

Truly Christian Families

Most children growing up in evangelical churches will abandon the faith. That's the conclusion of several studies done by a research company in the States. It showed that even though many of those who drop out of church are actively involved in church during their teen years, by their early twenties most have stopped participating actively in the Christian faith. In total, six out of ten twentysomethings dropped out of church and general Christian living. Worse, it's not just a temporary phase, but the trend seems to be continuing deeper into adulthood, even when those people have children. In other words, such people, who grew up in evangelical churches, are well and truly denying the faith with their lives. (<http://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years>)

I find that statistic disturbing, and I have seen it repeated again and again. I look back on my years in Sunday School, in a children's programme and later in a youth group, and try to count the number of people still professing Christ, worshipping Him regularly, actively serving Him. Out of a youth group of 40+ teenagers, I know of two who still serve the Lord, I am one of them, and the other was the pastor's son. Out of 140 children in a Bible club, perhaps a handful still self-identify as Christians. That pattern is repeated over and over, in church after church, in countries across the globe.

Years later, now as a pastor and as parent, it has led me to question, will I lose my children to the world when they are teens or young adults? As we think of our young people, I have to ask, what percentage of them will be actively worshipping God at church, in their lives and in their homes in ten or twenty years?

I have given a lot of thought to why this phenomenon happens over and over. And the Scripture which is clearly relevant is Deuteronomy 6, a Scripture which embraces two fundamental things – the Great Priority of Life, and making this the most conspicuous reality at home.

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

You'll remember that Jesus quoted verses 4 and 5 in reply to the question, what is the greatest commandment? Jesus told that scribe that the greatest commandment of all is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, because God alone is the true God. Love Him ultimately, because He is the exclusive God.

Loving God is our ultimate priority.

And then notice in Deuteronomy that God goes on to speak of how He wants this ultimate love for Himself taught in the home. He wants it in conversation indoors and outdoors, at rest, or at work, when the day starts or ends. He wants it as prominent as your own hand, as visible as if something was stuck in front of your eyes. He wants it to be something you know every time you enter or leave the gate or door.

Now, many of the Jews took these words so literally, they missed the real purpose of them. They began wearing actual strips of leather on their forearms, and tied small boxes with the law to their foreheads. They put little boxes with these verses on their doorposts.

But this was not God's intention. His intention was to say, make sure your homes are saturated with loving Me. Make sure that loving Me wholeheartedly is, as it were, on the walls, on the sofas, on the furniture, on every door and in every room. Let your children live in an atmosphere where God

is the weightiest and pressing reality. Loving Me wholeheartedly should seem like the most obvious thing to do, the most important things to do, the most sensible thing to do, the most pleasurable thing to do.

Because if loving God wholeheartedly is the most conspicuous reality in our homes, what are the children who grow up in those homes likely to do when they are adults? Love God as the priority of their lives.

I believe the reason so many Christian homes do not produce Christian adults is that their homes are essentially secular. By *secular* I don't mean that they actively deny God or turn away from Him. Secularism does not deny God, it simply acts as if He does not matter. David Wells put it well when he said that secularism essentially makes God weightless. God does not press down upon anyone as a reality which must be felt. He is as light as the air on your shoulders.

Secularism says, if God exists, He exists in some small corner of the mind for some people, and He is there to make them feel happy, and mostly on a Sunday. But He is relegated to the periphery of life. He is not needed, and therefore not involved in most of life. That's how secularism works.

Many, many Christian homes are *practically* secular. They don't deny God. They go to church on Sunday. Perhaps the movies they watch are milder than average. But if you had to compare that home with the average secular home in which God doesn't matter, you would not find many differences.

And when your home is practically secular, children can grow up in it and come to the conclusion that God does not really matter. Getting a job matters, having a house and car matters, getting an education matters, being entertained matters, but God is really a once-a-week concern. God comes up once every seven days. We do our religious thing, and then we trot back to what the children come to understand as 'the real world.' By our words, by our habits, by our priorities, by our interests, by our actions, we teach our children that the world where God is not a concern is the so-called 'real world', the world where He is a concern, is a kind of personal, invisible, inner world.

And children growing up in these homes eventually make a decision, once they're old enough. If God doesn't matter, why must I keep pretending that He does? If God is just a personal, private thing, then I will maintain my personal private feeling about God, stop going to church, and live life the way I want to. In other words, since God is weightless in 95% of home life, these children eventually grow up and decide to be consistent with that final 5%.

