

# Ministering to Family: Teaching the Next Generation

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## **The purpose of this article is:**

1. to understand how the covenant of grace impacts all relationships in the family which ultimately affects the Church and society
2. to give a practical overview of how mothers/fathers can teach their children intentionally throughout the day and through all seasons of life
3. to facilitate a discussion in the church about ways to equip moms, dads and grandparents in passing the faith to the next generation found in their homes
4. to consider how women in the church can use their giftedness and natural ability to nurture in developing proactive family ministries.

## **Suggested Use:**

This article can be used by church lay leaders and volunteers for individual and group study.

## **Theological Foundation:**

As a young mother I learned very quickly that I really didn't have a lot of "control" over my children. I studied all kinds of Christian families, making lists of what to do and what not to do to. My ultimate goal was to "have" children that knew our Lord Jesus Christ. What I looked at was behavior as the standard, not character. Unfortunately, the primary goal for my church was geared toward individual discipleship, not intergenerational relationship equipping. So, I became good at effective "rule-making," and **we looked pretty good to the outside eye.** However, sin entered in, as if it wasn't already there, and we were a mess. Truth is we were a mess from the beginning, and God had to shape my understanding of how He works and how I, as His chosen instrument of grace for these little children, needed to understand Him, His precepts, and His redemption.

Many of you want your faith to make a difference in your children's lives. We want them to love our Lord Jesus Christ, know Him intimately and serve Him with all their hearts. It's important to note here that we gain a wider understanding of the children God has placed in our life. Some women may not have biological or adopted children, but **all** of us are spiritual mothers. God has given us the care of the children of the Church to watch over. So it extends spiritually as well. In Romans 13 we learn that faith comes from hearing the Word of God. One of the ways that God our Heavenly Father has chosen to show His grace is through families, through the generations, through believing parents. Children need to hear God's word through us and see God working in us. At this point, you may be tempted to say that you are not the best mother to look at! The Biblical reality is that none of us are.

## **The Covenant of Grace**

Covenant theology has always been foundational for our Presbyterian Heritage, and it has much to say about family. Consider how God revealed His covenant of grace with Abraham in Gen 15. In verses 4-6, the Lord came to Abraham, who was still known as Abram at the time. Abraham was concerned because God had promised him an heir. In fact, God had promised him many children! Abraham and his wife Sarah were getting old. They still had no children. So the Lord took Abraham outside and said:

“Look up at the heavens and count the stars, if indeed you can count them.” Then God said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

Here comes the incredible next verse. “Abraham believed the Lord and He credited it to him as righteousness.”

There was nothing else for Abraham to do. He simply believed.

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covenant promise was God's.*

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In vs. 9 we read that God told Abraham to cut a heifer, goat, and ram in half and set the halves opposite each other. In the Old Testament days, when two men made a covenant, the two would walk between the halves together; it was a symbol to show that the two of them promised to do things for each other. In the story recounted in Genesis 15, we see that Abraham fell into a deep sleep. The Lord spoke to him about His promise, and then, in the form of a smoking oven and a flaming torch, He passed between the halves Himself. Abraham did not pass between the halves. He was asleep, remember? The fact that God walked between the pieces signified that **the total responsibility for fulfilling the covenant promise was God's.**

God didn't tell Abraham he would be blessed if he fulfilled certain requirements, if he met certain conditions. He told Abraham to do many things, and Abraham was obedient. As important as Abraham's obedience was, it was not Abraham's obedience that guaranteed the fulfillment of God's promise to him. God Himself guaranteed the fulfillment of the promise. God expected many things from Abraham. But as far as fulfilling the promise was concerned, Abraham was but a spectator. He watched what God was doing for him and through him. God had a purpose for Abraham. And this purpose was that Abraham would be blessed, and that the world would be blessed through him. Abraham did not do anything here. He simply received what God did on his behalf. That's why it's called the covenant of **grace.**

The Hebrew idea of covenant includes a relational element that lies at the basis of all covenants. In fact, to understand this aspect, you could just substitute the word relationship for covenant. God desires a relationship with His people, with us. So He made a covenant with us known as the covenant of grace. This covenant (relationship), according to Hebrews 13:20 is an eternal covenant. "...the God of peace who brought up from the dead the Great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal

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covenant, even Jesus our Lord. "

It is an eternal covenant made first with Jesus, God's only begotten son. The divine agreement to redeem man was in place before man was created. Jesus, the mediator and head of this covenant, according to Rev. 13:8, is the "Lamb that was slain, from the creation of the world."

We read about Abraham in Hebrews 6:13-15:

"When God made His promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for Him to swear by, He swore by Himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.' And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised."

Verse 17-19 tells us....

"Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

The Bible further tells us that this hope is found in Jesus, who has become our high priest forever. God made the promise AND He fulfilled it by His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 4:16 tells us,

“Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.”

So, what does that have to do with teaching our children, with telling the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord so that even children yet to be born would in turn tell their children, that they then would put their trust in God and not forget his deeds but would keep His commands? (Psalms 78)

It has everything to do with it – not just for your family, but for the wider kingdom of God, the family of the Church...for generations to come.

## **A Paradigm Shift**

Once we understand the implications of the covenant of grace for ourselves, as well as our families, **the basis of our relationship shifts from “rule-making” and behavioral standards, to one of dealing with one another in grace.**

After giving the law to His children (the children of Israel), He describes how He deals with His children, those who love him. Exodus 20:6 tells us that He shows “love to a thousand generations of those who love me, and keep my commandments.” The Hebrew word **hesed** is translated as love in this passage. No one English word adequately embodies its full meaning. It is also translated with words such as lovingkindness, mercy, goodness, or steadfast love. **Hesed** is often linked together with the Hebrew word for “covenant” (berit). This occurs so often that **hesed** “can be a synonym for covenant” (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, p. 661). Notice the connection between **hesed** and covenant in the following verse: “He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy (**hesed**) for a thousand generations” (Deut. 7:9, 12). **Hesed** “applies primarily to God’s particular love for His chosen and covenanted people. ‘Covenant’ also stresses the reciprocity of the relationship” (Vine’s Expository Dictionary, pp. 233-234). When the Lord shows **hesed** to His people, He is being loyal to His covenant.

Following are other Scriptures to shape our thinking about how God deals with us:

*Exodus 34:6-7 “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.”*

*Deuteronomy 7:9: “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God. He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him, and keep His commands.” (Keeping His commands is the outward life signifying what has taken place inwardly.)*

*Luke 1:50, Mary, the mother of Jesus, exclaimed, “His mercy extends to those who fear Him from generation to generation.”*

Peter understood that these promises were family promises. In Acts 2:29-39, Peter is teaching to a crowd of people. He talks about the promise God had made by an oath, by His covenant. He talks about the resurrection of Christ, and how He has been exalted to the right hand of God. He goes on to tell the crowd that the promise of the Holy Spirit was

***The promise is for you and your children, and for all whom are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.***

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being poured out. In response to the crowd’s question of what they should do, Peter says in verses 38 and 39: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children, and for all whom are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Even if you are the only Christian in your family, even if your husband does not believe, 1 Corinthians 7:14 tells us that your children have been sanctified, set apart. They are holy to the Lord.

In 2002 I participated as a member of the EPC Faith Focus team that traveled to Almaty, Kazakhstan. We met Christian women there and

helped with a Women's Conference. After sharing the Scriptures on praying and teaching our children about our Lord God, they wanted copies of the prayers I had shared with them. Prayers I had written for my own children and grandchildren that were Scripture-based. Working through a Russian-speaking translator, I learned why. They had been most encouraged by the story of Paul and Silas and the Philippian jailor. In Acts 16 when the jailor gratefully asks, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul responds, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." What I came to understand is that these women took the verse literally. They believed that soon their households – children, husband, family – would be saved because they believed! They explained to me that now they knew how God was going to do it – through prayer.

The point is we need a paradigm shift. The prevailing view among parents in our society today is that experts at the church can do a better job giving our children a relationship with the Lord. That is simply not true. God has given that job to moms and dads and grandparents. Parents are on the front line with regard to passing on the faith. In our churches and in our families, this is the paradigm shift. Church, then, becomes the support structure to train and equip moms and dads in this task of multi-generational faithfulness.

## **Authentic Living**

Now, especially as women, how personally can we be involved in this shift? In the book of Deuteronomy, we find Moses and the Israelites – the children of God in OT time — in the territory of Moab in the area where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea (1:5). He is coming to the end of his life and transfers leadership to Joshua, Moses delivers his farewell addresses to prepare the people for their entrance into Canaan out of the wilderness. From his heart as the servant of the Lord, Moses presses God's claims on His people by emphasizes the importance of remembering the Lord's covenant:

*<sup>23</sup> Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that He made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden.*

*<sup>31</sup> For the LORD your God is a merciful God; He will not abandon or*

*destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which He confirmed to them by oath.*

*<sup>39</sup> Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. <sup>40</sup> Keep His decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you....*

In Deut 6:4-9, God laid out a way for His children to tell their children about Him.

*<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

What God is basically telling us is that in the normal day to day experiences in our lives, we are to talk to our children about our Lord. We do this both in formal and informal settings.

