



BRIAN
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FAMILY
DISCIPLESHIP
THAT
WORKS

GUIDING YOUR CHILD
TO KNOW, LOVE, AND
ACT LIKE JESUS



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SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

As parents and followers of Christ, few areas of our lives can prompt more guilt, insecurity, and anxiety than disciplining our children.¹ We know God expects us to disciple our children. We know it's critical to disciple our children. We know the consequences of not disciplining our children. And yet, it's something we often struggle to do. We *want* to disciple. We *try* to disciple. But more often than not, we *fail* to disciple.

I know what often comes next. Pastors, conference speakers, podcasts, and authors start to rebuke Christian parents. But you're not going to hear that from me. Guilt is an extremely poor motivator, and, frankly, much of the guilt others may have placed on you is unfounded.² More importantly, guilt is anathema to the gospel. So, I'm not going to pile on here. Instead, here's what I want you to drink in as living water for your parched soul:

You're not a failure.

God is not upset with you.

You've got this.

Everything is going to be okay.



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Do me a favor. Go back and read those four sentences again. Read them slowly. Read them prayerfully. Digest the truth of each.

You're not a failure, because you are more than a conqueror in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:37). God isn't upset with you, because when he sees you, he sees the perfect righteousness of Christ which he has placed over you (2 Corinthians 5:21). You've got this, because the Spirit of God dwells within you and is ready, willing, and able to equip you and empower you for every good work—and that includes this one (Ephesians 1:13-14). Everything is going to be okay, because our sovereign God has you and your kids in the palm of his mighty hand (Isaiah 41:13).

I pray these truths echo deeply within your mind and heart as you read this book. *You* can do it, because *you* can do all things through Christ who strengthens *you* (Philippians 4:13). If you couldn't, God would never have assigned this important mission to *you*. But he did. And he is with *you*, guiding and directing each step you take. So be of good cheer.

My prayer for you is that as you read this book, you do so with hope and expectation—with optimism and eagerness. If you're like most Christian parents, you've had enough discouragement and hopelessness. You've had enough pessimism and guilt. My heart for you is that as you read this book, God casts from your mind and heart any shame you have around family discipleship—as far as the east is from the west. The last thing I want to do is add to the burden you might feel pressing down on you. I want to help lift that burden from you. I'm your advocate. I'm in your corner. We're in this together. And I believe we can do it.

CONFRONTING THE BRUTAL FACTS

In his bestselling book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins shares the idea of what he calls the “Stockdale Paradox.” James Stockdale was the highest-ranking officer held in the Vietnam prisoner camp known as the “Hanoi Hilton.” This camp housed hundreds of overcrowded, malnourished, isolated prisoners of war who routinely endured mental and physical abuse.³ Stockdale survived there for over eight years; tragically, many other prisoners of war didn't make it out.

According to Stockdale, the group that struggled most was the “optimists.” These prisoners firmly believed they would be released by the next holiday or before the next calendar year began. When those holidays came and went and the years continued to roll by, said Stockdale, they “died of a broken heart.”⁴ Now, Stockdale himself never doubted he would be freed. But there was a major difference in his hope: “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”⁵ This is the Stockdale Paradox: holding out unwavering hope for tomorrow while confronting the most brutal challenges of today. This is precisely what we must do when it comes to family discipleship.

Big Idea: We are not doing well in family discipleship.

Here’s today’s brutal truth: for the most part, Christian parents simply aren’t discipling our kids as we should. Fewer than 10 percent of us read the Bible or pray with our kids in a typical week.⁶ Only 10 percent of us discuss faith in our homes on a regular basis, and 43 percent of us *never* do.⁷ These numbers—and more that we will look at in a minute—suggest that we aren’t discipling our kids according to God’s design and calling. We aren’t discipling them in a way that passes along a vibrant, robust, deeply rooted, deeply satisfying faith. The data doesn’t just bear this out; our personal experiences do too.

Family discipleship can be a struggle in my home. My wife, Tara, and I can be inconsistent. We can be lazy. We can be distracted. We can mess up. We’ve gotten frustrated. We’ve gotten angry during family worship—at times, we’ve even pulled the eject handle midway through. We’ve had family worship times when we’ve talked about (or experienced) bodily functions more than about God. There have been plenty of times when we could tell our kids were far from engaged.

