

The Church: The Bridge to Disciple-Driven Families

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Introduction

With so many attacks on the structure and sanctity of a family, how can parents be equipped to weather the storms of marriage and struggles of raising their children to follow Christ? The church is the bridge to equip and support parents with discipling their families from the inside out, starting with healthy marriages.

Marriages

It is not a surprise that marriage is becoming less common in our current society. Marriages per 1,000 have dropped from eight in the beginning of the 21st century to six in 2019.¹ This trend is not only in society but also seeping into churches. In 2006, 82% of weekly church attenders surveyed agreed that marriage was very important for couples who wanted to live together, yet sadly in 2020, only 67% agreed to this statement.²

As marriages decline, questions arise about the need to protect the structure and sanctity of marriage, however Gary Thomas the author of Christian marriage and family books, challenges that, “The first step is to get back to reverence for God.”³ Since God is the designer and creator of marriage, looking to him should first be the focus. As Christians focus back on the opinion of God and his divinity rather than their opinion or preference, the result will be them valuing what God values.

God is the designer of marriage, it is written in Genesis 2:18 “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” (English Standard Version) Then in Matthew 19:4–6 (ESV) it is written:

He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

With these truths clearly laid out, Christians need to recognize that since the Bible is the Word of God, they are held to its commands for marriage and in all aspects of their lives. Tad

¹ Joesph Chamie, “The end of Marriage in America?” The Hill, August 10, 2021 <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/567107-the-end-of-marriage-in-america/>

² Meredith Flynn, “As Cultural Views on Marriage Change, Church Leaders Focus on Discipleship” Lifeway Research, March 2, 2022 <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/03/02/as-cultural-views-on-marriage-change-church-leaders-focus-on-discipleship/>

³ Ibid.

Thompson reminds Christians in *Intentional Parenting: Family Discipleship by Design* that homes are either Christian or pagan. He states that “a Christian home that is set apart for God will be one where the majesty and power and grace of God are treasured above all else. It will be a place where complete dependence upon God for everything is a way of life.”⁴ And with this foundational belief there will be clarity in regards to the importance of marriage and a man and wife committing themselves to God’s plan for their intimate relationship.

Once the church and Christians have reprioritized the importance and sanctify of marriage, it is imperative to understand the importance of marriage on the entire family. In the article “The Effects and the Impact of Divorce on Children”, Focus on the Family explains that a study conducted with children of divorced couples, even 25 years later experience residual fears and feelings of abandonment.⁵ This severe trauma shows that the health of the marriage within the family greatly affects the pressure put upon children. Since parents are the primary disciple makers as laid out in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, their relationship is vital to their children.

Knowing marriages need support churches should began the process of supporting those in marital relationships. Couples need an authentic community that will support and protect them as well as provide a safe environment for couples to share their struggles.⁶ The relationship God created between himself and the Church is what God modeled marriage after.⁷ The church is Christ’s bride and in their relationship, Christ lays down his life to protect his church and the church willing submits to Christ as in the martial relationship where the husband is to lovingly lead his wife and the wife is to respect and willingly submit to her husband (Colossians 3:18, ESV). So a healthy church is the very thing a marriage needs to help steer couples towards the gospel.

⁴ Tad Thompson, [Intentional Parenting: Family Discipleship by Design](#) (Adelphi, MD: Cruciform Press, 2011), 100.

⁵ Focus on the Family. “The Effects and the Impact of Divorce on Children” 2001. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/the-effects-and-impact-of-divorce-on-children/>

⁶ Joanna Wu, “What do Failing Marriage Rates Mean for the Church?” Biola University, December 14, 2020 <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/biola-magazine/2020/what-do-falling-marriage-rates-mean-for-the-church>.

⁷ Christopher Ash, “A Biblical View of Marriage” The Gospel Coalition. 2023 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/biblical-view-marriage/>.

The Church's Support for Marriages

As the Church acts as an example of the bride, there are important ways they can model a healthy marriage. Church staff and leadership need to foster an atmosphere that demonstrates living like Jesus. One important way is to “love one another” John 15:12 (ESV). As simple as the commandment is, it can come with many trying aspects like varying personalities, varying communication styles, previous hurts, and misunderstood intentions. The imperative thing to do is to use the Bible to navigate relationships with love and Biblical wisdom like “bearing with one another” (Colossians 3:13, ESV) and appreciating God designed differences (1 Corinthians 12) in all of us.

