

**TEACH  
YOUR  
CHILDREN  
WELL**



**A  
Step-by-Step  
Guide for  
Family  
Discipleship**

*Sarah Convan Johnson*



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## THE BAD NEWS

(or A Street Atlas and an  
Ashtray Full of Quarters)

*If there's a 50/50 chance that something can  
go wrong, then 9 times out of 10 it will.*

**PAUL HARVEY**



**S**O HERE'S THE THING, FRIENDS: I have bad news, and I have good news. I'm going to start with the bad news because, even if it lands like a punch in the gut, the anticipation of some good news will hopefully soften the blow.

At this moment in the United States, the odds of our children walking with Jesus as adults are equivalent to that of a coin toss. The Fuller Youth Institute estimates that 50 percent of high school students actively involved in their churches walk away from their faith after graduation.<sup>1</sup> Pay attention to that phrasing: It's not 50 percent of churched high school students or those who attend church occasionally. It's 50 percent of teens who are actively involved in their churches. We are talking about 50 percent of our most committed youth groupers choosing to do life apart from Jesus as adults.

I don't know about you, but this does not sit well with me—at all. I feel it in my gut every time I think about it, a churning discomfort

that grows into a raging fire within me to *do* something. Not just for my own two boys but for a generation of young people and for the sake of humanity's continued relationship with God. I am unwilling to entrust my children's future relationship with Jesus to a coin toss. And I firmly believe that we absolutely do not have to.

As parents, much to our frustration and emotional turmoil, it's important to remember that we cannot ever guarantee—no matter how faithfully we engage their spiritual journey and how hard we pray for them—that our children will follow Jesus as adults. As Greg liked to remind me when our infants simply would not sleep no matter how many sleep strategies we tried, they are not robots. They cannot be programmed to do what we want them to.

And so I'm not saying there is some magic formula that, by our own effort, will produce perfect little ~~robots~~ disciples. As enchanting as that idea might be to those of us who would prefer to be in control of all things at all times, it is simply unrealistic. It's also theologically bankrupt. Scripture is clear that a relationship with Jesus is initiated by God (John 6:44) and the part we play is simply opening the door to God's knock (Revelation 3:20). As parents, while we can do everything in our power to amplify the knocking, we cannot force our children to open that door. To believe anything different is to assume a place in our children's lives that rightfully belongs to God (idolatry) or to them (enmeshment).

This misconception can lead to shame, which is never from the Lord. If you are the parent of a child who has walked away from Jesus, your heartache reflects the heart of God. But if you carry any sense of shame or failure, please hear my invitation to lay those burdens at the feet of Jesus. The enemy would love to discourage you—or even deter you from continuing to pray for your child—by lying to you and heaping an undue burden on your shoulders. It may be helpful to remember that your children have always been a trust: they belong to God, not to you. You are not responsible for,

or capable of, determining the outcome of their journey. God knows and loves your children more than you will ever comprehend. And as the story of the prodigal son(s) in Luke 15 demonstrates, no one is ever beyond the scope of God's reach and grace.

So as long as we are clear on this from the beginning—that there are no guarantees, even if we do everything “right”—I think there's a whole lot we can explore that will equip us to lead our children to a maturing faith and leave that 50 percent statistic in the dust.

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### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

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I grew up in the eighties. I watched the Challenger explode and the Berlin Wall come down. I had a pink banana-seat Huffy bike with streamers on the handlebars. I died of dysentery hundreds of times on the Oregon Trail, and I remember when skinny jeans went out of style the first time. I also remember what it was like to learn to drive without a GPS.

Spatial intelligence and an intuitive sense of direction are two things that the Lord did not bless me with—and that's putting it mildly. When I got my driver's license, my dad joked that he wished he could buy me a homing pigeon to take with me in the car. (When I was twenty-four, and TomTom made the first all-in-one personal navigation GPS device, Dad sent me one in the mail with a note that said, “Finally: your homing pigeon.”) Whenever I drove anywhere alone, I planned extra time for getting lost. My Massachusetts Street Atlas was my best friend. And I always kept quarters in my car's ashtray (yes, you read that correctly, younger readers: ashtray) for payphone calls.

