

It Takes a Church to Raise a Child

Growing up, our family usually celebrated the holidays with our relatives. My mom's sister and three brothers lived nearby and so all our families would get together at Thanksgiving and Christmas; which meant at least a dozen adults and another dozen or so kids. The adults ate at the adults table and the kids ate at the kids' table. The adults ate in the dining room. The kids ate in the kitchen. The adults had china plates. The kids ate of Tupperware. The adults had cloth napkins. The kids had paper napkins – or shirt sleeves. The adults had adult conversations. The kids had dinner roll wars. Kara Powell in her fine book, *Sticky Faith* says that the two tables many of us experienced growing up is a good picture of what has happened in the church over the past half-century. Most churches have adult worship services and children's and students' classes; adult small groups and student small groups; adult socials and children's socials. Powell's contention is this age segregation which is only a recent development in the history of the church is causing a lot of kids to walk away from the faith. The church in America is losing her children. Study after study tells us that the vast majority of children who are raised in the church will walk away from the faith by their second year in college; that only around 1 out of 5 teens that are active in a church youth group will still be walking with Christ by the time they are 29. Passing our faith on to the next generation is one of our top responsibilities and Creekside's elders and Council have been studying the research and discussing solutions for the past year; and I'm taking a short break from our study in *The Acts of the Apostles* to talk with you about some new directions in Creekside in our children and youth ministries. Last week I talked about Parents as Disciplemakers and how parents have the most influence on the spiritual lives of their children and some practical advice the Bible gives parents in how to bring up their children to love Christ. This week I want to talk about the role of the community of faith in passing on the faith to our children and how it takes a church to raise a child.

There are two common mistakes Christian parents make. One is to outsource their child's spiritual development to somebody else. After all, we turn them over to the soccer coach to learn to play soccer; to the ballet teacher so they can learn to dance; to the teacher at school so they can learn math. It just seems natural to rely on the Sunday school teacher or the youth pastor to teach them about God. But as we saw last week, in the Fuller Youth Institute study of college students who grew up attending youth groups, the biggest difference between students who were still walking with Christ and those who were not was the relationship they had with their parents. Parents who talked regularly with their kids about Christ and their own relationship with Him, tended to have students who were still active Christians, while parents who weren't involved in their student's spiritual lives tended to have children who were no longer interested in Christ once they left the youth group. Parents can't delegate their responsibility for the spiritual life of their children because they're still the most influential people in their kid's life. For better or worse, we reproduce what we are, not what we want. Now the other common mistake Christian parents make is to go to the other extreme; to think they are all their kids need and that they don't need anybody else. The other major discovery the Fuller Youth Institute study made was that college students who are still walking with Christ had healthy relationships with the adults of their church; while students who only had relationships with the kids in their youth group tended to walk away from the faith. They really didn't know any adults who walked with Jesus. This doesn't mean that we no longer have children or youth ministries. It just means that we need to end the segregation so that kids have healthy relationships with Christians of different ages. What I hope to show you this morning is that both parents and children need the larger church to be healthy spiritually. Let's look at the fourth chapter of Ephesians.