Another vital area for church leadership to focus on is their own marital relationships. Dr. Douglas Groothuis boldly reminds pastors that pastoral staff “couples need to discern how to protect their marriage *and* support the ministry of the church—not one over the other.”⁸ Staff leadership can do this intentionally by creating a planned weekly time where they are unavailable to the church and spend it with their spouse and family. Church leadership can also find Christian martial mentors that either do or do not attend the same church to offer prayer and guidance (Titus 2:3-5).

A church with a healthy church atmosphere can then look to classes, seminars, and discipleship opportunities. First the church must require premarital classes for couples seeking to get married. A well cited study provides findings that premarital counseling participants experience 30% higher marriage success than those that do not attend sessions.⁹ Premarital counseling in the church also gives couples a Biblical foundation in God's design for marriage such as a husband and wives roles (Ephesians 5:22-33).

In addition to premarital classes, churches should provide opportunities for counseling and/or mentorship. Programs such as Prepare and Enrich can reduce couples risk of getting

⁸ Douglas Groothuis, “How Pastors can Help Married Couples Stay Tougher” Focus on the Family. September 23, 2019 <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/church/how-pastors-can-help-married-couples-stay-married/>.

⁹ Jason S. Carroll and William J. Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research” Wiley Online Library. February 17, 2004. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00105.x>.

divorce by 30%.¹⁰ This particular program provides a facilitator training that can be used by professionals or church members to mentor other church members. Couples meet with a mentor or a small group for six to eight weeks working through the results of a personalized assessment. This assessment is based on many facets of a couples marriage like first time marriages, second marriages, blended families, family backgrounds, history of abuse, and personality. Sessions are setup to be not threatening and focus on communication.

Churches also can provide classes and small group book studies. *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, the Respect He Desperately Needs* by Dr. Eggerichs focuses on the need for each spouse to proactively communicate with each other based on the way God designed their spouse. In Ephesians 5:22-33, God lays out the need for husband's to be unconditionally respected and wives to be unconditionally loved. Couples are given tools to step out of their current cycle of responding in disrespect or in an unloving way to provide unconditional Christlike responses to their spouse.

There are countless other important resources used for helping couples build a rewarding relationship like *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman where couples explore how God has made them specifically experience love as well as their spouse and how to treat each other as so. *Boundaries in Marriage* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend teaches couples to define healthy boundaries and then provides them with the tools to apply "ten laws of boundaries to marriage".¹¹ Churches not only need resources available, but to raise up leaders to lead individual couples or groups of couples through these studies. Like Karen Quek, professor and therapist points out, "The fear of sharing our vulnerability often leaves couples and families with no "safe room" to work through their struggles."¹²

As an added resource, but not a replacement, churches can utilize ministries like Right Now Media or a church library for couples to use as maintenance for their marriages. Right Now

¹⁰ Prepare and Enrich. https://app.prepare-enrich.com/webapp/pecv/couples/template/DisplaySecureContent.vm?id=pecv*couples*why_pe.html.

¹¹ Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, *Boundaries in Marriage*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan Publishing House. 1999. Ch.2.

¹² Joanna Wu, "What do Failing Marriage Rates Mean for the Church?" Biola University, December 14, 2020 <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/biola-magazine/2020/what-do-falling-marriage-rates-mean-for-the-church>.

Media provides 100s of resources for couples to explore in the convenience or privacy of their own homes or with mentors.

Churches can also be a bridge to professional help for couples who have suffered abuse or pornography. Studies show that couples who experience pornography within their marriages are two times as likely to also experience divorce.¹³ If churches cannot provide a counselor on staff, they can work within their communities to find Christian counselors to refer couples to. The process of healing for couples must include a supportive community, mutual encouragement, prayer, and accountability, in order to break out of isolation”.¹⁴

As families and churches refocus on prioritizing and revitalizing marriages, then parents and the church can begin ministering and discipling the family.

Family Discipleship

Family discipleship is an important and necessary focus for both the church and parents in providing children with the best opportunity for children to grow into mature and committed followers of Christ.¹⁵ Psalm 145:4 declares this focus: “One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.” (ESV) Verse 12 and 13 continue on to say “to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.” (ESV)

The structure in which God has designed family discipleship starts within the home and throughout day to day life. In Deuteronomy 6:4-9 God graciously lines out how to do so:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 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. 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.
(ESV)

¹³ Shankar Vednatam. “Researchers Explore Pornography's Effect On Long-Term Relationships”. National Public Radio. October 9, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/09/556606108/research-explores-the-effect-pornography-has-on-long-term-relationships>.