This is authentic living. How do we do this in our families? How do we live in community in the Church? Are we authentic in our church relationships? If we live one way in the church and another way at home, our children don't see authenticity – they see the inconsistency and hypocrisy.

Deuteronomy 6:8-9 teaches us that the children of God were to use reminders to help them in teaching their children about their God.

“Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

They were to tie them, the teachings about God as symbols on their hands and bind them on their foreheads. These were outward reminders of who God was, and what type of relationship they had to God, and they were to teach their children about God. **The way we live outwardly communicates what we believe inwardly. Are we giving a consistent message?**

As parents, we also have the tendency to want to “protect” our children from natural difficult life events. While we want to be appropriate in what we say to them and how we handle these difficult events, it’s not a good thing to pretend that these things don’t happen. **You grow deeper as you share together how you handle the difficult seasons of life.** The saying “better caught than taught” has real application here. You will see

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your children begin to incorporate what you are learning together in their own lives. What you want to do is help your children understand these events from God’s perspective.

When my granddaughter Laura was almost 3 years old, my best friend’s only son, age 15, was killed by a truck while he was riding his bike. It was devastating to us. I remember all the questions Laura had about why he died and she didn’t, etc. She was memorizing the Children’s Catechism at the time and filtered many of her questions through what she had learned. At the wake, as we went up to the casket to see Zach, Laura was in her grandfather’s arms. They left and while riding home, she stated, “Zach’s not in heaven; he’s in that room.” A dialog then began between grandfather and granddaughter about what happens to the soul when a person dies. One of the interesting questions Laura had was, “Does a soul have hair?” Grandpa didn’t have an answer for that one, or for the question of why Zach died at age 15. But they were able to talk about who God is – that He is in charge and in control of all of our lives. What He does is always for the good of His children. It’s okay to rest in Him – even when we hurt so much.

**We don’t have to have all the answers.** We don’t have to be perfect. What we need to be is honest and open with our children during all seasons of our lives. That’s what will stick with them as they grow older.

## A Call to Pray Intentionally

As we begin to understand the impact of how God deals with us and how He promises to deal with our children as we live out the Deut 6 principles, it's important to underscore praying intentionally for them. Although God has chosen to use moms, dads, and family members to teach the next generation about His grace, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that will regenerate them. Ephesians 2:8-9 states this very clearly:

*<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.*

What should we pray for? Pray that the blessings found in the covenant of grace are made real in their lives. Psalm 103:17-18 tells us about these blessings.

“But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear Him and His righteousness with their children’s children - with those who keep His covenant and remember to obey His precepts.”

Pray that the Holy Spirit will apply the teaching of the Scriptures to their hearts. Ephesians 1:17-19 shows us the prayer of the apostle Paul, which we can pray for our children.

“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Glorious Father, may give (your child’s name) the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that he may know Him better. I pray also that the eyes of his heart may be enlightened in order that he may know the hope to which He has called him, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe....”

**Pray for every practical aspect of their lives.** Philippians 4:6 tells us:

*“...in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

Pray for their success in school, pray for good friends, for safety as they play or travel. Pray for their future wife or husband, for every thought they might have, and that they might bring it into submission in Christ. One of the things that the Lord has brought to my mind to pray for is for the future grandchildren, that I may never see if the Lord tarries. I tend to pray for the immediate, for those present concerns. He’s en-

larged my vision for the generations to come.

How should we pray? Pray with your children, teaching them to pray. In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray; this same prayer can be used to teach our children at a very young age. First, we teach them to praise our Father, to hallow His name. We teach them to pray for His will to be done. We teach them to ask for daily provision of

***Make it a habit to keep your heart open to Him in prayer, and He will transform you.***

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needs, and ask for forgiveness and how they should forgive. We teach them to ask for deliverance from the evil one. Following Jesus' example, pray for your children and teach them how to pray.

Pray specifically for their requests. This involves listening! **Listen to your children, and what is on their hearts.** Pray for the forgiveness of their sins. Using Jesus our intercessor as the example, you intercede on behalf of your children. Pray with them about their sin, asking God to forgive them, and helping them to obey. That's really important too, because that's how they learn how to ask for forgiveness themselves.

**Pray for God's grace to make you the parent that you need to be.** Unless our children see Jesus working in us, transforming our lives, our prayers will mean nothing to them. As you desire to lead your children to Jesus, their High Priest, you must bring yourself under His authority, allowing Him to change your heart. He will give you the strength and the grace to be the kind of parent you need to be. **Make it a habit to keep your heart open to Him in prayer, and He will transform you.** He will make you holy. He's promised! It doesn't mean we have to be perfect. None of us are. We all make mistakes. That's why we have a redeemer. And that's the truth you want to help your children understand.

