

Preserving The Harvest: Keeping Our Children in the Faith—Part Five

By Philip Lancaster

In last month's article we defined Christian discipleship as a training process characterized by both a heart-level relationship and by Christ-centered content and goals. We began to discuss the content of that training process and emphasized the importance of exposing our children to God's word through a variety of means.

Teaching The How and The Why Along with The What

While getting our children into contact with God's Word is important, we should not think that our job of training is done if they are merely exposed to the content of the Bible. It would be possible for a child to win a Bible trivia game every time he played and spout off hundreds of verses of Scripture from memory without having been transformed in the process of learning. This is because the goal of studying the scriptures is not merely to learn content in the sense of a collection of facts. Our aim is to teach him to apply what he learns to his life.

Proverbs was written by a godly father to his young adult son in order to equip him with what he needed to live a life that was pleasing to God. It is clear throughout that this father's ambition is that through his "instruction" his son would not only have "knowledge" but also the ability to use that knowledge. The purpose of the book is stated in verse two of the

first chapter: "To know wisdom and instruction, To perceive the words of understanding..." (Proverbs 1:2). Later we read, "For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6).

There is a lot of overlap in the terms that are repeated so often in this book, but it is clear that "wis-

(Proverbs 4:7). "Buy the truth, and do not sell it, Also wisdom and instruction and understanding" (Proverbs 23:23).

We find an example of well-rounded instruction in Proverbs 5. The whole chapter is a warning against the perils of fornication and adultery, and the basic concept of the what—avoiding the adulterous woman—

is stated in the first few verses. But the wise father knows that he has to do more than, in effect, repeat the commandment against adultery.

So he adds the counsel of wisdom and explains how to deal with this kind of temptation: stay away from situations and persons that will entice you (v. 8) and enjoy sexual relationships with your wife (vv. 18,19). He also gives the counsel of understanding and explains why it is important to keep the commandment: if you break it you will risk loss of wealth (v. 10) and may con-

tract disease (v. 11) or even die (v. 23); but the overriding reason to avoid adultery is because the Lord sees all that a man does (v. 21). The young man who considers the instruction of this chapter will have a clear picture not only of what he must do but also how to do it and why it is important to do it.

One of the reasons many Christian parents lose their children is because they fail to follow this pattern of instruction. They think their job is done because their children know

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dom" and "understanding" are something added to "knowledge" to make it useful and effective in the life of the young person. You have probably heard someone say that knowledge is knowing what to do and wisdom is knowing how to do it. We could add that understanding is knowing why you do it. Both wisdom and understanding are crucial to making good use of knowledge. "Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding"

what the parents believe and can repeat it back to them, and even say they believe it too. But then suddenly a child reveals that he has not actually embraced what he has been taught at all.

Let's take a common example: A daughter who never questioned the idea that her father was her protector, that he would guide her in finding a husband, and would then give her in marriage suddenly runs off with a man her father would never approve and marries him against her father's will. The parents are in shock. They wonder what happened.

Perhaps what happened is that the daughter did not have a real understanding of the principles that she was taught and the wisdom to apply what she knew to her own life. Why does a young lady need a father to protect her? Why does God give him the prerogative of giving his daughter to someone he approves? How is she supposed to conduct herself around men? How can she avoid the temptations of unsuitable men? Our daughters need to be able to answer these questions or their commitment to the principles involved is pretty shallow and may not withstand the onslaught of other opinions and influences. Understanding added to knowledge will protect them by giving them a reason for what we teach them. Wisdom added to knowledge will protect them by helping them know how to apply in practice what we teach them.

Encouraging Children to Become Adults

These thoughts suggest a related reason why many families may be losing their children: the children are never encouraged to grow up. They need to learn to apply the truths they learn from the Bible to their own lives.