¹⁴ Nick Stumbo, “How Pastors can Address the Impact of Porn on Marriage” Focus on the Family. November 18, 2021. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/church/pastors-and-the-impact-of-porn-on-marriage/>.

¹⁵ Hannah Thompson “Desired Outcomes for Family Discipleship” (class paper submitted DSMN610: Family Discipleship at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, February 2023)

God lays out four important times for parents to lead their children in knowing and understanding Christ: when you are at home, when you are out about, before bed, and in the morning. Parents are called to intentionally use the entire day to teach their children how to follow God.

Once parents acknowledge they are the primary discipleship makers in their home and then know when to disciple their children, then they can start the task of impressing God's commandments on them (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). *Shepherding a Child's Heart* gives parents the foundational knowledge that parents must start with their children's heart when they begin to guide and disciple them.¹⁶ The Bible tells us in Luke 6:45, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." (ESV) Parents must not get caught up on their children's outward behaviors, yet the motives that spring from their hearts.

Parents must filter through God's grace that their children are sinners, as well as themselves, saved from death and destruction only through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. This Biblical truth will create the appropriate tone for understanding children's motives and constant mess ups. Jesus models this all throughout the Gospels of correcting sins and lovingly bringing sinners closer to him like in John 4 with the Samaritan woman. Following Christ's example will not only help parents raise their children, but also draw themselves nearer to their Savior.

In *Instructing a Child's Heart*, the Tripps share with parents what to teach their children. First of all, their lives are living testaments to their children of God's goodness as well as the hardships of life while walking with Christ. By sharing their own experiences, children will be provided with first hands experiences of God working on behalf of his people and what faith looks like. The Tripps also give insightful guidelines for teaching children the word of God: Bible stories are not imaginary, children benefit from hands on experiences, and God's word is authoritative.¹⁷ As parents demonstrate the Bible as active and living, their kids will also grow up believing the same.

¹⁶ Hannah Thompson "Annotated Bibliography" (class paper submitted DSMN610: Family Discipleship at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, February 2023)

¹⁷ Tedd Tripp and Margy Tripp, *Instructing a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2008).

Tad Thompson in *Intentional Parenting Family Discipleship by Design* lays out practical ways for parents to disciple their kids. Through daily Bible reading, parents can teach children to dedicate each day to the Lord and establish a life lasting habit. Parents are also instructed in teaching kids that a love for God is more important than a love for themselves or success, and an important family practice is identifying idols of the family or of each child and surrendering them to God as an act of worship

Knowing your individual child is also important to being able to communicate to them through the way God designed them. Just like Chapman's book for marriages, *The 5 Love Languages of Children: The Secret to Loving Children Effectively*, can be instrumental in parents understanding how God uniquely designed their child to receive and give love. *The Treasure Tree: Helping Kids Understand Their Personality* by John Trent and Gary Smalley is a fun book for parents to read with their young children to explore their personality strengths. Parents can use this book to teach their children how to work together while respecting the way God made their siblings.

Prayer is an another instrumental tool for parents. As Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:3 "I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day." (ESV) Parents too need to be in daily communication with God about their children. Also parents engaging in prayer with their child demonstrates the ability to have direct access to God whenever needed wether the child has a need, a fear, or even a praise. Children are exposed to God's powerful nature to answer prayers when their parents model through their own prayer life.

Lastly, obedience is a key factor in discipleship because it sets up kids to respect God's authority and glorifies their creator, while blessing their lives. Teaching kids to obey immediately and without delay will help save them from a life of negative consequences. An example of this in the Old Testament is in 2 Samuel 7 when David has the Ark of Covenant moved. Uzzah grew up knowing and understanding the instructions of moving the Ark but disregarded God's plan, so when he reached up to steady the Ark, he substituted his will for God's which cost him his life,

though this is an extreme example of consequences it demonstrates the ultimate price for disobedience and sin when we substitute our will for God's.

The Church's Support for Family Discipleship

In the Old Testament there are constant examples of God's people not disciplining their children and the outcome was lost generations, then a call back or a generational consequence for the wicked actions of the second or third generation. When families are in need of guidance, the church is the training grounds for parents.¹⁸ Colossians 1:28 says, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." (ESV) Maturity in Christ for children and teens needs to be supported by all churches through disciplining parents and ministering directly to children.

