

years by then. What I realized was this: If the faith of teens was mainly moralistic, that hadn't started in youth group. It had started in Sunday school.

THE PROBLEM WITH RAISING "GOOD KIDS"

From ages two through twelve, roughly, most kids who attend church are told Bible stories and play Bible games and eat Bible snacks and make Bible crafts. Each week they are taught exactly what to do to obey God. These messages are echoed at home as well. And maybe also at school.

"Well, what's wrong with that?" a Christian parent may ask. "Obedience is taught all throughout the Bible. God wants people to obey."

This is a fundamental question: Is obedient behavior what God most wants from, and for, children?

"Of course," this Christian parent continues, "Jesus' final commission to the disciples was '[Teach] them to obey everything I have commanded you.'² But *what* Jesus commanded them regarding kids was "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them..."³

Jesus wanted children to be able to come to him. Not to follow his rules, but to know him.

What's more, if we turn to the Bible's treatment of obedience, what we find is that the obedience God invites people into, both then and now, is a response to trusting God. Again and again in the

² Matt. 28:20 NIV

³ Matt. 19:14 NIV

Bible, Yahweh God goes first, acting with power and love on the people's behalf. God calls Abram, frees the Hebrews from enslavement in Egypt, sends manna and water in the wilderness. God becomes a human like us in Jesus, who goes first as he stops beneath Zacchaeus's tree, goes first in speaking to the woman at the well, goes first in offering his body and blood at the table and then in reality.

These actions reveal to God's people what *this* God is like (as compared to the many other deity options called by many other names). As God goes first, they grow in knowing, loving, and trusting Yahweh God. As they find this God to be trustworthy, they change their actions. Did you know the very word translated as "faith" in English refers not to what one believes in their mind, but whom one trusts, in the ultimate sense? The story of Scripture revolves around this trust, often by making a case that God is trustworthy, and the gods of the nations are untrustworthy.

Trust is always the precursor to obedience. The people's obedience is not the first course of action they take, but rather a responsive action based on their determination that yes, indeed, Yahweh God of Israel can be trusted.

Yes, obedience is talked about a lot in the Bible, but obedience is not our goal, because, ultimately, it is not God's goal.

Trust is.

The Ten Commandments offer one helpful example. Often viewed as a list of dos and don'ts, a guide to being obedient, they cannot be separated from the larger story of God freeing the Hebrews from slavery, leading them to safety, and promising them a future. The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20, with the reminder of how they continue the exodus story and of who this God is who has saved them and is now making them a community: "I am [Yahweh] your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt,

the place of your slavery.”⁴ What’s more, when we rewind the story a bit, we first see this in Exodus 14:31: “When the Israelites saw the mighty hand of [Yahweh] displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared [Yahweh] and put their trust in [Them⁵] and in Moses [Their] servant” (NIV).

But trust only happens, for kids and adults alike, when we can come to Jesus. We all need the opportunity to explore whether or not God can be trusted. Just like the people from the world of the Bible, we need to discover what *this* God is like, because just like those people, we have many other deity options, both in terms of formal religions and less formal ones, like money, power, or status. And just like them, as we find this God to be trustworthy, we change our actions. Trust changes us. It shapes our identity, our way of being in the world. If healthy obedience ever happens, it’s because it’s animated by trust.

When it comes to our kids, we have to be clear: It’s backward to ask a child to obey a God they do not know. Childhood is for getting to know God, so kids can discover if God can be trusted.

When we bump obedience to the number one spot over trust, we deny children the chance to experience the same process that God’s people were offered. Instead of a process, they get lists. Even if the actions included on the dos and don’ts lists are precisely the things God wants for us, by dictating them *to* children, we have set them up for a moralistic faith that says what God cares about most

⁴ v. 2 NLT

⁵ When I’m speaking of God, I sometimes use the singular *They* and *Them*, which I’ll note by capitalizing it. If I’m speaking of Jesus, I use *he* and *him*. I find the singular *They* can be one helpful way to (a) use language that reflects the fact that God is not male; and (b) remind me that God is more expansive than and distinct from human beings.

