherwise we rest upon the efficacy of our ministerial programs and youth groups, then spin our wheels as we try to reinvent something that cannot provide eternal life in the first place. Otherwise we feel betrayed by God when we do everything “right” and then faith doesn’t stick with our kids.

Salvation in Christ and the faith by which he is received come from the Holy Spirit, and we cannot channel him into the hearts of our youngsters. Our children staying Christian is then God’s work and responsibility. He calls and holds his

people, and he who unites his children to Christ alone can maintain their union with him.

Because faith comes from God, we can trust and follow the ordinary means he has established for providing it.

Conversion Comes by God's Covenant

I'm an American because I was born an American. I was not merely born in US territory but am descended from generations of Americans, going back to before the Revolution and all the way to the Dutch colonization of New Amsterdam (Manhattan). My fathers and mothers are buried in American soil all across the continent, and I am deeply formed by American culture, institutions, history, and practices. People from countries across the globe can speak of their national identities in similar ways. Yet one popular way of describing America as unique among nations focuses on its ideological foundation: a country established to secure self-evident truths about human rights and happiness. America is not only a people, place, and history but also a commitment to ideals.

I was an American by birth long before I could understand these ideals, much less articulate, agree with, and defend them. I was taught our story; instructed in our civics; shown the beauty of our nation and ideals (Memorial Day parades and Fourth of July fireworks do wonders to instill affection in children for a country); and formed in the values of liberty, equality, and democracy as I grew. America was my heritage and inheritance by birthright long before I ever grasped the meaning and responsibilities of that gift. My parents and grandparents never said things like, "We don't want to pass our citizenship on to him because we want him to decide

to be an American on his own as an adult.” They treated me as an American who needed to be trained in responsible citizenship.

God operates in the same way with his people. The clearest picture of this is with the Old Testament people of God, the nation of Israel. God called Abram from the land of Ur and made a covenant with him. A covenant is a kind of pledge or agreement, but with greater weight. Theologians and scholars of the ancient Near Eastern world have proposed multiple definitions for “covenant,” including “a bond in blood sovereignly administered”¹ and “a stipulated commitment under divine sanctions.”² But the easiest one to remember and teach to children is “A relationship that God establishes with us and guarantees by his word.”³ A covenant is the kind of relationship that God creates and sets the terms for, and he is the one who guarantees its terms. His word is his bond and the collateral for the fulfillment of the relationship.

The specific covenant made with Abram was that he would be made a great nation through many descendants, that he would be granted the land of Canaan as a home for his people, and that God would bless him and the world through his descendants (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:4–5). This pledge was always about salvation in Christ, not merely having kids, grandkids, and a plot of land to build a home. Abram trusted God’s promise, “I will be a God to you and your children,” and it was counted to him as righteousness.

God’s covenant with Abram was developed and fleshed out over time, but a key milestone was delivering his descendants, numbering hundreds of thousands, from slavery in Egypt. Abram’s descendants were known as the Hebrew people, the nation of Israel. God confirmed with them through Moses

that they were heirs of the covenant promises to Abram, and as the nation and community that inherited that promise, they received another covenant that detailed the rules, expectations, and blessings of being the people of God. To be born to an Israelite was to be born an inheritor of the promises of God. “I will be a God to you and your children.”

Covenants in the ancient world came with signs and seals that represented their substance. In God’s covenant with David, for instance (2 Sam. 7:1–16; Jer. 33:20–21), David’s throne was God’s sign and seal of his promise. The covenant with Abram had the sign and seal of circumcision. Circumcision had the dual purpose of assuring the people of God’s promise and reminding them that they were parties to the covenant, which brings with it both the promises of God and the expectations of belonging to him. Circumcision was so closely identified with the covenant that God actually calls it the covenant itself (Gen. 17:9–13), and it being marked on the body of male Israelites served as an indelible reminder of who they were, by virtue of the promise of God.

To be born an Israelite was to be born a child of the covenant. To be a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a member of the nation with its rules and customs defined by the covenant made under Moses, was to be an Israelite. And an Israelite individually was a child of the covenant: a child of the promise of God for salvation.

In this sense, under the terms of the covenant relationship that God established, a child of God is someone who belongs to the covenant community of God. Sometimes modern Christians denigrate the Old Testament community of God as “just” a political or cultural entity. It’s as if there were two Old Testament peoples of God: first, the Israelites who received the covenants and Mosaic law, defined by rules,

regulations, and cultures, but for whom being a child of God was not actually spiritual and salvific; and second, the Israelites who had faith in God and incidentally were required to be part of the first community as an act of obedience.

