

A Faith Worth Following

THE D6 TEAM REPORT



“⁴Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

“Since the spiritual lives and choices of American teenagers echo with astonishing clarity the spiritual lives and choices of the adults who love them, lackadaisical faith is not a young people’s problem, but ours.” That sentence stunned me. I put down the book (“Almost Christian” by Kenda Creasy Dean) and sat silently in my office as my mind and heart were flooded with personal conviction. What had I been modeling for my own kids and the kids in our church? What were the demonstrated priorities of my life? What topics dominated my conversations with my kids? How did they see me spend most of my money and time? What type of faith was I passing on to the next generation?

In January of 2011, Andrew Keasling and I began to notice some alarming trends in the lack of involvement of our own 2PC kids in the life of the church. Convinced that there must be something wrong in the way we were doing youth ministry, Andrew led the youth staff on a complete evaluation of every aspect of the ministry. By May of 2011, Andrew and I were convinced that the problem was much bigger than the youth ministry. Something we had heard about years ago had sadly made its way to Memphis and 2PC.

Between 2003 and 2005, researchers out of the University of North Carolina conducted the largest, most comprehensive study ever done on the religious lives of American teenagers. The purpose of the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) was to discover the reason that this generation was leaving the faith of their parents in such great numbers. The results were surprising. Teenagers did not see themselves as leaving the faith of their parents, but rather embracing the faith of their parents. According to the research, the faith demonstrated by the older generation and embraced by the teenagers was a “moralistic, therapeutic deism”...God wants you to do good and to feel good. A further surprise to the researchers was the lack of a “faith language” or “faith vocabulary” among those who called themselves Christians. They didn’t know their Bibles and could not articulate this faith they were supposedly embracing.

By the summer of 2011, Andrew and I were convinced that the prevailing problem we were seeing among our students was an embracing of a weak faith demonstrated by the adults in our church. And it started with us. Andrew and I were both deeply convicted about our own homes and our own parenting. As we shared our story with others throughout the Fall of 2011, the results were always the same...confession and repentance...God was on the move.

This all led up to what we presented at the Officers’ Conference in January of 2012. After presenting our research and concerns, the Session charged me with heading up a team of staff and members to study the issue and suggest a plan of action. The team was made up of 12 people, half of whom were staff members and half of whom were congregation members. The members of the group (named the Deuteronomy 6 Team, or D6) were Carol Overcast, Deborah Coleman, Lauren Scott, John Ivy, Pat Nelson, Matt Gandy, Sandy Hazelwood, Susan Warner, Dylan Franklin, Mike Stokke, Mitchell Moore, and Andrew Keasling. The group spent January through May of 2012 studying the issue, meeting together, and praying together. The following paper represents the study and conclusions of the D6 Team.

Todd Erickson
Student Ministry Executive

Our Vision

What we long to see in the children of our church is a faith that would set them apart in the world. They would fear God and know Him to be powerful and relevant. They would recognize their need for a savior and their inability to earn salvation through performance. Our children would understand God's grace and what Christ did on the Cross for them. In response to that knowledge, their desire to follow Christ would be intrinsically woven into every facet of their lives. They would be ready and willing to articulate their faith to other people. Worship would be a significant, meaningful part of their weekly routine, not out of duty, but out of love and gratitude. Our children would embrace their calling to be participants in the mission of Christ, and the fruits of their labors would be evident.

God calls parents to be the primary vision-casters for their children by making Him the center of family life. He commands parents to pass the faith on to their children and gives them instructions on how to do it: God's people are to fear Him and love Him first, personally and comprehensively. Out of this love for God, parents are to be diligent in teaching their children how to love Him in the same way.¹

As the Body of Christ, the church as a whole shares in the awesome responsibility of instructing our children. We affirm this each time we take the congregational vow at a baptism: Do you undertake the responsibility to assist these parents in the Christian nurture of their child?²

What is the faith we are teaching our children? What vision are we casting? Are we modeling what it is to be a follower of Christ? Most teenagers in the United States mirror their parents' religious faith, so what we see in the next generation is naturally and ultimately what they see in us.³ This means the vision we have for the children of our church will become reality only if it is the same vision we have for ourselves.