Research has shown that worldviews are established between the ages of four and fourteen years old. Also that 80% of Christians accept Christ as a child.¹⁹ These statistics are imperative for churches to set priority on their church outreach. Whether churches have families stay together for all parts of services or split ministries up by ages for classes, there must be a focus on disciplining children at church and in the home.

Just like churches need a plan to support couples in their marriages, they need to be intentional on supporting parents in disciplining their children. One way this can happen is through classes on Sunday or throughout the week. Books like *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Ted Tripp is not only good for home studies but also resources for groups. Each chapter ends with application questions for parents to analyze the concepts presented. *Instructing a Child's Heart* by Ted and Margy Tripp is a great followup. These books also are beneficial for families with children from all different ages.

To bring the family together, churches can create events that draw in the entire family, like volunteer opportunities. Philippians 2:3-8 says "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others". (ESV) Churches can make Christmas food boxes,

¹⁸ Tedd Tripp and Margy Tripp, *Instructing a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Valerie Bell, et al "Resilient Disciples: Child Discipleship and the Fearless Future of the Church" Streamwood, IL Awana Clubs International. 2019.

arrange clean up days to serve neighborhoods, have church clean up days, plan packing Operation Christmas Shoebox parties, and the list is truly endless. Parents would have the opportunity to model service to their children.

Other activities that would draw the entire family together are family worship Sundays if a church is not already accustomed to them. In the Old Testament you see Noah and his family worshipping together at the alter.²⁰ These services can make allowances for a youth worship band, children co-serving as greeters or ushers, and sermon guides can be made for all age levels. Children would again see their parents modeling aspects of Christian faith. Churches could also open up their spectrum of family events and plan fun and active events like family movie nights, game nights, holiday celebrations, parent child/parent events (mother/daughter teas, father/son fishing), church campouts, church in the park, potlucks, missionary potlucks, nerf gun tournaments, softball games, and this too is a list that could have endless possibilities. All of these events are to enhance family bonds showing children the joys of living a life with Christ.

The church can provide at home resources like Right Now Media. Right Now Media has numerous devotions for parents and the entire family, as well as Christian children shows. One particular devotion is “Daily Steps For Family Faith” by Timothy Smith. Smith gives examples of ways he and his wife impressed faith on their children’s lives daily by doing things like praying over their children’s daily needs with them and by creating a weekly sabbath where they intentionally set 20 minutes aside to interact in a fun way with the word of God through games, stories, and activities. AWANA provides another media source for families that churches can have available for parents. “Talk About” is weekly subscription for parents to us to disciple their children. They provide a weekly devotion and activities that fit all ages as well as varying personalities.

An important way to captivate fathers is from the pulpit. Pastors need to express the responsibility for fathers to lead their families. As a husband is the head of his wife (Ephesians 5:23), he too is the head of his family. Fatherless homes have alarming statistics for children. They account for 90% of homeless/runaway children, 85% of children with behavior problems,

²⁰ Paul Renfro, Brandon Shields, and Jay Strother, “Perspectives of Family Ministry: 3 Views” Nashville, TN, B&H Publishing Group. 2009. P 69.

and 85% of youths in prison.²¹ God demonstrates fulfilling this responsibility of being the perfect father all throughout the Bible with sacrificial love for his son, Jesus and mankind. The church can match up fathers with mature Christian men to help teach him how to Biblically lead their families. Churches can also pair mentor men to help with children from single mother homes.

Conclusion

Family discipleship is imperative to the current generation and the lives of future generations. Psalm 78: 1-4 declares:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might and the wonders that he has done. (ESV)

Parents are the primary providers for discipleship, but since the relationship between the husband and wife is the foundation of the family unit, it must be the first priority. As families realign themselves to God's structure, the church is the bridge for struggling and uncertain homes to healthy and God centered, well disciplined families.

²¹ John Fuller. "First Time Dads: Learning from Your Father's Mistakes". Focus on the Family. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/first-time-dads-learning-from-your-fathers-mistakes/>

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There are many shaping factors that play into a parent’s discipline of their children that they need to beware of as they make decisions for disciplining and approaching their children. These include family history,

Instructing a Child's Heart dials in on the condition of a child’s heart and that all disciplining needs to center on pointing a child’s heart back to God and highlighting God’s love for the child