### **Personal Questions to Consider**

How does understanding the covenant of grace impact your family relationships? Your church relationships?

How do your children learn about who God is throughout the day? What Deuteronomy 6 principles do you—or can you—incorporate?

Do your children really know what you believe about God? Can they see it in your everyday actions? Are you living authentically?

Are you setting aside time to pray intentionally for and with your children?

## **The Church and Family Ministry**

As mentioned previously in this article, the approach most often taken in our churches today regarding discipleship is an individual one. The outcome of thinking about individual needs is to provide programs that are geared for age groups. We have women's ministries, men's ministries, youth ministries, children's church, etc.

There are conversations that must take place in the church if we are to understand the Scriptures regarding all the promises that flow from the covenant of grace. The Bible is clear about the responsibility of parents and family to tell their children about the Lord throughout the day and evening, throughout all seasons of life. It is not the church's responsibility to train our children! However, because the family has given its responsibility to the church professionals, the church has inherited untrained children and has responded reactively.

Many recent surveys have shown, including one done by George Barna in 2006, that “reactive” or “crisis” ministry to youth is not working. Conservatively, 61% of teens who have been churched are disengaged with the church in their twenties and do not return. We are losing the next generation of faith. **We must steer the church to train and equip parents to become “proactive” and “intentional” in passing this faith to the next generation.**

If the local church is to equip parents to teach their children Biblically at home, here are some questions for its leaders to ponder:

- What kind of members/attenders do your churches have: parents and families authentically being a “Christian” family OR people in families just going through the motions?
- Is the church's ministry to families proactive or reactive?
- How can the church come alongside parents and grandparents at critical family formation times?

- How can the church come alongside families in these times: weddings, birth of children, difficult times, child-rearing years, teen years, etc.?
- How can the church train parents and grandparents to intentionally pass their faith to the next generation?
- When does the church do parental and grandparental training?
- What kind of mentoring programs can be used for family training? Are there outside counseling/training programs that would be effective?
- How are women leaders being incorporated into family ministry (not children's ministry)?

How can women minister to others at critical family formation times? Older women training the younger in family issues – this is Titus 2 in action:

*<sup>3</sup> Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good.*

*<sup>4</sup> Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children...*

## **A Final Word**

Recently, my husband and I had the privilege of attending the wedding of a friend's son. His parents had taught him well about the Lord and what it meant to live in covenant relationships. Here is the inscription he and his bride wrote to all who came to their wedding:

“We thank everyone reading this for your role in our lives. We are your family, your friends, your co-workers, your teammates, your students, your roommates, your brothers and your sisters. You have traveled with us, lived with us, cried with us, fed us, inspired us, and smacked us around when we needed it. You have loved us, shaped us, supported us, blessed us, raised us, challenged us, taught us, laughed with us (and at us) and prayed with us (and for us).

“You are a part of our story. And we are overjoyed that you are here sharing this day with us.”

## **Get To Know The Writer**

**Ruth Baer** is married with two adult children and ten grandchildren. She currently serves as chairman of the EPC Women In Ministry committee. Previously, she served as chair of the Presbytery of the West WIM team; she has been involved for over 30 years in women's ministries. She served as the pastor's wife of several churches and has led Bible studies, served on the board of a crisis pregnancy center and been involved in family counseling. A member of American Association of Christian Counselors, she is currently working on a Biblical Counseling certificate.

Ruth and her husband, Dave, serve FamiliesAlive®, a ministry that strengthens families and encourages them to actively pass Biblical faith to the next generation. FamiliesAlive® is in the process of becoming an Approved Resource Organization for the EPC, having been recommended to the General Assembly by the Christian Education & Publications Committee. Their website is: [www.familiesalive.org](http://www.familiesalive.org).

## **For Further Reading**

**Creative Correction** by Lisa Whelchel

**How to Really Love Your Child** by Ross Campbell

**How to Really Love Your Teenager** by Ross Campbell

**The Five Love Languages of Children** by Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell, MD

**Shepherding a Child's Heart** by Tedd Tripp

**Heirs of the Covenant** by Susan Hunt

**Traits of a Healthy Family** by Dolores Curran

**Building Faith at Home** by Mark A. Holmen

**Faith Training: Raising Kids Who Love the Lord** by Joe White, Ed.D.

**Family Driven Faith** by Voddie Baucham Jr.

**Revolutionary Parenting** by George Barna

**Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions** by George Barna

**What They Did Right: Reflections on Parents by Their Children** ed. by Virginia Hearn

**The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant** by Lewis Bevens Schenck

**Your Heritage: How to Be Intentional About the Legacy You Leave** by J. Otis Ledbetter & Kurt Bruner