I love Paul's letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament because it's not about what we should be or what we should do. Instead it's about all that we already are because of what Christ has done for us. Growing as a Christian is not becoming something different than we are; but becoming who we already are because Christ is in our life. Ephesians is about living in the light of what God gave us when He gave us Jesus; and in chapter 4, Paul talks about what God gave us when He gave us each other; when He made us members of Christ's body, the church; and how that membership changes our lives. Paul points out that even though we come from different backgrounds and experiences, different races, different languages, and different nations, we are all one in Christ because Jesus lives in each of us. What we have in common is far more powerful than the things which divide us. We're united – but we're not uniform. We're not all stamped out of the same mold; because after Paul explains the unity of the church, he explains the rich diversity of the church; why the body of Christ is made up of many different parts, That's the section I want to look at briefly this morning because Ephesians 4 contains one of the clearest explanations in the Bible of why Christians need each other; and why parents and children need the larger community of faith; and why we either grow and thrive together, or we don't grow at all. Now I need to warn you. This passage is so counter to the isolated, independent and individualistic culture in which we live that it takes some time to get used to. Christians who grow up in more communal cultures read this and say, "Well, obviously." Christians who grow up in individualistic cultures may have a little more trouble. In verses 7-11, Paul explains that although we're unified by our relationship with Jesus, we're still diverse because of the different way God made each of us. In vs. 7 Paul writes, "*But (in contrast to all that unites us to one another) to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.*" God has given each Christian a different gift; a different way He works through us in the lives of others; and a gift which the rest of us need to grow spiritually. Let me ask you a question. How many useless parts do you currently have in your body? Would you ever say, "I don't need that toe – I've got 9 more; or that ligament or that valve?" Of course not; I'll keep all the members of my body, thank you. Well, just as there are no useless parts in your physical body, so there are no useless members in the body of Christ. Just as I would never say, "I really don't need my spleen or my parathyroid," so the Bible says that we need each other. Each member of Christ's church has a unique and necessary role to play, based upon what Christ gave each of us when He came into our life. Imagine every chair in this auditorium with a beautifully wrapped gift sitting on it, and a note attached to each, "Love Jesus. P.S. I knew you would need this!" That's what the church is, all gifted people because Christ now lives in them; all bringing something different but necessary to the party. Christ has given every son and daughter of God a unique gift and in vs. 11-16, Paul explains why. "*And He gave some {as} apostles, (or church planters) and some {as} prophets, (men and women who deliver direct messages from God to God's people) and some {as} evangelists, (men and women uniquely skilled in preaching the gospel to those who don't yet believe) and some {as} pastors and teachers, (people gifted in teaching and caring for God's flock) for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all {aspects} into Him who is the head, {even} Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*"

Paul is explaining how we grow stronger and more mature; "the building up of the body of Christ," the attaining of maturity, the growth of the body. He's explaining how we become more and more like Jesus and how other believers are essential to our growth. Notice that Jesus is the source of growth; "*from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*" All growth in my life begins with Jesus. He is the one who grows me and matures me and makes me like Himself until I *attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.* Jesus' goal for my life is that my faith becomes so strong and I know Him so well that I reach His stature; that I become just like Him. And Paul's point is that Jesus works in my life through other Christians. Spiritual growth and maturity is a community project. We either grow together or not at all. If a part of your body is

separated from the rest of your body, what happens to it? That's why we need each other. Notice the process. Christ gives gifts – really gifted people – to the church; apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, not to do the ministry themselves but to equip the rest of us for ministry. We grow because of someone's ministry to us and we help somebody else to grow. Christ works through you in my life and works through me in your life. Paul says that every Christian is a minister and every Christian is called to minister. We need the church and the church needs us; because we all bring something different and necessary.

What Eph. 4:11-16 means is that no matter how spiritual, how godly, how committed you are as a follower of Jesus, you can't follow Him by yourself. His call to follow Him is a call to community because He lives in the community and works in the community and if I separate myself from the community, I have effectively separated myself from Him as long I stay away from His people. I've seen it so many times. Christians become disillusioned with the church and decide they will go it alone. And the longer they are away, the less like Christ they act or even think. And what this means for parents is that no matter how spiritual, how godly, how committed you are as a follower of Jesus, you cannot pass on the faith to your children by yourself. There will come a day when your children won't listen to you any longer and if they are not surrounded by other believers they care about and trust, their faith will shrivel as well. You can't grow apart from the body of Christ and neither can your kids - and that's especially true in the Bay Area. Think about it. What is the Bay Area's view of Christianity? Does the culture affirm Christ or deny Christ? Does it encourage our children to trust in Jesus or discourage them? The culture our children live in assumes that belief in God is medieval superstition; that science has disproved the Bible and anyone who still believes in it is backward and ignorant; that the church is repressive and that faith in God is irrelevant and useless. That's the pool our kids swim in and if they are not consistently hearing and seeing another perspective from people they love and respect, they can't help but be deeply infected by the culture in which we live. The same thing was true in the first century. That's why Paul writes that the result of living in healthy community with other believers is that *"we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all {aspects} into Him who is the head, {even} Christ."* We and our children need to be able to discern between the lies of our culture and the truth of Scripture; and we need to be living in community in order to do so. That doesn't mean group think or trying to shield our children from the culture. It does mean providing our children with an environment where they can hear another side of issues and be able to answer the objections to Christ which the culture asks in an intelligent and winsome way. Let's say your sophomore comes home from Biology class and says, "My teacher says that science disproves the Bible." Would you know how to give them a compelling and intellectually satisfying answer? There are people here at Creekside who can if you can't yet. That's why we need the whole community of faith to parent. We're smarter together than we'll ever be by ourselves. It's been fun for me that now my own son is one of the first places I go to get my questions answered. He is unusually perceptive about how the faith interacts with our culture and how to answer our culture's objections to faith in a clear and winsome way. Paul's point is that by facing these challenges together, we will no longer be children, tossed here and there by lies and trickery but we'll be able to figure out what's true. There are tremendous resources for the development of you and your children's faith in this church – if we'll use them. So, there are two convictions we must be convinced of if we're serious about passing our faith on to the next generation. First, parents are children's primary disciplinarians. We reproduce what we are and what we are will have the most powerful influence on our children's spiritual lives, whether positive or negative. Second, it takes a church to raise a child. Our children's level of engagement in the community of faith will profoundly influence whether your child follows Jesus or not.