It's true that as the history of redemption progresses, the community of God finds its fuller expression in the New Testament church under Christ's rule. But the communities formed by God's covenants are always aimed at the same thing: his glory in our enjoyment of him through salvation in Jesus Christ. This was just as true of the Old Testament covenant community of national Israel as it is of the New Testament covenant community of the Christian church. People of the covenant are not just discrete individuals, converted and united to Jesus by faith and then joined together for worship and discipleship. Covenant communities are families God has established for the sake of passing down and enculturating the faith in its members.

To be born an Israelite was to be born, in this sense, into the family of God, with his promise of salvation as their birthright and inheritance. This is how the New Testament talks about the Old Testament Jewish people (see Rom. 9:1–5). A Jewish baby born into the nation of Israel was a child of God by covenant; they were in the family of God by virtue of the relationship that God established and guaranteed by his word. A child, in this sense, becomes a follower of God by covenant.

How does this not contradict salvation by faith alone? Because the covenant family of God, with all its rules, regulations, customs, and expectations, was intended to cultivate faith in God. Even circumcision was a call to regeneration (Deut. 10:16; 30:6). The things that marked the boundaries of the covenant community were also calls to faith.

Circumcision as a sign of the covenant was an indelible mark in the flesh that renewed life—not only in the body but in the heart and soul—and was necessary for salvation, which God alone could truly provide.

The cairn stones were set up to remind the children of the Old Testament of God's miraculous salvation (Exod. 13:3–6; 24:4; Deut. 27:1–8; Josh. 4:9). The signs of the covenant were more than markers of the earthly family of God; they were the earthly means of calling children of Israel to faith in God, whereby they were united to Jesus. As God said to Abram, “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7).

This covenant principle continues from the Old to the New Testament; now circumcision and the Passover lamb have been fulfilled in the death of Jesus, who in the new covenant has given his church the signs and seals of baptism and the Lord's Supper to exhibit the relationship that he has established with the church and guarantees by his word. The promise of God remains for those who trust in God by faith in Christ. The covenant community is still the family of God aimed at enculturating faith in Christ: “For the promise is for you and for your children . . . , everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39).

Conversion has a community and a corporate identity. Israelites were Israelites by virtue of God's promise. Salvation was never by blood or birth but by the promise of God (the covenant) received by faith. They could be described as Israelites by birth and blood because they were heirs of the promise, but they were Israelites truly by faith, insofar as their hearts were circumcised by God through trust in his promises.

The same is true for children of the church. It is faith in the person and work of Jesus that saves, but we can also describe our children as being Christian insofar as they are part of the community that has received the promises of God: the church. The covenant community of God works in the same way. Conversion, then, is about receiving the promises of God through the normal things of the world, which are gifts that God uses to work faith for the sake of union with Christ. This connection between covenant community and faith is what Paul reminds Timothy of regarding his upbringing—that his sincere faith was passed down to him by his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15).

Every Christian belongs to the community formed by God’s covenant promises: the church of Christ. To be abundantly clear, being born to Christian parents does not unite a child to Jesus by faith. But just as the children of Israelites were themselves Israelites, children born to Christian parents who are part of the church receive the blessings of the church as their heritage and inheritance. In this sense, to convert to Christianity is to belong to the community forged by God’s covenant—to join the church by becoming a participant in God’s covenant of grace.

The church, its ministry, and its community are the natural, God-ordained means for nurturing faith in the children of Christians. The church and its ministries are the ordinary means by which grace is distributed to and received by the children of God. Kids become Christians through participation in the life of the church. They stay Christian through their rootedness in the church’s faith and practice, and the vehicle that normally brings them into the life of the church is their family—namely, their parents.

The Church Needs to Treat Its Kids as Christians

There are several implications that flow from the covenant nature of God's people, and one of them is that the church should presume the children of Christian parents are themselves Christians. The church is not to act as missionaries to its children, as if they were non-Christians living outside the kingdom of God, but should disciple them as those to whom the kingdom of God belongs. Conversion and union with Christ occur by faith, but that does not preclude the church from describing its children as being Christian before they have expressed that faith.

The first reason for this freedom is due to the covenant, community nature of the church. The second is that the church should presume the presence of saving faith in its children even prior to their articulation of that faith. Saving faith is not rational assent to the precepts of Christian dogma, though it does necessitate that as a consequence. Saving faith is a regenerated heart that trusts God. Like how children implicitly trust, rest upon, and cry out for their earthly parents before they can articulate the nature of their relationship, children can trust in their heavenly Father before being able to express the reasonable nature of their faith.