For me, getting lost was a normal part of driving. The first step to finding my way again was figuring out where I was. First, I'd need to figure out what town I was in, then locate two cross streets and look them up in the atlas. At that point, I would try to retrace my steps—“How did I get here?”—to find my way back to my ill-fated wrong turn.

As I think about where we are when it comes to helping our kids walk the way of Jesus, that 50 percent statistic indicates that we in the Western church are lost. For those who remember pre-GPS driving, it's the moment when what you are seeing out your window doesn't match where you expected to find yourself. We are lost. And to find our way again, it's helpful to first retrace our steps—to ask, “How did we get here?”—so that we identify the wrong turns we've made along the way.

To be honest, there are probably too many wrong turns to count, but I'm going to explore a few, loosely labeled under the subheadings of the world, the church, and us.

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## THE WORLD

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The world around us is changing and has changed significantly in the last twenty years. If you are my age or older, you have lived through this shift as an adult and may be acutely aware of the sea change, though you may not be able to put your finger on exactly what it is or why it's happening. Maybe you don't understand why everyone younger than you lists their pronouns everywhere. If you are a decade or more younger than me, you have likely come of age amid this shift and may not even be aware of it. Pronouns are a completely normal part of life.

Prior to the turn of the twenty-first century, with respect to Christianity, there were only two types of cultures in the world: what we might call “non-Christian” cultures (societies with no historic Christian influence) and those we could call “Christendom” (societies where Christianity had exerted strong cultural influence). But for the first time in human history, the twenty-first century has brought about the emergence of a third type of culture in Western societies, what scholars refer to as “post-Christian culture.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, I am writing this from Providence, Rhode Island—recently ranked by the Barna Group as the third most post-Christian city in the United States.<sup>3</sup> If you are reading this from the Bible Belt,

you may feel like I'm talking about another planet as your context may still feel more like Christendom. But if you haven't yet experienced this shift, know that it's absolutely coming your way.

Post-Christian culture is unique because it is a reaction to Christianity. It is familiar with Christianity but has rejected it. Most vaccines work by exposing the human body to enough of a virus—a weakened version of it—to enable the immune system to defend itself against it. This is called *inoculation*. In the same way, post-Christian cultures have been exposed to enough of the gospel—a weakened version of it, usually—to become inoculated to it.

Some distinctives of a post-Christian culture include (1) a particular adeptness in deconstructing the Christian worldview; (2) an interest in the values of the kingdom (e.g., justice, the dignity of all human beings, etc.) without the authority of the King; (3) a sense that the moral high ground has shifted from the religious sector to the secular sector (for example, the Christian sexual ethic used to be seen as peculiar, perhaps, but a generally moral way to live); and (4) an almost pharisaical judgmentalism toward the way of Jesus when it cuts against the grain of mainstream culture.

For our discussion, this means that our children are growing up in a world that is discipling them in these post-Christian distinctives. When I was in high school, those who knew my (traditional) views on sex often told me, “Oh you're such a good person, Sarah.” This head-patting sometimes embarrassed me, but there was a baseline level of respect in the air for my choices. Today, that same ethic is very often viewed as immoral, repressive, and even harmful. I'm quite confident my kids will not receive the same kudos for the choices they (hopefully) make about their bodies.

Though many of us have become decidedly used to it, myself included, it's important to remember that post-Christian culture is not neutral to the way of Jesus. It is actually quite hostile to it. Now, I'm not saying that Christendom was any better. You will not

hear me longing for the “glory days” of the last century, because Christendom came with its own very real threats to the way of Jesus. Christianity and Christendom are not interchangeable terms; one is about walking the way of Jesus, the other is about cultural power and privilege (two things Jesus didn’t actually have).

Honestly, I’m not convinced that this shift is fundamentally bad for the future of Christianity, in the same way that living in exile wasn’t fundamentally bad for Israel, and persecution wasn’t fundamentally bad for the growth of the early church or the modern Chinese church. The people of God adapted in these scenarios and allowed the trials and tribulations of these moments to cause them to depend on God’s power rather than their own. Pining to return to Christendom, where there was cultural power, is not unlike the Israelites pining to return to Egypt where there was meat.