One real danger in parenting is that we don't allow our sons and daughters to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Paul

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speaks of this process when he writes, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

Children can obey their parents "because I told you so," but young adults had better have developed their own reasons to follow their parents' — particularly in paths that are counter to our sinful culture — or they will find ample reason to do what everyone else in the world is

doing. So fathers need to encourage their children to learn to think for themselves and come to their own convictions, always of course within the framework of the Word of God. The power of control that parents exert over an eight-year-old should gradually be transformed into the power of influence so that by the time the child is a young adult of eighteen he or she is voluntarily making the right choices for the right reasons. Parents should never

hesitate to exert their wills when that is required by the foolishness of a child of any age, but their aim should be to have to do that less and less.

Too often, strong Christian fathers think they have succeeded in passing on their faith and values simply because they have maintained a firm control of the family and their children have acquiesced to that control. They have taught the "what" of their faith and life and have stifled any thinking or acting in other directions. Their children learn to keep the peace by simply going along in smiling agreement with Dad. But unless the children are embracing what they are taught with their own "hows" and "whys", trouble may be brewing.

The next generation will not embrace Christian values through the sheer force of the parents' will, nor should we desire that. Our goal is not full-grown children who submit unthinkingly. Our goal must be mature

adults who have embraced our values because these values are pleasing to God and our children want to please God. But this means we need to be willing to take the time to give reasons for our beliefs and not feel threatened when our children question us about these things.

Let me give you a live example from my family this very day. My fifteen year old daughter, Joanna, asked me if she could get her hair cut tomorrow. Now for my taste, her hair is already on the short end, but I have allowed her some liberty to choose her own length and style, anxious to let her practice making adult decisions. When she brought it up tonight at supper we talked about it briefly during the meal, and after supper I opened the Scripture to the passage on head coverings and hair length (1 Corinthians 11) and read it. Then as a family we talked about the principle of women being given hair as a covering, the need for gender distinction, feminine hairstyles vs. unisex styles, etc.

Bottom line: I'm letting her get her hair cut and styled tomorrow, but I told her I didn't want it any shorter than the last time it was cut. My aim was to expose her to God's word, invite her to consider its meaning and application to her life, and give her the liberty to make a decision like the young adult she is (by Biblical measures), all the while making clear the boundary I wanted her to respect (my wish that it be no shorter than I allowed previously). My preference is that she have longer hair, and I would have been happy had she chosen to allow it to

grow out more, but I'm not willing to impose my preference under the guise of its being a Biblical mandate (when in fact I believe there is liberty in application). I do believe a father has the right to impose his will in such cases, but that right must be used with increasing caution as the child grows older.

Far more important to me than her hair length is Joanna's relationship to the Lord and her learning to think for herself like a Christian. I'd rather let her have her hair too short (by my standards) than exasperate her by strictness on non-essentials. I'd rather point her to God's word and urge her to consider how it applies to her life than just tell her

what she can and can't do. Of course, I can't allow what is clearly sin or what would be a danger to her, but I must give her room to develop her own beliefs and convictions within the band of liberty God gives his children.

We fathers

must always bear in mind that we are stewards of God, and we are raising our children for Him, not for ourselves. My daughter's primary relationship is with her Lord, not with me; so I have to be careful not to usurp the place of God in her life by too much control. If a father presses his children to observe his standards on every application of biblical principles, how are they supposed to learn to think like adults and apply those principles for themselves? As a child grows, a father's direct control must decrease while he seeks instead to maintain influ-

ence through counsel in the context of biblical principles and a loving relationship - yet he never gives up his overall responsibility to direct his home in the way of the Lord. It's not that a father becomes less involved as his children grow; he just channels his leadership in a different way.

So we are back to the thought we expressed at the beginning of this article: Biblical discipleship encompasses both content and process, both truth and love. Our goal is to love our children in such a way that the truths of God's word take root in their hearts and become so much their own that they live out the truth by their own choice. To put it another way: Our aim is to teach the truth in a relational context that assures that the truth becomes theirs for life.

The author is the editor of *Patriarch* magazine, a publication for Christian men, which is available for \$25 a year from Patriarch, PO Box 50, Willis, VA 24380. Or sign up online at www.patriarch.com.

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