A good biblical example of this is John the Baptist in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth. In Luke 1:41–44 when the pregnant Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the preborn John recognizes the preborn Jesus across the distance of the two wombs. John leaps and kicks for joy; he is acting in a regenerated manner even before being born. The Holy Spirit descended upon John in the womb and regenerated him, granting him faith and union with Jesus even before he was born, much less able to speak words of faith. John was

not saved differently than any other person; he was saved by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who provides faith. The difference is the clear example of the timing and the unusual circumstances in which God provided for the conception and ministry of John.

When Jesus welcomed children to join him (Matt. 19:13–14; Mark 10:13–16), he welcomed even infants (Luke 18:15–17) and announced that the kingdom of God belonged to those like them. He was not saying that adults with a child-like faith were part of the kingdom while the infants themselves were out. He was saying instead that the kingdom of God, which no one can see or enter without rebirth from above, belonged even to these very young children. Infants before they can speak, and toddlers before they can recite the Apostles' Creed with understanding, have the faith from the Holy Spirit that brings one into the kingdom.

Confirmation (or communicant) classes are good examples of this principle in action. These classes, if done well, are designed not to draw faith out of a child or to create faith in them. Rather, they exist to confirm to the child, their family, and the church the existence of that presumed faith, by equipping the child to sincerely articulate what it is they believe. They are built to confirm or exhibit faith, where presumed faith transforms into professed faith. The church approaches its children as baby Christians who need to grow in their communion with Jesus.

By nature, kids are children of wrath because they are sinners who are in bondage to the power of Satan and in need of a Savior (Eph. 2:1–4). But by covenant, kids of Christian parents, kids of the church, are holy. To be holy is to be devoted to God, set aside and dedicated to him on his terms. By virtue of belonging to Christian parents—parents who

themselves belong to the one holy church—children of believers are holy.

This is why Paul can talk about the children of one believing parent and one nonbelieving parent as holy (1 Cor. 7:14–15). They are already heirs of the covenant promises of God and are recipients of the normal, temporal benefits of belonging to the covenant community. As children of the covenant, we presume that our kids have been welcomed by Jesus into his kingdom, and we disciple them accordingly. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were commanded to teach their children the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). Children, even infants, received this creedal statement and were expected to be taught it and recite it with honesty. Their parents were not coercing the children to recite what wasn’t true of them. By covenant, the Lord was indeed the God of the kids of Israel, and the parents, with eagerness to have their children disciplined, were to teach them to heartily recite those words.

In the same way, Christian parents and the church can teach their children to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven” long before the kids can articulate their own personal faith. God is the Father of those who have been united by faith to God the Son, yet parents can teach their children to pray to their heavenly Father even from the youngest age, when vocabularies are first developing, long before a child is capable of vocalizing their personal beliefs. Why? Because they are children of the covenant who belong to the church through the normal gift of a family and can be honestly described as Christians who are being disciplined, not non-Christians who need to be evangelized. Their status in the church is members—nonprofessing members, but members of God’s people through his covenant all the same.

The Ordinary Means of Grace: The Church's Toolbelt

Family and the church itself are the normal and natural gifts that God has given his people to ensure that faith in Christ is passed down. The rest of this book concerns the posture, culture, and hope for the regular rhythms of family and church life to strive for so our children stay Christian. Salvation and union with Christ are not mechanistic but are works of God's sovereign grace exercised within the context of these normal communities. And God uses tools (means) to normally and ordinarily apply the benefits of Christ's redemptive work (grace) to his people. These are the Word of God, prayer, and the sacraments. The clearest biblical statement to this effect is found in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

If we want our kids to be united to Jesus, to grow in communion with him, and to profess sincere faith in him, then our churches and homes need to be characterized by devotion to the ordinary means of grace. These means are made effective for salvation not by the efforts and skills of those administering them or the quality of the recipients but by the appointment of Christ and the operation of the Holy Spirit. Christ established these practices, and the Holy Spirit uses them to bring the gospel to bear on the hearts of those who receive them, so that faith may be worked in their souls and they turn to Christ. If a church wants its kids to be Christians by faith and to remain in the grace of God, then whatever programs and culture it may have must be characterized by these practices and ordinances.