WALLS AND WEBS

Once we’ve settled on the goal of helping our kids discover that God can be trusted based on who God is, we then face a new challenge: The fact that who God is, is not simple. Sometimes we act as if God is, or should be, simple, but it shouldn’t be surprising that God is at least as complex as human beings are. Since *we’re* a bundle of seeming contradictions, competing priorities, and conflicting desires, we ought to expect God to be similarly intricate.

But it never fails to catch us by surprise when the God we thought we had a handle on doesn’t seem to match up with the God we see in Scripture, or that others talk about, or that a pastor describes. When confronted with this sort of disorientation, there’s a natural temptation to respond by latching on to and overemphasizing certain attributes of God (the ones we like best, of course), which inevitably leaves us with an incomplete, even unhelpful understanding of God and ourselves.

As much as we might wish it were different, there’s no getting to know God without confronting tension.

God is mystery. And yet, God comes near to us and makes Himself known through the Bible, through Jesus, in nature. Both are true. God is mystery. God is knowable.

The Bible is full of these seeming contradictions and competing themes; all true, but impossible to hold in one simple picture. Our brains want to simplify, to make things understandable. So we hold on to one side and push the other away, only to end up with distortion, which leads to confusion when we are confronted with the reality of a fuller picture of God.

God is love, we say; that’s what’s true. So...what is all this violence about?

God is justice, we say. So...why don't bad people get what they deserve?

And this tension brings us, of course, to philosophy (bear with me for just one minute; I promise it'll be helpful).

Let's talk about a branch of philosophy called epistemology. Or, in words actual humans use: the question of how knowledge works. How do we know what things are true? There was a long era (dates for this sort of thing get fuzzy, so let's say roughly from the 1600s to the 1900s) when philosophers looked around, presumably at a cathedral or something, and said, "Aha, knowledge is like that!"

In modern philosophy (what this era is often called), knowledge is like a wall. I lay a sturdy foundation of knowledge and facts, and then I can build on top of that layer with another layer of knowledge, and then another. Each layer follows from and rests upon the layer before.

If we've thought that faith, too, is like a wall, and that the purpose of childhood is to "give kids a firm foundation," it's due in large part to the way modernity has influenced our understanding of knowledge.

But somewhere in the 1900s (again, the dates are fuzzy), post-modern philosophers came along asking whether another image might better describe the way our minds, and the world, actually work. Maybe knowledge is more like a web.

In a web, the things we know are like the strands, all interconnected, rather than being built on top of one another. There are still anchor points that hold the web in place, but the structure is flexible, pliable, able to endure stress and even certain amounts of breakage while still surviving.

Did you make it through? Excellent! Let's turn to faith, then.

Here's the key question: Is our faith more wall or web? As a parent, am I helping my child build a wall, or weave a web?

If my faith is a wall, then I begin by selecting foundation stones, key doctrinal statements, perhaps, or traits of God upon which I build my beliefs. And then I build another layer of beliefs on top of the foundational beliefs, and then another layer on top of that one. But then, because this is the not-at-all-simple God we're talking about here, one of those beliefs gets exposed as not being true, or one of those competing themes that are all through the Bible appears. Even something as good and true as "God is love," if it is seen as a foundation stone for a wall, built brick by brick, will have to confront other true attributes of God—like justice.

What now?

If my faith is a wall, there are two options: I can explain away the new information that doesn't fit in the wall I've built, or I can take out a stone. The wall will hold for a while, with holes here and there. But what happens to a wall when too many stones get removed? The whole thing topples over. In other words, I can either ignore reality or see my reality crumble to the ground.

The problem with seeing our faith as a wall is that when one of the stones gets exposed as not being true, or not being true in the way we thought it was, we think we need to tear the whole thing down and start over again. Worse, unless we're *really* good at ignoring reality, the wall falls whether we want to tear it down or not. We find ourselves standing amid the rubble of our former faith, wondering how we will ever rebuild.