It is not that these homes actively deny the truth. They believe the truth. They faithfully attend church. Perhaps they even do devotions at home. But if you had to summarise the weightiness of God in these homes, He is not on the doorposts, or on the gates, He is not as visible as one's hand, He is not in frequent conversations. He is mostly invisible.

We as believers should actively resist this trend. What we do and what we refuse to do, is in hopes of seeing our children remain deeply devoted to Christ. We want families and homes and a church where loving God is our ultimate priority, and where it is the most obvious priority.

I want us to examine how we do this. I want us to think through what it means to have a home where God is seemingly everywhere you look. And it doesn't mean putting up posters or fridge magnets with Bible verses on them.

This series is not meant to say that if we do these things, we will have a perfect formula for God-loving children and young adults. Humans are not recipes. They make choices. If your children

have or do rebel against you and God, it may be that you have done as much as can be expected from a Christian parent. What this series aims to do is to ask and answer the question: How do we make loving God so prominent in our homes? How do we make fearing Him something which seems to be on every wall, contained in the fabric of the carpets, so to speak? How do we have homes where we are saturated with the knowledge of God?

Now, though this series is aimed at the family, it has applications for those who are single or live alone, or are not responsible at this time for a family. First, these principles should be lived out even if we are single. A single person also needs to have a God-saturated life. Second, for some of you, there will be a family in the future, and you need to know how you can have a God-centred home. Third, for others, there is the chance to positively influence, even in small ways, the homes of others. Fourth, these ideas also affect the church. Just like it is possible to have a secular home, it is also possible to have a secular church, where God seems weightless.

To be able to do this, we need to understand two things. First, we need to understand what it is to love God wholeheartedly. Second, we want to know how to structure life and the home so that we keep seeing and reinforcing the meaning of wholehearted love for God.

Today we want to begin with the first question, and in the next few weeks we want to answer the second question.

What does it mean to love God wholeheartedly?

Well, let's back up to verse 4. Verse 4 gives you the reason for, the motive for loving God with all your heart, soul and strength. If you understand verse 4, you can put verse 5 into practice.

Let's read it again: Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!

Now that translation is accurate and fair. Yehovah is our God, Yehovah is one. But equally valid, and I think more compelling would be to translate it this way: Hear O Israel, Yehovah is our God, Yehovah *alone*.

In fact, we know that that is how Israel understood it because in Mark 12, the scribe responded to Jesus this way:

Mark 12:32 So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He.

The scribe doesn't say, "You're right Jesus, there is one God and He is one Person." The scribe says, "There is one God, and there is no other besides Him. He is unique. There is one God, our God, Yahweh, and no one else but Him."

Now mark this. The kind of love we give God in verse 5 is based upon this statement in verse 4. Once we understand what that means, we'll understand why we should love Him with all the heart, soul and strength.

I come to you and say, you should love me with all your heart, all your soul, all you mind. What are you going to say? "Why?" You want a reason. So God comes to us and says – love Me ultimately. And the rational part of us says, why? Because there is only one God, and that God is Jehovah.

Those two statements explain what it means to love with all your heart, soul and strength. The kind of love which is wholehearted, which is ultimate, is the kind of love you reserve for a god. Whatever

your god is, human love their gods with all their heart, soul and strength.

God's logic is like this:

Why must you love God ultimately? Because that's how you love a god, and there is only one God.

This is God's defence of loving Him ultimately: no other God is really god! Not other god exists in reality. There is only one member of the class God – and it is Jehovah.

The first of the Ten Commandments is really the negative formulation of the greatest commandment. "You shall have no other gods before Me". There should be nothing and no one else that we have give this ultimate love to.

So that leads us to a second question: what kind of love do we give our gods? What does this wholehearted, ultimate love look like?

As we go through the Bible we find three actions or attitudes associated with the love you give to a god: dependence, devotion and delight. A god is what you ultimately lean on, ultimately commit to, and ultimately rejoice in.

When you think about it, isn't that a fair definition of love? What makes up the love between husband and wife? First trust, or dependence. Second commitment or devotion. And hopefully it will lead to delight. At root love is trust, commitment and joy. Dependence, devotion and delight. This is the love of worship: ultimate devotion, ultimate dependence and ultimate delight. All your heart, all your soul, all your might is given when you are trusting absolutely or devoted absolutely.

I. Loving God Ultimately is Making Him Your Ultimate Dependence

Isaiah 42:17 They shall be turned back, They shall be greatly ashamed, Who trust in carved images, Who say to the moulded images, 'You are our gods.'