So how can the Creekside family better support our parents in their efforts to disciple their children and how can we encourage the younger believers in our midst? Here are some ideas for the future. First we plan to hire a

Family Pastor. We have always had a youth pastor and a children's pastor; one staff member to minister to those between birth and fifth grade and another to minister to middle-school and high school students. But after our last youth pastor, Richard Moore, left Creekside to become a missionary in Germany, the elders decided that after reading all of the research about the large number of teenagers leaving the faith after high school, rather than hiring another youth pastor, we needed to find a family pastor who could lead our whole effort to help parents to disciple their children, oversee our ministries to both children and youth, as well as help our church to be more intergenerational in our approach. We'll still have a distinct children's ministry and a youth ministry, staffed by both paid staff and volunteers; but the family pastor will supervise the entire process to ensure that our children's ministry is integrated with our youth ministry and all is integrated with our family ministry – so we're all on the same page and working on the same goals together. Most importantly, our family pastor will be the parents as disciple-makers champion, constantly looking for ways to encourage and equip families in their relationship with Jesus. It will take a special person to fill this position and we think we may have found him. We hope to make an announcement this month so stay tuned.

Second, we want to develop regular training events for parents, from parents of new borns and toddlers all the way up to parents of college students to address the particular challenges of parenting at each stage of your child's development; and how to develop your own faith and pass it on to your children. If parents are called to be the primary disciplers of their children, then the church's role – as we saw in Ephesians 4 is to equip them for that responsibility. How do I teach my child to pray; to trust God, to read the Bible? How do I motivate my child to grow spiritually? How do I answer their questions? How do we serve Christ as a family? Those are just a few of the topics we'll be tackling.

Third, we want to design a comprehensive Christian education plan from birth through graduation from high school, so that our children will not only be biblically literate but also able to interact with the culture in a wise and winsome way, and able to understand answer the questions our culture is asking.

Fourth, we want to involve our middle school and high school students in Sunday worship. The Fuller Youth Study discovered, "The closest our research has come to that definitive silver bullet is this sticky faith finding; for high school and college students, there is a relationship between attendance at churchwide worship services and sticky faith." Students who worshiped and learned with the whole church were much more likely to continue to walk with Jesus than were those confined to the youth group. What the study found was that students who never developed the habit of worshiping with the rest of the church didn't know what to do once they graduated from their youth group. That's why we want our students to develop the habit of attending worship now; and they have. Our high school students have been attending worship two Sundays out of every month and our middle school students one Sunday out of every month for a year. Our high school students will be joining us every Sunday beginning this month, having their class at 9 and attending the 10:30 service together. We know this is going to take some getting used to for everybody. For students, I know it's more fun to hang out with your friends than it is to come to worship, and I appreciate our students hanging in there. For parents, if you want your student to come to both worship and go to their class, and they can't drive themselves to church yet, you'll need to be here for three hours. We're going to be offering more classes on Sundays that parents can attend during the time they are not in church, but the studies show that helping your child to develop a habit of regular participation in worship is essential for their long term faith.