Perhaps we can summon the energy to search for better foundation stones. Perhaps the destruction is too great to even imagine rebuilding.

But what if our faith, like other kinds of knowing, is not a wall?
What if our faith is a web?

“And then there’s funnel webs, and tangle webs, and sheet webs, and orb webs. And...”

Our younger son hadn’t even clambered up into his car seat yet and he was in full flow. He had learned about spider webs at preschool that day, and so now, as is always the case when he learns something new, every precious drop of information was rushing out in a torrent of words. Who knew there was so much to say about spiders’ webs?

As I learned that day, webs can take on an astounding variety of shapes, while still sharing some common features: anchor strands that hold the web in place, internal strands that give it shape and texture and beautiful complexity. I trust you have, at some point in your life, looked closely at a spider’s web. It’s fascinatingly intricate, seemingly so fragile, and yet it’s a spider’s home, its source of nourishment, its protection. A web is a spider’s way of adapting to the endlessly complex, maddeningly unpredictable, frighteningly unstable world in which it lives. And that’s what makes it such a helpful image for our faith.

A web anchors itself at many points, with strong strands that provide its basic structure. Each anchor thread is upheld by tension and expects to be stretched. Meanwhile, the internal strands make up the body of the web so that it has its own unique shape, texture, complexity, beauty. Anchor threads and internal threads combine to create something incredibly resilient. You may not have known, but spiders’ webs are considered incredibly strong, not because they

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rigidly withstand the elements, but because they can bend without breaking in the face of them.

Perhaps our faith works in a similar fashion. Anchor threads affix to who God is, including the attributes that live in mysterious, dynamic tension with one another. Internal threads—habits; less essential, but still important beliefs; faith practices; life rhythms—give our faith its unique shape.

Then there’s what happens when breakage does occur. A web is designed with the *expectation* that strands will break, and with resources for repair. When the web does break, it’s not because the spider failed; the web was made for this. Unlike a wall, which topples over if too much wind comes along, webs are designed so that if the wind blows extra hard, or a stick falls through it, a few of the strands will break, but the web will stay together. In fact, the rest of the web will be stronger after the few strands break, more able to flex without breaking so as to withstand the added stress. The spider, then, will only have to go back and repair the broken parts.

Put another way, the whole structure doesn’t need to be deconstructed and then reconstructed, because there was nothing wrong with the whole structure; there was just something wrong in that one, localized spot. The spider—and you may relate to this—doesn’t have the energy to start all over, again and again, every time one strand fails. So, too, our faith can be expected to change, in ways big and small, as our understandings of God, the Bible, and the world grow over time.

If our faith is a wall, and we learn something new that contradicts our old beliefs about God, we may think the whole thing needs to come down. But our faith isn’t a wall; it’s a web, and sometimes strands break and need to be replaced because they just aren’t true, or because they just don’t work anymore. We realize our ways of

and establishing the habits and practices of faith that will make up your family's unique web.

I want to begin by highlighting four *unhelpful* approaches to this process, because recognizing those from the outset can be so important in clarifying your own vision.

FOUR UNHELPFUL RESPONSES

Moralism

The first unhelpful answer, as I mentioned in chapter 1, is moralism. Moralism is, simply, making religion primarily about becoming a good person. Religious activity or involvement is treated as a tool to help a person be moral. Instead of asking, *How might we follow Jesus together?* moralism asks, *Can Christianity help me (or my kid) be a good person?*

Moralism often works like a contract: I am a good person, so the deity owes me safety and happiness. I'm good, so I deserve good things to happen. Moralism is the pseudo-Christian cousin to manifesting good vibes into the universe, or whatever. But moralism is often enforced through the threat of loss. If I am not a good person, then someone—the deity, the adult I love and depend upon, or both—will be less pleased with me.

Moralism can be built upon any list of dos and don'ts that mark what it means to be a "good person." The lists can be focused on personal virtue or societal ills. They can uphold so-called conservative or liberal values. But there are lists, and the religion of moralism maintains those lists.