First, the Word of God must shape the church's programs and culture, for it is through Scripture that we come to know God. Through the preaching of the Word, the Spirit works to

create and strengthen faith in its hearers. As we immerse our minds and wills in Scripture, we are transformed—no longer conformed to a sinful world but renewed by God's truth. Saturating our churches and children in the Word and cultivating a sincere love for it are essential for them to know God. He uses his Word to train, educate, and form his people, producing and bolstering faith. By listening to Scripture, children learn to recognize the voice of their Father—just as the sheep learn to know the voice of Jesus (John 10:16, 27). The Word of God contains his covenant promises, written and proclaimed, given to his people so they may know the substance of that promise: Christ crucified and received by faith.

Because the divine gift of faith is presumed present by covenant, children are to receive the Word of God both as covenant members and as those who need to grow in faith. The Word is to be preached so as to draw people to faith, salvation, and conversion. Children, no more or less than adults, need the nurturing of the Word.

The second ordinary means of grace is prayer. Prayer is asking God for things that are agreeable to his will and character, and that certainly includes praying for the salvation and spiritual formation of our children. Prayer is the acknowledgment that the normal, visible powers of cause and effect are not all there is to the universe, that there is a God, that he is powerful, and that he can do all that he pleases. In other words, prayer is us as his children turning to this God for help for *our* children. Teaching our children to pray and praying for our children are some of the highest blessings that come with being part of God's covenant community.

This is the key: The Word of God is his covenant address to his people, wherein his gospel promise is announced and

we're reminded of the grace of Jesus. Prayer is our covenant response to God, wherein we who are parties to the gospel cry out in the name of Jesus and the power of the Spirit to our heavenly Father. Prayer is the practice of our personal relationship to God. We as his children come to our loving Father. Teaching our children to pray is teaching them to know God—to hear his voice in his Word and to speak to him as one who hears and cares for us. Prayer is an act of faith, where through the mediation of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, God's children lift their hearts, souls, and minds to their Father and grow in communion with him. Prayer knits our hearts more deeply to God. Teaching our children to pray is not simply teaching them a model and posture but walking with them down the most basic path of faith: We may not see him, but there is a God, he hears you, and he cares for you, because he is our heavenly Father.

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are together the third ordinary means of grace. Sacraments are signs and seals of God's covenant that represent and communicate to us the substance of the gospel promise of Jesus. They affirm the covenant promise of God, and since they are divinely established, they come with divine authority and power.

Baptism marks admission into God's covenant family, the church. It represents the promise of God that as surely as one is washed in water, if they turn to God through faith in Jesus Christ, their soul is cleansed of sin. The Word preached is the covenant announced, prayer is speaking to God as his covenant children, and the sacraments are the covenant Word made visible in water, bread, and wine.

Now, baptism is not only the marker of admission but also a means by which the Holy Spirit accomplishes what

it represents. This is the exact same as the preaching of the Word: It is not sound waves in the air from a pastor's mouth or the reverberation in a person's ear that creates faith. God the Spirit uses the sounds and words and meanings as the avenue by which he creates and builds faith. It does not happen automatically whenever someone hears Scripture taught, but only at the Spirit's discretion is the Word used to bring people to faith. Baptism is the same. It is not water or the motions of the pastor in washing a child that regenerates; that only happens by faith as the Holy Spirit works. But like with the spoken Word, the Spirit uses the waters of baptism as the covenant promises of God made visible (rather than audible in the Word) to create and build up the faith of our children.⁴ Baptism is a Christ-established means by which the union of children with Christ is confirmed and our communion with him strengthened, and it serves as a lifelong blessing for those who receive it since it is a gift of Jesus.

The Lord's Supper functions similarly. It is the covenant, family meal of the church. While baptism admits into the family, the Lord's Supper confirms. Regular participation in the Lord's Supper is a means by which our faith is nourished. Scripture is clear that you need to be able to discern and judge the meaning of the sacrament before coming to it (1 Cor. 11:27–32), which means a sincere profession of faith is a prerequisite for coming to the table.⁵ Even children who have not been admitted to the table benefit from being present in the worship of the church when the sacrament is served. Beyond teaching, seeing the sacrament fuel the rest of the church helps whet children's appetite for deeper faith in Jesus.

How do our kids stay Christian? The same way they become Christians—through the grace of God. Prioritizing the

means of communicating this grace builds and maintains our children's faith. Our kids stay Christian the same way they became Christians—through the regular gifts of God to his people, the family and covenant community of God. If we want our kids to stay Christian, we must prioritize those things using the normal means of grace. Family is divinely established in creation. Belonging and knowing God happen through family.