It might surprise you to read of these struggles in my home. After all, I'm writing a book on family discipleship. Doesn't that mean I'm supposed to be the expert and have it all together? Nope. My wife and I are far from perfect in this area. But isn't it wonderful that our God overflows with mercy and grace? Tara and I have found things that have worked. We've learned we need to die to the notion of the perfect family worship time and roll with whatever happens. It's okay to laugh—joy is a fruit of the Spirit, after all. It's okay to be silly, even. It's okay to chase rabbits. And it's okay to stop short of what you planned. Give yourself grace. Remember that God is in control. We've also found plenty of things that haven't worked, like a few structured family worship experiences others encouraged us to do. Sometimes we've succeeded, and other times we've failed. All along, however, we've tried to be faithful, learn from our mistakes, and never quit. They say evangelism is one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread. The same is true in family discipleship—at least in this book.

Why am I sharing this with you? First of all, because I owe you transparency. You've put your trust in me by reading this book. But more than that, I want you to know you're not alone. You might feel that way—as if you're the only family not hitting a home run in family discipleship and are instead struggling even to draw a walk. You might be reading this book leaning in over the plate, hoping to be hit by a pitch just so you can finally reach first base. I can relate. I've felt the same way at times, and plenty of other families have too. Actually, *most* have.

In his book *Raising Kingdom Kids: Giving Your Child a Living Faith*, Tony Evans says that “the home is no longer the place where faith is transferred.”⁸ According to the data, Evans is right. But wait—shouldn't we be in a golden age of family discipleship? There are tons of great discipleship resources available, and technology has put many of these tools literally at our fingertips. Anyone with a smartphone has a Bible in their back pocket. But the data shows we simply aren't taking advantage of these resources:

- ▶ Fewer than one in five parents feel like we are discipling well.⁹
- ▶ 85 percent of parents know we're the primary disciplers of our children, but most of us admit we do nothing to develop faith in our children beyond taking them to church (which two-thirds of us do).¹⁰
- ▶ When asked about the “two or three most important priorities for Christians to pursue in terms of their faith,” only 1 percent of Christians included “family faith—discipling your children, shaping family faith” on our lists. This means 99 percent of us wouldn't consider discipling our own children as even the *third* most important spiritual priority in our lives.¹¹
- ▶ Only 12 percent of our children have regular faith conversations with you, Mom, and only 5 percent with you, Dad.¹²

These are the brutal facts of how most of us are doing as parents. It shouldn't surprise us, then, that the facts about our kids' spiritual well-being are even worse.

- ▶ 64 percent of teens don't believe the Bible is accurate in all it teaches.¹³
- ▶ Most teens believe Jesus may have sinned.¹⁴
- ▶ 42 percent don't believe God is an all-powerful, all-knowing Creator.¹⁵
- ▶ 81 percent don't believe they need to tell others about Christ.¹⁶
- ▶ 79 percent don't deny that good people can earn their way into heaven.¹⁷
- ▶ 43 percent don't consider faith very important to them.¹⁸
- ▶ Most young adults have stopped attending church.¹⁹
- ▶ Fewer than one in ten young adults lists faith as their top priority.²⁰

In their landmark 2005 book, *Soul Searching*, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton found that even teens raised in the faith are “incredibly inarticulate” about the Christian faith.²¹ Most either don't understand or don't accept the core doctrines of Christian faith, preferring instead to live with faith operating in the “mental background of their lives.”²² Smith and Denton conclude that most teenagers see life

through a lens they call “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” which is marked by five beliefs:

- ▶ A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- ▶ God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- ▶ The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- ▶ God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- ▶ Good people go to heaven when they die.²³

Considering how our kids define the Christian faith, we shouldn’t be surprised when they don’t make that faith a priority. If the Bible is just another book, and Jesus is just another good teacher, why would they? Honestly, why *should* they? I don’t know about you, but I’m not laying down my life for any ordinary book and any ordinary teacher. Why should they?

The Christian faith intrigues children, teens, and young adults, but most of them don’t know its core tenets. In other words, they like the *idea* of faith but are missing the *substance* of faith. Those who are rejecting the faith, then, aren’t rejecting the gospel, but a caricature of the gospel. They are turning their backs on a mirage.

CORRECTING A BRUTAL MYTH

The news about family discipleship today isn’t great. Okay—it’s really bad. But it gets even worse. Look back at Tony Evans’s contention that “the home is no longer the place where faith is transferred.” There are two words we need to zero in on: “no longer.” The clear implication is that we’re getting it wrong today, unlike some prior generation of parents who got it right.

And Evans isn’t the only one to think this. Here’s how Mark Holmen put it in *Church + Home*: As “each generation becomes less and less involved in the Christian Church—and, as a result, with faith at home—more

and more parents are now two to three generations removed from the last generation that remembers having faith talk, Bible reading, devotions and prayer in the home.”²⁴

As if we aren’t already feeling down enough about ourselves, we read *this*. Our grandparents and great-grandparents disciplined well. They ran a strong race. But then, when it was our turn to run, they handed off the baton to us . . . and we dropped it. Things were going fine until we threw a wrench into the system. If only we could have done what so many parents before us did.

