

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

3 Parenting Myths We Are All Tempted To Believe

by Tim Challies

God tells each of us that we are responsible to faithfully parent our children, and that ultimately our task is to raise our children to be fellow disciples of Christ. Through his Word he instructs us how to go about so daunting a task. Yet even while God sets the challenge and provides the instruction, he makes no guarantees about the result. He gives no sure formula that will result every time in healthy, obedient, saved children.

As Christian parents raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, we can be tempted to believe some dangerous myths about what we are doing and how we are to go about it. I was helped and challenged anew as I encountered these myths, and the truths that destroy them, in Chap Bettis' book *The Disciple-Making Parent*.

Results Guaranteed

Myth #1: The perfect environment will guarantee that my children follow the Lord. I've never heard anyone outright express this myth, but I've spoken to hundreds who functionally believe it. I've had to battle against it in all 17 years of my parenting. It is so easy to reduce parenting to a method and to look for a step-by-step approach that will guarantee the results we want. Many authors and so-called experts are only too happy to oblige us in the myth by providing and promising their methodology. But even while we acknowledge the usefulness of methods, we must reject their supremacy. "Discipling our children in the faith is not a matter of combining the right ingredients and the right environment to guarantee a godly adult." Parenting is not baking a cake or assembling IKEA furniture. God gives us no guarantee.

Truth #1: You cannot control your children. Children are "independent moral beings made in the image of God. They have real choices to make." We can teach and guide and plead, but we cannot control. By the grace of God, some children far exceed their parents in godliness and grace; in the providence of God, some children utterly reject the legacy their parents attempt to leave them. "Our job is to discharge faithfully the duties God has given to us, leaving the results in God's hands. Our goal is not 'successful' parenting per se, but faithful parenting." This is a sweet, liberating truth.

My Kids Are My Life

Myth #2: The ultimate goal of my Christian life is to have my children follow the Lord.

Some parents need a gentle (or serious) reminder that the primary task of parenting falls not to the church and its pastors or programs but to the parents. But on the other side of the spectrum are those parents who would do anything—anything!—for the spiritual well-being of their children. “They would sacrifice their own walk with God, their emotional health, and even their marriage for their children.” This is, of course, an idolatrous shift from worshipping Jesus to worshipping children. This is living a child-centered life rather than a gospel-centered life. What seems like it will help our children will actually harm both them and us.

Truth #2: You should not make an idol out of having perfect Christian children. Idols are good things (like children!) that become ultimate things, and this is a bad thing. As parents we need to ensure we do not love our children more than Jesus. We cannot love them more than we love our spouses. We have to guard against finding our identity in them. Parents must not judge themselves by their children. “Like concentric circles, my first priority is to walk closely with the Lord himself. Then my spouse is my next priority. My children come after that, and then my church family and the world.” Properly prioritizing children brings about an important result: “As my children realize that I love Jesus more than them, they will realize their place in the order of the universe.”

It’s All Up To Me

Myth #3: It is all up to me! Too many parents isolate themselves, sometimes literally and sometimes emotionally. They withdraw from relationship and go it alone, thinking that parenting is a solitary pursuit. While I do not know any parents who actually articulate this claim, there are many who live as if it’s true.

Truth #3: You cannot do this alone. While we must insist that the dominant focus of parenting is parents disciplining their children, it still takes a church to raise a child. Parents and their children equally need the local church. The local church “provides others to proclaim the gospel clearly, good examples to influence our children, feeding from Scripture, encouragement to pray, a place to serve, and good friends to encourage our children in their walk. The best thing you can do for your child’s soul is to become actively involved in a gospel-preaching, gospel-living church community.”

The truth is that even the perfect environment offers no guarantees of successful parenting, that raising godly children is not the ultimate goal of your life, and that you are dependent upon others in raising your children. It is far, far better this way. It frees us to make use of means and methods without enduring the tyranny of impossible, idolatrous expectations.