So please do not hear me longing to reclaim the cultural power and privilege Christians once had. But, we must not forget that the world around us, apart from Jesus, is lost. If you’re like me, you may be tempted to try to view these post-Christian distinctives as little more than “alternative paths through life.” I don’t particularly like calling them “wrong turns,” because I don’t particularly like feeling like a caricature of the judgmental zealot the world expects me to be as a Jesus-follower. But these paths do not lead us anywhere we truly want to go. They, along with several other twists and turns, have led us to a land we don’t recognize, where 50 percent of our children are leaving the faith as adults.

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## THE CHURCH

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Have your kids ever had a fight where what distressed you more than the original infraction was the way they treated each other during the fight? That’s how I feel about post-Christian culture and the church. What concerns me even more than the fact that our kids are being disciplined by the values of a post-Christian world is how the Western church has, by and large, responded to this fact.



When animals are threatened, they tend to respond with one of three primary responses: fight, flight, or camouflage. Bears will try to maul you, deer quite literally hightail it, and chameleons try their hardest to look just like the rock they're sitting on. In many ways, this is how the Western church has responded to the cultural shifts of the twenty-first century:

- **Fight:** These are the culture-war churches, who have tried to hold onto the trimmings and trappings of Christendom's declining cultural power by fixating on political candidates and court battles.



- **Flight:** These are the foxhole churches, who have evacuated mainstream culture in favor of monocultural Christian environments.



- **Camouflage:** These are the syncretistic churches, who have sought to blend into the shifting culture and have adopted many of the values, attitudes, and even theological perspectives of the post-Christian milieu.



These responses are nothing new. In Jesus' day, the Jewish community responded in much the same way to Roman occupation. The Zealots chose to fight, quite literally attempting to overthrow Rome by force. The Essenes, and to some extent the Pharisees, went the flight route, separating themselves off completely from anything that might defile them. And the Sadducees chose the camouflage option, rejecting the oral tradition of their ancestors and accommodating as needed to survive.

If the 50 percent statistic is evidence that we are lost, then each of these responses has been a wrong turn somewhere along the way—because none of these responses are helping our children to walk the way of Jesus confidently in a world that doesn't. Children raised to “fight” will expect, and find, battles everywhere. Children raised to “flee” will struggle to translate their experience of God into a secular setting. And children raised to “camouflage” will fear critique and criticism by their peers—of which there will be plenty—more than anything else. We need to recalculate and find a new route forward.

But before we do that, there are a couple of other wrong turns in the church category that deserve an honorable mention.

***The professionalization of the priesthood.*** One of the primary doctrines of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was “the priesthood of all believers.” The leaders of this movement, seeking the reform of the state church, felt strongly about liberating the work of ministry from a small elite class of priests and inviting every Christian to join God in the work of renewal in their daily lives. But, five hundred years later, many churches who trace their spiritual heritage back to this movement don't actually seem to embody this doctrine in practice. Our church, Sanctuary Church in Providence, uses the analogy of a football field. In many churches today, the church staff appear to be the only ones on the field. They are the ones faithfully doing the work of kingdom ministry while the congregation watches from the stands, cheering them on (or, all too often, booing and complaining loudly about how they could improve their game). Sanctuary hopes that our church staff will operate more like the coaches and trainers and medics—and even cheerleaders—with the congregation out on the field, partnering with Jesus in the work he's called them to do in their own contexts: at work, in their neighborhoods, and in their homes. As Aaron Niequist puts it, “[Church staff] have a role to play, to

be sure, but their primary job is to launch everyone else into the remaining 166 hours of the week.”<sup>4</sup>

Parents are one group that too many churches have kept in the stands for far too long. While helicopter parenting and the tendency to be over-involved is a real dynamic for some, when it comes to discipleship, many of us sit in the bleachers week in and week out. We watch the youth pastors and children’s ministry directors and Sunday school teachers run plays, feeling relieved that folks with experience are wearing our colors. And all the while nobody realizes, least of all parents, that we would very likely become the MVPs if we were handed the ball. One critical way for the church to find our way again is to revisit the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, equipping and empowering every follower of Jesus to find their place in God’s mission.