Judges 10:14 ¹⁴ "Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress."

God chastened Israel because they were ultimately dependent on a false god, and not Him. When it came down to it, Israel paid lip service to trusting Jehovah, but their ultimate trust was in false gods.

There are many things people might trust in and lean on. But when someone depends on something as an ultimate end, and not as a means, that thing or person is his or her god.

You find someone who depends heavily on his education. He trusts in the degree or diploma or experience he gets. Does he trust in his education as an end, or as a means? As means. He trusts in his education to get him a job. Does he trust in his job as a means or as an end? As a means. He depends on having a job to give him something else. What is that something else? A stable salary. Does he trust in a stable salary as a means or as an end? Probably as a means to something else. He trusts in a stable salary to afford certain insurance policies. Does he love insurance policies for themselves? Does he love them as ends? No, he loves them as means. He loves having the policies to cushion him or protect him. If you had to ask him, why do you love having a sense of certainty or protection or control over events, he would probably say, because I just do. He doesn't use that to get him anything else. He places ultimate trust in that which gives him a sense of security.

Now my point is not to say that insurance is wrong, or seeking a good salary or getting a good education. Those can all be fine in their place. The point is to illustrate, what you place ultimate

trust in, is your god. But at the end of that chain of trusts, where the thing or person is trusted for itself, that thing or person is your god. It could be a job. It could be a bank balance. It could be a husband. It could be your good looks. It could be a country, or a city, or a church, or a business. And you know it is the person's god by his reaction if that thing or person is threatened. The anger, the lashing out, the fury that comes out when you try to take away a person's ultimate trust is very revealing.

There are many things in life we have to trust in. We do have to lean on others, on the economy, on our businesses, on our money, on our friends, relatives, loved ones. But all those things are given to you by God. And at the end of them, ultimate love for God says, yes, I have this policy, I have this bank balance, I have this husband or parent or child, I have this church or government, but these things are only means to lead me to trust ultimately in You. You provide, You protect, You lead, You comfort, You strengthen.

Jeremiah 17:5 *Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man And makes flesh his strength, Whose heart departs from the LORD.*

Psalms 20:7 *Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; But we will remember the name of the LORD our God.*

II. Loving God Ultimately is Giving Him Your Ultimate Devotion

A god is what you are ultimately devoted to. You are committed to serving it, and giving yourself to it.

2 Kings 17:16-17 So they left all the commandments of the LORD their God, made for themselves a molded image and two calves, made a wooden image and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. 17 And they caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and soothsaying, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger.

God often speaks with great revulsion at how Israel descended into human sacrifice, and gave up their children to Molech. Such was their commitment, their devotion, their willingness to serve Molech. The sacrifice to Molech involved an image of Molech which was heated up to a great temperature, and then the infants were placed alive on that fiery hot metal and burnt to death. You can't get much more devoted than that.

People are committed to all kinds of things. They are committed to their jobs. They are committed to their hobbies. They are committed to relationships. They are committed to sports. They are committed to churches. They are committed to societies and interest-groups and political parties. And we might have many commitments in life, and in fact, we have to have numerous commitments. The question is, are your commitments means to the ultimate commitment, or are you devoted to some things as ends?

You meet the mother who is committed to getting her children to every activity under the sun – swimming and music and Kumon maths and little kickers and play groups and several others. She is devoted to driving up and down the city and getting her child to those things promptly and faithfully. Is she committed to any of those activities as ends? No, she is committed to them as means – they lead to something else. What do they provide? Probably she will say, they provide a well-rounded child. Is she committed to having a well-rounded child as an end or as a means? Possibly she idolizes her child, and it ends there. But perhaps it is a means to something else – that she be a 'successful' mom, who deprives her children of nothing. And if you were to ask her why

she is committed to being a successful mom, she may shrug, and just say, because I am. That then is her god, her own image of herself as supermom. And you can tell if it is her god if that image of her is threatened or undermined in some way.

See, once again, when you find a commitment that leads to nothing else, you've reached the end of the chain. There is the person's ultimate love. There is his or her god.

No problem being committed to many things. But all commitments should ultimately lead back to one commitment: the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31 *Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

This is why Jesus gave such radical calls to discipleship. It was not that he was refusing people the right to love father and mother, to go and bury their dead. He was trying to teach that all other commitments must only form part of your ultimate commitment – God.