Talk about kicking us when we’re down. That’s just salt in the wound, isn’t it?

But are Evans, Holmen, and so many others *right*?

I’m not so sure they are. Actually, I know for sure that they aren’t.

I’ve read this claim that our elders got family discipleship right so many times that it prompted me to channel my inner librarian and dive into a research rabbit hole to find it. Wouldn’t it be wise of us to learn from these parents who disciplined well? What did they do? How did they succeed while we’ve kept failing? But as I began to research, it didn’t take long for me to discover an unexpected pattern.

Let’s start with this quote:

When one considers the new, modern perils in the social context in which you must live, the strange and complex influences of our secular society, it simply must be said that the church school cannot win out singlehanded. No longer can any father and mother in blissful confidence delegate the Christian education of their children exclusively to the church school.²⁵

The term “church school” likely clues you in that this quote is somewhat dated. But the gist of the quote is basically what we hear today—parents have to stop abdicating discipleship to the church. So, when was this quote written? The first decade of the twenty-first century? The 1990s? The 1980s? Actually, it’s older than that. Hazen G. Werner wrote it in 1958. I wanted to start here because this is the

generation of parents Holmen pointed to as the ones who got it right. These would be the parents two or three generations back who were having faith talks, Bible reading, devotions, and prayer in their homes. But according to this quote, they weren't. In fact, Oscar E. Feucht estimated that only 10 percent of parents in the 1950s were leading in family devotions.²⁶ That should sound familiar. It's the same percentage as today. That's shockingly far from the utopian family discipleship we hear about, isn't it?

But wait; there's more. Check out this blistering attack on 1950s parents by J. C. Kuehnert:

The modern family seems to have relinquished or lost consciousness of its religious function. The family altar has become as outmoded as the heating stove in the average American home and has disappeared in most church-related homes. The Bible is an unread book in many homes, and even table prayers have become a discarded practice. Statistics show that millions of American children grow up as pagans because their parents, by precept and example, are depriving them of all religious guidance and spiritual nourishment.²⁷

And here's a stinging rebuke from W. Neill Hart from six years before that:

Religion formerly centered in the home. Parents read the Bible to their children, had family prayer, said grace at meals, talked to their children about God and the Christian way of life. Today the only formal teaching some children ever receive about religion is the few minutes they have on Sunday morning at the church school—if their parents are sufficiently interested to get up in time to get the children to the church.²⁸

It seems our grandparents didn't do much better at discipling our parents than we're doing discipling their great-grandchildren. You have to wonder what Hart, Kuehnert, Feucht, and Werner would have said had

they been told our generation would hold up theirs as a model for family discipleship!

By the way, did you catch the first part of Hart's lament? If only the parents of *his day* were discipling like the parents who came before them. Sound familiar?

Let's push back even farther. In 1915, Henry Frederick Cope offered this blunt critique of family discipleship: "The memorizing of scriptural passages and of the different catechisms once constituted a regular duty in almost all well-ordered homes. Today it is rarely attempted."²⁹ I won't ask if you saw it this time. I'm sure "once constituted a regular duty in almost all well-ordered homes" jumped out at you. He then went on to say, "Family worship has declined until, at least in the United States, the percentage of families practicing daily worship in the home is so small as to be negligible."³⁰

Here's yet another quote that, if we massaged the language, would sound like a modern prophetic voice on family discipleship:

All will agree with [the] strong plea for more religious training in the home. Modern life offers many difficulties on this score. Fathers are away from home so much and see so little of their children. In large towns and cities home, in many thousands of instances, is for the father but a place for bed and breakfast. Family life is being sacrificed to the exigencies of business life. . . . Who is to train these children in religion? The Sunday School teacher? We are very thankful for splendid service rendered by Sunday Schools. But that is not enough.³¹

This comes from Thomas Stephens in 1905. We're now about 120 years into the past, and we're still finding the same talking points. Family discipleship is struggling; if only parents followed in the faithful footsteps of those who came before them. So, let's keep looking.