***Mass-marketed Sunday school curricula.*** I remember four-year-old Noah coming home from Sunday school one week with one of those little parent handouts summarizing the day’s lesson (you know, the ones that typically make their way directly to the recycling bin without so much as a glance). The lesson that day was about Noah, his favorite character in the Bible for obvious reasons. The lesson’s key takeaway was, “Noah was kind to the animals. How can you be kind to your family this week?” I was taken aback. How could the story of Noah—a story about hearing God’s voice and obeying when everyone else thinks you’re crazy, about judgment and rescue, about God’s redemption of humanity—*how* could this story become diluted to the point that we are discussing saccharine takeaways about being nice to animals?

Well, let me tell you exactly how this could be.

Prior to the late nineteenth century, the primary tool for religious education was a catechism, a summary of the basic tenets of the Christian faith in the form of questions and answers. This tool, used with both children and new believers, taught the

larger picture of the story of God. It covered topics such as creation and the fall of humanity, the nature of the Trinity, the pathway to salvation, the purpose of the church, and the future return of Jesus. For example, here is an excerpt from the well-known Westminster Catechism:

**Q1. What is man's primary purpose?**

Man's primary purpose is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

**Q2. What authority from God directs us how to glorify and enjoy Him?**

The only authority for glorifying and enjoying Him is the Bible, which is the Word of God and is made up of the Old and New Testaments.

**Q3. What does the Bible primarily teach?**

The Bible primarily teaches what man must believe about God and what God requires of man.

**Q4. What is God?**

God is a spirit, Whose being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth are infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.<sup>5</sup>

Near the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the first part of the twentieth century, several waves of revival swept through Europe and the United States, dramatically increasing the numbers of new believers in need of religious instruction. To meet this demand, lay people began to join the ranks of religious educators, previously limited to clergy. This was the beginning of what became known as the Sunday School Movement. On the surface, this was a wonderful thing as hundreds of lay people across the Western world were empowered to partner with clergy in response to a move of God's Spirit.

But how do you train and equip a whole new class of religious educators with no access to seminaries? Before long, parachurch ministries called Sunday School Guilds began to form. Their mission was to resource and equip these lay teachers with curricula and training. Because they were parachurch ministries, they were interdenominational. And because they were interdenominational, they didn't always agree on the finer points of doctrine contained in the various catechisms used by the major denominations. So these Sunday School Guilds made the decision, due to their interdenominational audience, to base their curricula solely on the one teaching tool that every major denomination could agree on: the Bible.

On face value, this sounds amazing. Denominations working together, empowering lay people, and depending on the Bible as the baseline for religious instruction. But as J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett discuss in their book *Grounded in the Gospel*,

But is it really possible to avoid teaching doctrinal controversy by teaching the Bible? In order to come as close as possible to achieving this goal, it was inevitable that the focus of the biblical teaching would shift from doctrinal emphasis and would arrive at last at the teaching of Bible stories. While the teaching of Bible stories is surely a good thing, this has often been done in a way that separates the particular stories from the broader story of God's redemptive dealings with humankind. This in turn can easily mean that attention is taken away from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ to mere rehearsal of episodic events, often followed by moral admonition: "We see Jonah got himself in trouble, so we had better not . . ." "Mary gave herself wholly to the Lord, and so should we." A child who has grown up even recently in an evangelical Sunday school will likely be very familiar with the stories of Noah, Moses, Jonah, and Mary. But that same child will be far less

likely to be able to recite the Apostles' Creed or enumerate the Ten Commandments.<sup>6</sup>

Fast forward a couple hundred years, throw in market pressures and profit margins, and this is how the story of Noah turned into a conversation about being nice. Now, you might be thinking, "Your son was only four! Did you really expect his Sunday school teachers to talk to him about hearing God's voice? Or about the wrath of God?" To be completely frank, yes.