Moralism tends to fail in the face of two realities: pain and exhaustion. When the moralist experiences pain, it leads them to

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conclude that either (a) this pain or hardship means I must not have been good after all; or (b) this deity must not be good after all, because they didn't honor *my* goodness by preventing this challenging situation. Exhaustion is related, as someone thinks, *Why am I working this hard to be good? Is this worth it?* If the only motivation for their effort is an abstract sense that their behavior pleases God, eventually list maintenance will be too tiring. This is as much true if the list focuses on personal holiness as if it focuses on social justice (both of which have a place in a holistic, healthy faith but must be given their home under the umbrella of the character of the God we trust).

Despite its shortcomings, contractual moralism is appealing. It asserts that one can control their happiness through their right behavior. It offers a path by which our children can avoid the hardship of consequences for poor choices. But it does so through a threat of loss, whether stated overtly or simply implied. God is happy if you are good and less happy if you are not good, and there's always a chance that you could be bad enough to lose God's favor. Moralism persists in part because of how it allows adults in authority to use a deity as leverage for compliance, which leads us to a related, but distinct and equally unhelpful friend: obedience training.

Obedience Training

Obedience training asks, *How can I make sure my kid obeys God?* Beyond simply hoping a kid will be good, like moralism does, obedience training tends to begin from the notion that the child is not good, but could become so as they learn to obey. It hopes a kid will be compliant to the requirements of the deity (and usually the deity wants the child to be compliant to the parent, which is a nice added bonus).

But our role is to offer kids a healthy, life-giving, love-filled space in which to grow. To bypass the process and jump straight to obedience is dictating, not discipling.

A literal disciple of Jesus went through a process of getting to know this new rabbi Jesus, listening to what he said and who he claimed to be, watching what signs he offered as proof of his authority, experiencing the fruit of his work over the years. They were figuring out who he was. What's more, these folks would have come to the process already prepped with a lifetime of Scripture knowledge, more aware of the details of their collective faith story than most of us will ever hope to be. Still, Jesus welcomed this process, walked with them literally and figuratively so that they could decide if he could be trusted. He invited them to obey as a sign of their trust, not instead of it.

Wait and See

A third unhelpful response is to wait, doing and saying very little about God or the Bible until a child is older. If you've been hurt by the way faith was presented to you, this can be especially appealing, because you don't want to pass along bad religion to your kid. If God or the Bible were weaponized against you, of course you might wonder if the best course of action is to steer clear until they are older. Or, this response might appeal because while you know what you don't want for your kids when it comes to faith, you're uncertain about what you do want. Perhaps you are hoping to be more personally settled when it comes to theological questions or biblical interpretation before opening yourself up to the questions (so many questions) your kids will have. You know that you don't have answers yet, and where will that leave you when the questions start rolling in?

To do this, you'll craft a family faith culture, an intentional set of habits and practices that help you live connected to God and what God is doing in your lives and the world. This is your web. This is a way of living your ordinary life joyfully and sustainably, aligned with God's character but in your own creative way, while at the same time not seeking to control your child's faith experience or force a specific outcome (mainly because that isn't actually possible, so this is just a way of recognizing your limits).

Your family needs a faith culture all its own, a way to joyfully and sustainably follow Jesus as a family and invite your kids along in intentional and meaningful ways. You need to weave your own web.

With this in mind, let's turn our attention to four specific elements that can inform and guide you as you're weaving the strands of that web: biblical exploration, experiences, rituals and traditions, and relationships.

Biblical Exploration

Biblical exploration is the category of practices that help our kids get to know God through the Bible. It includes the ways we tell stories, ask questions of the text, and discover God's character and actions through the story of Scripture. We help kids see that God is trustworthy now, in large part because of what God did then, and that God's fundamental attributes, attitudes, and aims for the world are unchanging. As with all these things, there is not one uniform approach that all kids or families should employ in order to explore the Bible. We will devote the next two chapters entirely to how to approach and explore the Bible with kids, so for now, I'll move on to the other three.