Fifth, I've asked each of the staff to incorporate into their plans ways that children and youth can serve alongside of adults to promote true intergenerational ministry at Creekside. Children and students can be greeters, worship leaders, Sunday helpers, leaders of younger children, and involved in community service. Any Creeksider can become a voting member at age 12 and we really want our kids to feel like they are contributing to the work of the

kingdom and not just along for the ride or too young to make a difference. I love watching the middle school and high school students who lead the younger kids at Camp of Fun each summer; their faith really comes alive as they get to give back and not just take; as they get to be a leader and not just a follower. So promoting intergenerational ministry is going to be a major culture change for Creekside in the coming year.

Sixth, we need to encourage mentors. Teenagers especially crave the attention and approval of adults and the number one way that churches made the teens in the Fuller survey feel welcomed and valued was when adults in the congregation showed an interest in them. More than any single program or event, adults making the effort to know the kids was more likely to make the kids feel like a significant part of the church. Some churches have promoted the idea of a 5:1 relationship between five different adults for every child; five people who take an interest in and pray for each child. I'm so grateful for the adults who invested in my kids, especially in their teenage years. It made a huge difference. Tony Dungy, who coached the Indianapolis Colts when they won the Super Bowl, talks about the impact other adults have made on his son. Coach Dungy's son was playing high school football and practicing three hours every day after school. So Tony told him he needed more than a Pop Tart for breakfast. His son refused, telling him that a Pop Tart was all he needed. Tony tried to convince his son but his son just blew him off. One morning however, Tony's son woke up early to make himself a huge breakfast of bacon and eggs. Tony thought he had finally listened to him and couldn't resist mentioning, "So I see you're having a bigger breakfast today." "Yeah, my coach said I should." His dad was one of the most respected coaches in the NFL but because he was his dad, Tony's son couldn't hear him. He did listen to his high school coach. Parents can't do it alone and other adults can have a powerful influence on our kid's faith. We want to do everything we can to encourage those relationships.

Next week we will finish up this brief series on parenting as Greg Arthur shares his family's story about how all this works out practically and the lessons God has taught him about parenting. Greg and Lori's story is compelling and very encouraging about how God can work in a family's life, so I hope you'll join us. Proverbs 15:20 says, "*A wise son brings joy to his father but a foolish man despises his mother.*" Few things will mean more to us at the end of our lives than our relationship with our children. No matter how successful I may be in my career, if I am estranged from my kids or my kids have made a mess of their life, they will be foremost on my mind at the end. That's why the Bible makes a big deal about parenting. We never stop being parents and our children and our children's children can either be our greatest joy or our greatest sorrow. When we had Jenny, I remember someone telling me that parenting is the only job done exclusively by amateurs. That's why we need each other. And even more, that's why we need Jesus. At the heart of the gospel, the good news about what Jesus has accomplished for us and will do for us now is the conviction that we are not competent to live the kind of life God has called us to live. We can't obey Him. We can't do things His way because we are enslaved to a fallen human nature which thwarts all of our attempts to live the way we know we should. I'm not a sinner because I sin; I sin because I'm a sinner. There's something wrong in me and I can't do anything about it. But there is one who can. The story of the Bible is about God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. In the Old Testament, He promises to send a Savior and in the New, He keeps those promises. His Son becomes a human to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He lives the life we have failed to live, so that God can credit His perfection as a gift to all who simply put their faith in Him. He dies the death we deserve, paying for our sins on the cross so that we can be pardoned. And He defeats death in our behalf, rising from the dead never to die again so that we can live forever with Him. And when we ask Him to be our Lord and Savior, Jesus comes into our life and makes us new people and daily gives us the power to live the way God has called us to live for our good and for the good of our children. God is the best parent ever and He lives in us and will give us the wisdom and the power to be the parent He wants us to be and our children need us to be – if we'll come to Him.

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