

“Helping Your Children Love God”
by Jim Burns, Ph.D.

Michael wasn't a bad kid. In fact, with only a few rough edges, he was basically a good kid who had lots of potential, good grades, loads of friends and a pleasing personality.

I'd known his parents for several months. They were the all-American family: active in church, enjoyed great family times, and had no major turmoil. Michael's sister was "Miss Outgoing and Popular." She was admired at school, church, home and everywhere. So what could be wrong?

When Michael was 16, he informed his family that he was no longer willing to attend church. He wasn't chucking all the morals; he simply didn't believe in God and thought church was boring. Six months passed, and he never attended. His mom and dad were crushed.

"Should we force him to go to church?" they asked me, "What can we do to bring him back to God?"

Then his dad asked, "How can I answer his inquiries about the faith when I have some of the same questions buried deep inside?"

I met with Michael. The teen wasn't antagonistic, just unmotivated. I looked for deep-rooted issues: major sin, a broken relationship with parents, abuse or anything else that might cause his lack of faith. None appeared. After a while, I said to him, "I think your questioning is healthy."

"You do?" said Michael.

"Yes. You are asking great questions for someone your age. Often these questions about the faith don't come up until a person is out of the home, in college or even well into adulthood."

He smiled. "You don't think anything is wrong with me?"

"No, I don't," I replied. "I think the only thing that would be wrong is if you quit searching for the right spiritual answers. I wonder, though, how much of your perception that church is boring is related to your attitude and not to the services?"

He nodded.

I proceeded. "Are you willing to invest five minutes a day in your spiritual life and meet with me twice a month for three months to talk?"

Michael smiled. "I'd like that."

I handed him a devotional book that would take less than five minutes a day to complete in three months, and they set up another meeting. He was taking my challenge.

By the next meeting, Michael had been to church on Sunday, had several conversations with his parents about their faith, and handed over a full page of questions-some of which I couldn't answer, either! They talked, laughed, prayed and set up another meeting.

After only three months, Michael had rekindled his faith. He still had questions and didn't always love the adult-oriented church services. However, he was now committed to Christ and committed to church. After three months, we stopped meeting because Michael was now getting together with his dad for the same purpose. What can I say but, "**Yahoo!**"

Just because young people are bored with the Christian faith doesn't mean they hate God. They may be going through a normal adolescent questioning phase and need a personal relationship with a spiritual mentor. I suggest that parents develop a regular devotional time with their children.

This isn't a time for parents to preach to their kids, but a time of Bible study and prayer together, within an atmosphere where no questions are considered silly.

To be a Christian doesn't mean family problems all go away. It simply means we have God's help in dealing with issues.

Parents Set the Pace

Excitement is caught, not taught. Influential parents and churches have smothered excitement for God by treating Him like a great killjoy or a boring, distant relative.

Recently, I had the privilege of spending time with a roomful of deeply committed Christian teenagers. Their faith was ablaze with energy. I asked them, "What brought you to this point in your faith?" One boy mentioned a prayer, several mentioned friends or youth workers, but the vast majority told of their parents' influence.

From childhood we learn best from role models. Principles and methods mean little to a child, but example means everything. What do Mom and/or Dad teach when they leave their children at church, go to brunch or sit and read the paper, and then pick up the children after church?

How about the parent who knows all the right doctrines, never misses a church meeting, but is a tyrant at home? Martin Luther once said, "I have difficulty praying the Lord's Prayer because whenever I say 'Our Father' I think of my father who was hard, unyielding and relentless. I cannot help but think of God that way."

Parents set the pace. As children, our earliest concepts of God don't come from a book or church, but from our parents. "The Bible is the most important book in the world," we say, but if our children never see or hear us read it, how can they relate to what we say and do?

If our children watch us "cut corners" and compromise integrity in little ways, why won't they think we'd do the same in things that matter most, such as our spiritual life? Proverbs 10:9 tells us: "*The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.*" This verse implies another step. People of integrity walk securely, and so will their children.

My 8-year-old, Christy, was sitting in our living room reading her little devotional. When I asked her what she was doing, she said, "I'm pretending I'm Mommy!" Why? Because she sees her mother sit in that same place reading a devotional.

A chaplain at our local juvenile hall told me, "A delinquent is usually nothing but a child who's trying to act like his parents." That's not always the case, but as parents, we can't relegate our children's Christian education to even the finest church or most excellent youth group. The responsibility is on our shoulders. It's a privilege and responsibility from God that we must take seriously.

Talk to Your Kids About God

I know an excellent pastor who does a great job caring for his congregation, and his sermons are usually right on the mark. I have only one minor complaint. It's the way his voice changes whenever he talks about "GAAWD." His casual conversation changes to an extremely formal tone when he emphasizes a spiritual word. Actually, it's rather funny.

I've met parents who have the same problem. They communicate well with their kids, but when the conversation turns to spiritual issues their mouths freeze, their countenances change, and words come out in a manner that the kids hear only when their parents talk about God.