II. Loving God Ultimately is Making Him Your Ultimate Delight

Jeremiah 2:11-13 *Has a nation changed its gods, Which are not gods? But My people have changed their Glory For what does not profit. ¹² Be astonished, O heavens, at this, And be horribly afraid; Be very desolate," says the LORD. ¹³ "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns -- broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

Israel had turned to idols to satisfy its soul. They were looking to other gods, with other laws to bring them fulfillment and satisfaction and pleasure. God does not chide them for seeking to quench their thirst! He chides them for seeking to do it outside of Him. They used things, that were not meant to give ultimate delight – to that end.

God has filled this world with pleasures. The world is bursting with things to enjoy. Beauty to be seen, sounds and music to be heard, food and drink to be tasted, fragrances to smell, experiences to have, knowledge to gain, relationships to enjoy.

And where do all these potential pleasures come from?

James 1:17 *¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*

Ecclesiastes 5:19 *¹⁹ As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor -- this is the gift of God.*

But idolatry is when we take the creation, and put it in the place of the Creator. We take any of God's gifts: food, drink, sex, music, nature, bodily comfort, precious things, possessions, beautiful appearances and either misuse it, or use it to seek ultimate delight.

Remember Esau? Esau loved food. There came a time when Jacob was making food and Esau came in hungry. He wanted food. Did he want food as a means to glorify God? No, at that moment, his god was his belly. He was willing to sell his birthright, that which would be the means of glorifying God, he gave it up for the sake of the pleasure of eating and feeling full. That's why the New Testament called him profane or godless.

You can delight in all kinds of things, but you love God wholeheartedly when all those things are means, and He alone is the end.

1 Timothy 4:4-5 *⁴ For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with*

thanksgiving; ⁵ for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

God wants His people to know, He alone is worth this kind of ultimate love

In fact, God's name even suggests this idea. "Yahweh" - "I AM" suggests God is saying, I am the only one in the universe who is not simply an instrument or a means for someone or something else. I am not someone who is explained as an agent or means for something beyond Me. No, God is simply, I AM.

And whenever something other than God is put in His place, it disappoints. False gods cheat us – they promise they will do what only God can do, but they turn out to be hollow. They do not satisfy like God does. They are not trustworthy like He is. False gods are treacherous. False gods always abandon the worshipper at some point.

If God alone is the true God, then no one and nothing else should be loved in this way. That means two things:

1) **Loving God ultimately is loving God for Himself.** To love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is to not seek to use God for some other end beyond Himself. We love God for His excellence, for His beauty, for His reliability, for His desirability.

"If we love not God because he is what he is, but only because he is profitable to us, in truth we love him not at all." - Jonathan Edwards

*My God, I love Thee; not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet for fear that loving not
I might forever die
But for that didst all mankind Upon the cross embrace;
For us didst bear the nails and spear,
And manifold disgrace.*

2) **Loving God ultimately is loving all other things for His sake**

Whatever else in my life I love for its dependability, whatever else I am devoted to, whatever else I delight in, is to be part of ultimately loving God. I love people and things for God's sake.

Now when you think of how idolatrous your own heart is, you begin to realise that something quite beyond our power has to happen to us to make this possible. We need two things – regeneration and sanctification. Regeneration is the moment at which the Spirit of God imparts new life to the believing sinner, and with it a new heart to love God. Sanctification is the process by which the Spirit increasingly changes the believer from loving the old to loving the new.

These are works of God, which people cannot do in their own strength. But God does use means to bring these about. He uses the Word of God. He uses prayer. He uses the church. And so Deuteronomy 6 says – structure your home, so that this kind of love for me seems obvious. Set it up so that regeneration is likely, and sanctification is encouraged.

Truly Christian homes make the environment one in which God is the ultimate dependence, God is the ultimate devotion, God is the ultimate delight. Homes which are likely to produce saving faith in Christ, leading on to dependent, devoted, delighted discipleship, are homes which make loving God

the most obvious thing, the most sensible thing, the most beautiful thing.

How do we make these kinds of homes? It won't be one thing, but many things. It is through modelling godly, Christlike relationships. It is through our priorities and plans. It is through our habits, routines, traditions and rituals. It is even in teaching the difference between the ordinary, and our extraordinary God. Over the next weeks we'll look at these things.

But how is your love for God? If you have to trace the chains of dependence, devotion and delight in your life, do they terminate on God Himself? Maybe there are some idols we need to repent of. Do you have a heart which desires to love God? Only Christ can give you that.