

It Starts At Home *By Kurt Bruner*

If you've ever been part of a loving, healthy family you have smelled the sweet aroma of heaven. If you've lived in a troubled, broken home you have breathed the foul stench of hell. This series is about making your home what God intended it to be—a place of intimacy and joy instead of isolation and pain; a little bit of heaven rather than a foretaste of hell.

The home is the primary context of our spiritual formation—for better or worse. God wired us for flesh-and-blood relationships with a mom, a dad, a spouse, a child and others who profoundly shape our perception and experience of the Faith—whether they intend to or not. This series is an invitation for you to become highly intentional about fulfilling your God-ordained role at home and, in the process, giving your family something better than you might have received.

Christianity's Orphans

A 2008 study conducted by the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame found that only about 17% of emerging adults become more active in religion than they were as teens, while 54% back away from active faith.¹ In a book released that same year titled ***Unchristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity*** David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons reported that the increasingly negative perception of the Christian faith in our culture has been fueled by the fact most self-identified unbelievers in America are former church kids. Their study found that “the vast majority of outsiders in this country, particularly among young generations, are actually de-churched individuals.”²

Don't miss the significance of that statement. Perhaps for the first time in church history many of those most inclined toward belief—our own children—are actively rejecting or passively abandoning the faith. And the problem, in our opinion, is not what's happening at church but what desperately needs to happen at home.

Those who have seen the 1968 film version of the musical ***Oliver!*** may recall the barefoot, ill-kept orphan boys carry their bowls to mealtime while singing “Food, glorious food!” The song is a vain wish because each will receive one measly serving of an awful gruel. As the boys sing, the camera pans past a room where those who run the orphanage gorge themselves on a delicious feast a few feet away from the half starved boys. The most striking part of the scene, however, is the phrase stenciled on a stone wall behind the boys; **GOD IS LOVE.**

Are those three words true? Absolutely.

Is the experience of the orphans telling them it's true? Certainly not.

Which do you think they will believe?

No matter how creatively we proclaim God's word to children at church, they are more likely to believe their experience of the faith at home. That's because incarnation trumps proclamation.

Incarnation literally means "en-flesh-ment." God became a flesh-and-blood human being to reveal Himself to us in a way written words could not accomplish. The gospel of John tells us that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."³ No wonder every major heresy in church history has been an attack on the doctrine of the incarnation. Satan hates that God became flesh. He also hates healthy families because they serve as flesh-and-blood icons of the unity and love that flows within and from the Trinity. The scriptures tell us that when husband and wife become one flesh in the pleasure of marital union it creates a picture of the beautiful union between Christ and his church. It also reaps the gift of children—filling the world with more fleshy reminders of Satan's mortal enemy.

Do you want to make the Devil cringe like scratching nails on a chalkboard? Then celebrate fifty-years of marriage or enjoy laughter with your children around the dinner table. Satan does not fear a religion that merely stencils words on a stone wall, or even preaches them in a sermon. What he dreads is when "the Word" becomes "flesh-and-blood" in the tangible context of a God-honoring marriage and family.

The Roots of Faith

I have four kids. I want nothing more in life than for Kyle, Shaun, Troy and Nicole to embrace my Christian faith. Every generation of believing parents has had this same hope for their children. So why, all of a sudden, do fewer kids growing up in Christian families embrace Christian faith?

We spent two years facilitating a dialogue on this problem with a national network of church leaders and together recognized that the next generation is abandoning Christianity at an alarming rate despite some of the best teaching, worship, student ministries and coffee-shops in church history. Churches have never worked harder, yet generational-faith transfer is in decline. Something doesn't add up!

Let's face a few sobering facts. Several studies have shown that the vast majority of those who ever become believers in Jesus Christ do so as minors.⁴ Statistically speaking, there is a 32% likelihood of someone becoming a believer before the age of thirteen, dropping to a 4% likelihood during the teen years and a 6% likelihood during the remaining decades of life.⁵ No wonder Jesus told his disciples to

bring the little children to him. It seems there is a very limited window of time when we are most inclined toward belief; those few years our tender roots seek nourishment in the context of a believing family.

Does that mean a child growing up in a non-believing or passive family has no hope? Certainly not. My wife grew up in such a home yet became an active, passionate follower of Jesus Christ. Her faith life began AFTER turning thirteen when a friend invited her to church. Olivia's single-mom had rejected Christianity and never once took her daughter to a religious service. She fell in love with the gospel by hanging out at the home of a Christian friend seeing icons of the gospel portrayed in the day-to-day realities of an imperfect but healthy home.

Every child deserves regular exposure to the life-giving warmth of a loving marriage and of parents who lay their lives down for their children. Ideally that will happen at home. But if not, they need "free samples" that can give them an incarnational picture of what the words "God is love" really mean.

The next generation may be losing faith. But a small amount of intentionality can turn the tide.

Kurt & Olivia Bruner

Kurt and his wife, Olivia, co-founded Heritage Builders to provide practical tools to parents to give the next generation a strong legacy. Kurt serves as Pastor of Spiritual Formation at Lake Pointe Church and on adjunct faculty with Dallas Theological Seminary. As President of HomePointe Inc., Kurt also helps local church leaders create an ongoing culture of intentional families. He is the author of more than a dozen books including *It Starts At Home* and the best-selling *Family Night Tool Chest* series. Olivia is a former schoolteacher who now speaks to moms about the hectic joys of parenthood. She is the author of *The Minivan Years* and a frequent guest on national radio. Kurt and Olivia have four children.

¹ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009) pp. 213-214

² David Kinnaman & Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2008) p. 74

³ John 1:14, NKJV

⁴ Christian & Snell, *Souls in Transition* pp. 246-248 & The Barna Update: *Evangelism is Most Effective Among Kids* (October 2004)

⁵ The Barna Update: *Evangelism is Most Effective Among Kids* (October 2004)