Obstacles

From the beginning, we were created in God's image for relationship with Him.⁴ Because of this, we should naturally make Him the center of our lives, but the Fall radically altered that dynamic. When sin entered the world, no dimension of human nature was left untouched. Mankind "died" spiritually, and our relationships with God and with other people became marked by shame, guilt, blame-shifting and the battle for control. We are no longer naturally God-centered but self-centered.⁵

The good news of the Gospel is that the grace of a loving God came to a fallen and hopeless humanity through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. God's saving love in Christ reveals to us the truth of our sinfulness and the assurance of His unconditional commitment to us. For those who trust in Christ, we are reborn into a restored relationship with God and the possibility of restored human relationships as well. Yet we still struggle to make God the center of our lives, because of the weakness of our sinful natures, and the powerful influence of the fallen world we live in.

1 Dt. 6:1-12. See also Ps. 78; Ps. 127; Ps. 128; Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3: 20-21

2 Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Book of Worship, §3-2 (G)(6)

3 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

See also Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Zondervan, 2007)

4 Gen. 1:26

5 Gen. 3:7

What We See In Our Church Today

Rather than intentionally living out God's instructions in Deuteronomy 6, it is all too easy, even if unintentional, for us to be self-focused and to teach our children to be the same. Our time and energy are given to the pursuit of happiness, high achievement, and success in all aspects of life – vocation, education, sports, etc. Church is important as long as it contributes to our happiness and success. We are motivated by a sense of entitlement that leads us to believe we actually deserve a certain standard for our lives.

Many families have become child-centered as opposed to Christ-centered, and we often deem “family time” and “rest” to be more important than worship and church activities. Technology regularly dominates the times we spend with our children, giving us the false illusion of being “more connected.”

Moreover, in years past our culture recognized and respected the significance of faith and worship. Sundays and even Wednesday evenings were set aside for church services and activities. We were not asked to choose between going to church and something else.

Things have changed dramatically over the last several decades. Today, we desperately try to piece together all facets of our lives. Sports and social events often conflict with worship services and youth group activities. It is impossible not to sacrifice one for the other. Culture no longer cooperates with a family that intends to be God-centered.

Even parents who place a heavy emphasis on going to church may not be teaching their children how to love God. They may totally miss the truth of salvation through God's grace and Christ's atoning sacrifice on the Cross. In our performance-driven culture, we are tempted to believe in the false paradigm of “good parenting in – good kids out.” As we check off our list of the right things for our kids to do - church, youth group, service projects, missions trips – we create a confusing “covenant of works” model for our children and are surprised by their sinful behavior.⁶ As it turns out, merely exposing children to the Christian faith is no substitute for teaching it to them and modeling it for them.

Warning Signs

The behaviors described above have not become the norm overnight. As our culture has gradually changed, we have moved along with the flow, unintentionally rearranging our priorities and unaware of the consequences. Researchers who have studied the impact of our culture on our faith have written about these consequences, describing disturbing trends in Christian teenagers.

Over the past several years, our youth leaders have noticed these same trends in the children of our church, even children of church leaders. (By “children” we mean mostly those in grades 7-12).

⁶ "Roundtable on Parenting: Jono Linebaugh, Elyse Fitzpatrick, Paul Tripp / Liberate 2012"
<http://vimeo.com/43635793>

Many children are unable to articulate a genuine understanding of the Christian faith, and their lack of commitment to the faith is evidenced by an absence of spiritual fruit in their lives.⁷

Children believe participation in church activities helps make them “nice people,” but they do not see God as relevant to their everyday lives.⁸

Children who go through the motions of attending worship and church activities without really understanding the message of the Gospel just become “better sinners” while in the home. They do good things to get their parents off their backs. When they leave home, anywhere from 60-80% of these children also leave the faith.⁹

Our children are isolated, stressed and exhausted, and an alarming number of them suffer from emotional, psychological and physical disorders.¹⁰

We have lost our fear of the Lord and compromised the pursuit to be His holy people. We are practicing a diluted Christian faith, and the lives of our children are beginning to reflect the results.