Here's what troubles me deeply about this trend: the Sticky Faith researchers at the Fuller Youth Institute suggest that a robust understanding of the gospel is one of the key factors in developing a faith that "sticks" from childhood into adulthood.<sup>7</sup> The same study also found that a primary confusion among teenagers about the gospel is around the role of behavior. "Many young people see faith like a jacket: something they can put on or take off based on their behavior."<sup>8</sup> Is it any wonder that our kids are confused about the role of behavior when we haven't helped them, for example, connect the Noah story to the larger story of God's grace and rescue, and we instead have encouraged them to focus only on Noah's good behavior?

In short, this is a massive wrong turn, like full north instead of south on the highway. As we eventually find our way again, a significant consideration should be helping our kids understand the larger narrative arc of Scripture and their place in God's eternal purposes.

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## US

Finally, we parents have taken a few wrong turns as well. And, when I say that, I don't mean the missteps and mistakes we've each made personally on this journey. That is unavoidable; we are human beings who are both sinful and fallible. (By the way, if your kids do not know these two facts about you, please tell them now. Talk about this often. Apologize to your kids and ask for their

forgiveness whenever you are wrong. You would be surprised how many children grow up assuming their parents are neither sinful nor fallible and are deeply disillusioned later in life when they learn the truth in a more dramatic way.) What I mean is the wrong turns we've taken collectively as parents. And this one rises to the top: in nearly every area of life, when we want our children to grow or succeed at something, we hand them over to the professionals. We hire math tutors and soccer coaches and sign them up for voice lessons. This is completely normal in our society and makes a lot of sense. We hired music teachers for our kids (piano and drums) as soon as their skills eclipsed our own.

Our wrong turn has been assuming that this otherwise very sensible logic applies to our kids' spiritual development. When the church provides us with a children's pastor or youth pastor—or even Sunday school teacher—we breathe a sigh of relief and hand our children over to the ones who are “paid the big bucks” and, we assume, are much more qualified than we are to train our children in this area. (Note how our preference for professional teachers and trainers pairs very nicely with the church's emphasis on professional ministers.)

The only problem is that this logic doesn't apply to our children's spiritual development. Now, please don't get me wrong. Paid children, youth, and family ministers are an incredible gift to the church and an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to children's faith development. But they are not an adequate replacement for the spiritual leadership of the parent. The data is clear on this: the leadership of parents is essential when it comes to helping children learn to walk the way of Jesus.



In my pre-GPS life, one of the worst parts of getting lost was the initial sense of impending doom as I began to realize I was not

on the right track, followed by the utter confusion of driving around in circles trying to find my way back to something I recognized—a landmark, a street sign, anything. So there was always a certain sense of relief in finally deciding to pull into a gas station and admit I was lost, because that was the first step in finding my way again.

I'm hoping that you are feeling that sense of relief right now. The truth is we didn't mean to end up here, with 50 percent of our kids walking away from Jesus as adults. So it's okay—and perhaps even liberating—to admit that we are lost and we need a little help getting back on the right path.

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### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

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1. How does the 50 percent statistic make you feel? What thoughts or emotions come up as you reflect on it?
2. What has your experience of post-Christian culture been like? Has it felt more like a crosscultural experience or more like your cultural “home”? When it comes to helping your children learn to follow Jesus in a post-Christian world, what are the implications of your answer?
3. Of the three responses to post-Christian culture—fight, flight, or camouflage—do you resonate with any of them? Which one are you most tempted to emulate? How might your particular posture affect your kids' views of the world?
4. On a scale of one to five, how strongly do you resonate with the idea that church leaders and staff seem better equipped to disciple your children than you are?

#### *For pastors and church leaders*

1. Which of the three responses to post-Christian culture is your church most likely to gravitate toward? Is this the same or different from your natural response?



2. How does the organization and structure of your church reflect the idea of the priesthood of all believers? Who is running the plays on the field? Who is in the stands?
3. How are children in your church community learning about the larger story of God and their place in that story? Does your Sunday school curriculum help children to understand the gospel of grace or the gospel of good behavior?

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