When you talk to your kids about spiritual things or the Lord, be yourself. One friend told me that his spiritual conversations with his son take place when they're playing basketball. For some reason when they are at the park shooting hoops, questions and information flow. It's not forced.

Talking about God will happen most naturally when your children see your own growing relationship with Him. Share with your children what you're learning. Share your victories and disappointments. A spiritual bond and intimacy with your children comes when you develop an open, forgiving and listening atmosphere. Far too many kids believe that God is a great killjoy in the sky because their models for the faith-their parents-only mention God in a negative, guilt-producing manner.

Make Life an Adventure

Make it fun to be a follower of Jesus. Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life, was fond of saying, "It's a sin to bore a kid with the gospel." That's why I like the idea of building beautiful memories with a spiritual theme.

I know a family that took a week's vacation in the picturesque Yosemite Valley. Each day they hiked to the waterfalls, swam in the rivers, looked for deer and ate fun food. Every night they played a game called "I Spy," and each family member had to record 20 ways he or she saw God working that day. They came up with a miraculous description of a waterfall, or perhaps they talked about a conversation with a new friend who was camping nearby. A fun vacation week turned into a meaningful spiritual time as well. Regular family times don't have to be dull, either. Too many parents raised in Christian homes remember enduring family devotions. They were boring, adult-oriented and centered around "preaching."

Although I am not a Bible scholar, I searched the Bible and decided that it never says family devotions have to be boring! The Burns family likes to act out Bible stories. We recently attempted the story of the Good Samaritan. We simply acted out each part and talked about how we could apply this parable to their lives. Then we prayed.

Build Traditions

Keeping Advent calendars, making regular trips to the convalescent hospital, or simply going around the table every Thanksgiving and sharing five reasons why we are thankful can be meaningful. Non-formal, non-traditional settings are usually much more effective in reaching kids. Educators call this "hidden curriculum," which is simply the learning that takes place outside the classroom. I know a family, for instance, that memorized Philippians while driving in the car. When they could recite the entire book, they bought themselves a CD player. That's effective spiritual learning.

Become Involved in Family Ministry

When families reach out beyond their own worlds to serve others, they have a stronger spiritual bond. The call to Christ is the call to serve. There's something special about having a heart that breaks from the same things that break God's heart. Every family I know that serves together regularly has a strong foundation and closeness that other families are missing. Here are some examples:

- The Rice family, who live in San Diego, save up their money all year and at Christmastime, they visit orphanages across the border in Mexico. They usually go down in a pickup truck filled with boxes of shoes, which they hand out to barefoot children. Each month, they return to play games and serve in any way they can. All the kids in this close-knit family have a desire to serve God.
- The Rigery family dishes up food at a local inner-city soup kitchen each week.
- The Johnsons visit a convalescent home once a month.
- The Culps have opened their home to drug babies.
- The Swansons oversee a volunteer workday at their church once a month.
- The Burkes have chosen to "adopt" several elderly saints in their church who don't have nearby family members. They bring meals, mow lawns and visit often. Each child has a special chore.
- Trevor Ferrell, a teenager from a nice Philadelphia suburb, once saw the plight of the homeless on TV. He asked his dad, Frank, to take him downtown. He brought a blanket and a pillow to give to a needy person. Trevor was so profoundly affected that he and his family collected used coats, hats and other clothes to pass out regularly to his new friends. Today, Trevor and Frank have started a ministry called Trevor's Army, which has a battalion of volunteers giving blankets, food and-most of all-hope to the homeless.

Family members who minister together create a lifestyle of servanthood. They ask, "What can we do for someone else?"

Create a Desire for God's Word

One of our jobs as parents is to plant the Word of God into our children's lives. Here's a great promise:

"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field: the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." (1 Peter 1:24-25)

How Can You Do This?

First, surround your kids with good resources. Children love Bible stories filled with action, such as David and Goliath, the birth of Christ, and Abraham and Lot. When your children are young, read to them and talk about scriptural content. Include new, top-quality Christian video series.

Second, share what you learn from God's Word. Again, don't preach, but spontaneously share something you've learned. This often will motivate your children to learn from the Bible also.

Third, consistently show your appreciation for Scripture by reminding your children that the Bible isn't just any book; it is the Word of God.

At this point, you may be thinking, these points are all fine and well, but you don't know my child. He hates church and will have nothing to do with spiritual things.

We know it's not easy. Life is complicated, and the issues surrounding our spiritual lives aren't always cut and dried. I want to assure you, however, that it's never too late. Proverbs 22:6 states, *"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."*

Although it is not a promise or a guarantee, it is a principle that should hold great hope for us. Your responsibility is to do the best you can-and pray. God loves your child more than you do. Jesus died for your child and has a vested interest in that life. Prayer works. God's timing is not our timing. His ways are not our ways. There are just too many stories of parents' children coming back to the Lord after dropping out of the faith for you to lose hope.

No matter what happens, don't give up and don't stop praying. You do your part, and ask God to do His. In the meantime, the apostle Peter gave us excellent advice that relates well to parenting a child who is not walking with God:

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:6-7).