Our Vision Realized

What we are presenting here is meant to challenge and edify every member of our congregation, regardless of age or season of life. Our initial audience must be the officers of Second Presbyterian Church, because they should be modeling what we call all others to do.¹¹ In tandem with the example set by our officers, we ask that all pastors and CC teachers begin to weave the substance of this paper into their preaching and teaching.

Our vision for every member of Second is simply this: that Christ would be the center of his or her life. That is the only way we can be faithful and obedient to God’s commands in Deuteronomy 6. It is essential to the spiritual well-being of our children. To effectively engage our leaders, staff, and congregation in moving toward this vision, there must be an understandable representation of what a Christ-centered life is.

Below are three diagrams of a wheel. For a wheel to work properly, the hub must be in the center, and the spokes must be in correct proportion. Otherwise, the wheel will not work as designed and cannot serve the purpose for which it was intended. In much the same way, God has created His people – as individuals and families – to live with Him at the center.

In Diagram 1 the hub of the wheel is Christ. The spokes represent various aspects of the life of a typical Second member and family. This diagram may look like a well-balanced life, but it is just our starting point.

7 Almost Christian

8 Ibid

9 “Roundtable on Parenting”

10 Madeline Levine, Ph.D., *The Price of Privilege* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006)

11 I Tim. 3:4-5

Diagram 2 demonstrates how off-center we can and have become as individuals and families. The hub of Christ is diminished and displaced. Vocation, recreation, education, and sports are grossly out of proportion and dominate our lives and families. The result is a life out of alignment with God’s design, causing dysfunction and limiting fruitfulness, satisfaction, stability, hope, security and love.

In Diagram 3 the hub is restored to the center of the wheel, and is no longer set apart, as in Diagram 1. This illustrates Christ properly at the center of our lives and integrated into rather than separated from everything we do. As He expands into all areas of our lives, they work together, perfectly aligned and balanced, to bring Him the glory He deserves and the blessings we inherit from Him. With our priorities made right and our purpose clearly understood, we can actually live out and enjoy the fullness of Christ that He promises us¹² and pass on to our children a real and lasting faith.

DIAGRAM 1



DIAGRAM 2



DIAGRAM 3



¹² Eph. 3:14-19

Achievable Goals

We cannot bring our lives into alignment with God's design for us without His help, so we must ask Him to give us new hearts and renewed passion for Jesus Christ. As we move forward, we are first calling on all officers and staff members of Second to evaluate their personal faith and that of their family members and to recommit their families to the worship of God. To that end, we offer some practical steps for our leaders and congregation:

1. Take an inventory of your life and the life of your family. Is your life more in alignment with the culture or with Christ? What commitments need to be evaluated and where do you need to repent?
2. Set the rhythms of your life and the life of your family around Christ, His work in the Gospel, and the worship of Him. Annually build your rhythm around our Church calendar, allowing seasons like advent and lent deepen your devotions and worship engagement. Weekly bring your rhythm around our corporate worship services joining us for morning and evening worship on Sunday along with community life through our CCs. Daily set your rhythms around personal and family worship, seeking to have intentional time focused on Christ.
3. Intentionally cultivate the expansion of Christ into your life and the life of your family. What would it look like for you to center the spokes of your life on Christ?
4. Develop a personal or family vision statement. Set your priorities through what God has revealed in His word and the burdens He has put on your heart.

It is important to acknowledge that these beginning steps will look different for every individual and every family, but the one common feature will be Jesus Christ at the center. No matter where you find yourself and your family, there is an opportunity for grace and realignment.

Conclusion

The counter-cultural implications of what we are advocating are clear. Rather than working to become happy, well-balanced individuals and families, we should be striving to live Christ-centered lives that reflect the very purpose for which we were created: to glorify God in all we do. The former is what our culture tells us is worthy of our time and focus; the latter is what our great God – the God we should love and fear – tells us we must do. There is nothing more important or more urgent for our sake and the sake of our children.

Finally, we recognize that none of this can be accomplished without the help of the Holy Spirit, and that we must also rely on one another for support, encouragement, and accountability. As we spur one another on towards this end, we will see the restoration, renewal, and revival of our members, families, and church.