Experiences

Experiences help connect and counterbalance biblical exploration, extending faith into the wider world. They offer kids a variety of ways to connect with God and give them a chance to try different faith practices.

Faith experiences can take many forms, of course. One way you might think of them is that they are ~~embodied and external~~—things we *do* more than things we think about or talk about. Though a person may reflect or discuss along the way, those aren't the main goals.

Rest and play during a Family Sabbath (more on this in chapter 5), generosity as we give time or money to address an injustice, worship and a chance to connect with God through music—all these and more create space for our kids to discover God beyond the world of words. Words are great, but if we aren't intentional, it's easy for the words of Bible stories and the words of prayers to make up a disproportionate amount of a child's faith sensibility. The fact is that ~~the experiential is educational~~, and kids need the chance to live some things as much as they need the chance to hear or talk about others.

Experiences distinguish themselves from our third category, rituals and traditions, principally by being more sporadic in frequency.

Rituals and Traditions

Rituals and traditions are the things we say or do with our kids that get repeated, whether that repetition is daily, annually, or anything between. They may come from our tradition or faith communities, or we may create them just for our own family. Often they are connected to our schedule or calendars, such as:

- Meals
- Bedtime routines
- Words you say as your kids start the day, head to school, or return home

Rituals and traditions are often connected to the regular things a family inevitably navigates together:

- Family mantras can help us persevere through a challenge or remember who we are.
- A template can guide how you ask for and offer forgiveness to one another.

Some are born from a desire to lean into special experiences and connect them to important ideas:

- Holiday traditions for Christmas and Easter help us enter into God's great work in the world, not only as it happened in the past, but as it continues today.
- Birthday celebrations are a chance to bless a family member for simply being who they are, honoring them as a gift from God and expressing gratitude for them.

Repetition is the very thing that empowers any of these practices. Rituals and traditions might vary in intensity, duration, depth, and required effort (in fact, a great many of them will be low on all four of those things!), but in doing them again and again, a thread gets woven in a child's web.

Experiences and rituals are significant not only in providing space for distinct faith practices or learning, but also because these

are the categories wherein you nurture faith by nurturing family warmth.

Family warmth is the sense of connection, support, and affection that is shared among members as they live together. Dr. Vern Bengtson of the University of Southern California highlighted the significance of family warmth as the single most important relationship factor in faith transmission. Of the many significant relationships a child will have—with teachers, coaches, mentors, and friends—family relationships will mark them most. When a family has nurtured warmth, the child is far more likely to share a desire to be part of the faith that family adhered to.

Warmth can be cultivated in myriad ways, but the key is the fuzzi factor. Does it make your people feel warm fuzzies? Then lean in.

Relationships

The final element is relationships—with peers and adults in your kid's life who support them, and you, along the way. These could be friends, members of your faith community, teachers, coaches, or extended family. They could be people with you for a season or for the long haul. Whatever specific form they take, it's nearly impossible to overstate the significance of relationships to your child's faith. Our God, after all, is a relational God.

Research from Dr. Chap Clark, Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, and the Sticky Faith Project from the Fuller Youth Institute all speak to the vital role a collection of adults can play in a child's faith. This body of research reminds us that any significant message will stick with a child much better if it's repeated by many different adults who are invested in the child's life.

I call this group "faith cheerleaders." These are adults other than yourself and your co-parent who

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- basically align with your understanding of God, faith, and the Bible;
- are a consistent, positive part of your child's life (the specific frequency will vary, but consistency in their life is key); and
- you would trust to talk with your child about God, faith, or the Bible without you there.

It's not just that faith cheerleaders echo what's vital about faith to your child, it's that they engage in a meaningful, ongoing relationship with your child. The collective research on faith formation for young people draws out that intergenerational relationships play a key role in a kid's long-term faith. These adults do more than reinforce a message; they invest in your child as a whole person.