Kathryn Lofton notes that Christianity went from being a primary practice of parents in the home to having "simply disappeared" by the

end of the Victorian era, which lasted from 1837 to 1901.³² E. Morris Fergusson echoed this observation when he wrote:

[In 1884], at Royalston, Vermont, Dr. Samuel W. Dike, a minister resident in the Congregational church there, deeply interested in marriage and divorce, with other problems of the home, realized that for a century the church had been developing its church centered activities—Sunday School, missionary societies, temperance bands, and recently young people’s societies—at the expense of the home’s chance to teach and maintain family religion.³³

Fergusson pointed to the lack of discipleship in this generation’s homes as originating nearly a full century before, at the advent of the American Sunday school in the early 1800s. Let’s look at that period, then. In 1805, Frederick Smith observed that “many parents are too negligent respecting the religious education and instruction of their children.”³⁴ Smith believed the reason for the decline of his day was the “spiritual weakness” and “indulgence” of parents. We are now over two hundred years in the past, and we still haven’t found that elusive generation of faithful parents.

Let’s continue to go back farther still. Michael J. Anthony and Warren S. Benson argue that during the colonial period, parents operated from a conviction that they were to disciple their children in the home. “In time however,” they continue, “the church and the state took over for the family and assumed the role of chief religious instructor for the parents. With the introduction of the Sunday school after the Revolutionary War the home was simply left to provide food and shelter.”³⁵ Another generation; another verse of the same song.

Let’s make one final jump all the way back to the Puritans. Now *this* is where we should find success, right? The Puritans are often held up as prototypical Western Christians. While they certainly got many things right, even this generation of parents didn’t have an idyllic experience of family discipleship.

Evidence of this is found in what's called the "Half-Way Covenant" of 1662. Congregational churches of that time required evidence of a person's salvation before she could become a member of the church. Furthermore, only church members could have their children baptized. The problem? Many of America's second generation of Puritans, despite being baptized, hadn't been converted. Then, their children couldn't be baptized, because their parents—the second generation of Puritans—weren't members of the church. The resulting compromise was the Half-Way Covenant, which allowed for the baptism of the children of unconverted parents.³⁶

Big Idea: Family discipleship has never flourished in America.

Do you see the problem? This covenant arose from the fact that the children of those first-generation Puritans hadn't had conversion experiences, leading to a third generation whose parents weren't church members at all. The truest test of successful family discipleship is not the spiritual vitality of the child, but of the grandchild, the great grandchild, and the generations beyond. That shows a faith that has stuck, a faith that is transferred and cemented (not held together by duct tape) onto the minds and hearts of the next generation. But we don't even see family discipleship flourishing past two generations in Puritan America.

So, what do we do with this information?

First, we recognize we're chasing a mirage. The notion that a previous generation of parents succeeded in family discipleship while we've somehow dropped the ball is a myth, and a vicious one at that. We're being held up against an imaginary standard that is amplifying our acute sense of failure. Parenting is hard. Family discipleship is, in many ways, even harder. Let's take comfort in knowing we're not the first to struggle with it. We're not the first to know and long for what we ought to do, but then to have a difficult time doing it.

Second—and this gets us to the crux of this book—history should tell us we have to find a new way forward. Just as there is no generation of parents in the past that got this all right, neither is there one perfect, successful strategy we can return to. We need a discipleship plan that is faithful to the gospel, but new.

The title of this chapter, “Something Old, Something New,” comes from an improvisational theater game (like the rest of the chapter titles in this book). Starting in the next chapter, we’ll see how the analogy of the theater can help us focus our discipleship efforts in the home. This improv game, based on the common wedding proverb, starts with four actors, each being assigned something old, something new, something borrowed, or something blue. Then a fifth actor has to guess these items. The idea of the game is to develop listening skills. I think this is what we need to do as parents—listen to what has been tried before us, learn from it, and forge a new path forward. They say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. Let’s not do that. Let’s not be insane disciplers. Let’s do something new and expect a different result. What if we become the first generation of American parents to get family discipleship right? What if we become known for turning the tide of family discipleship, not for our glory, but for God’s glory and our kids’ good? What if we plant seeds of faithfulness so deep in our kids that they bear fruit in them *and* in multiple generations beyond them? So, how do we do this? It all starts with how we understand the gospel.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What teachings have you heard about family discipleship? What has been encouraging? What has been discouraging?
2. Why do you think family discipleship is so challenging?
3. Why do you think American parents have always struggled with family discipleship? How does this knowledge make you feel?
4. Why do you believe God tasked parents to disciple our kids?

5. What family discipleship practices have you implemented to this point?
6. What are your greatest struggles in family discipleship? Why do you think they are problems for you?
7. What wins have you experienced in family discipleship, no matter how big or small they might have been?
8. What family discipleship resources have been most helpful to you? What resources do you wish you had?
9. On a scale of 1 to 10, with one being “none at all” and ten being “total,” how much hope do you have for your family discipleship?

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