

Parenting by Faith—Not Formula



by JULIE LOWE

Bill and Amanda are the parents of three children. They both work, are involved in church, and are trying their best to juggle the business of life and family activities. Like many parents, they are looking for solutions to the problems that their children are experiencing. Micah (age 14) is consumed with his phone and seems to be slowly withdrawing from family life. Rachel (age 6) is anxious and struggles just to get on the morning bus, and Matthew (age 4) is a typical high-energy child who wears his mother out with his constant movement.

Bill and Amanda came for counseling to find out what they could do to make their family “function normally.” As we talked together about what function normally meant to them, I realized that they were looking for *the* thing they could do to end the struggle in their family. They wanted to know what to do so that their kids would become happy, decent young people. Surely, there is *a* right thing, a foolproof recipe for producing the results they are looking for?

I get it. I am like this with my children, too. I want a formula for successful parenting. I want a parenting roadmap with directions (like my GPS) that tells me where to turn. And I definitely want the guarantee that my family will end up at the right destination. I don’t want to have to struggle or

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wonder; just tell me the next step and I will take it.

In my search, I, like many others, have read my share of the countless books written on Christian parenting that tell me what steps to take. But I often struggle to apply what I have read to my own family. I notice in myself, and in the parents I counsel, the tendency to take what we read or hear and try to squeeze our families into a one-size-fits-all approach to our children: Do these specific things and your family will function well. But all too often, we feel defeated, frustrated, and stuck when it seems that we've followed the rules, and yet our children still struggle, appear unresponsive, or have challenging behaviors.

When this happens, we can feel abandoned by God, discouraged, and frustrated. From there, it's easy to simply revert to our own ways, the ones that seem right and natural to us. We move toward a parental pragmatism that justifies our bad reactions, our passivity, and a paralyzing defeatism. What we fail to see during these times is that we have *not* been abandoned by God as we have attempted to parent. The reality is that biblical truth and biblical principles are *always* at work and *always* offer hope and help. They remain true and effective even when it appears that our children are not responsive.

And yet we do flounder. The place where I see myself and others struggle the most is in our application of biblical principles. We want someone to give us ten steps to apply the Bible to our family life and we want it to work NOW! But that is not how it works. Applying biblical principles and truth to your family (and mine) takes time and requires biblical wisdom. The wisdom that comes from God to us is gentle, peaceable, full of mercy, and good fruit. From that wisdom we are promised a harvest of righteousness that brings peace (James 3:17–18). But it doesn't come through a formula and it has no timetable.

The goal, then, is not to keep looking for *the* formula but to pursue biblical wisdom that comes from knowing and loving God. The aim is to turn to him and depend on him for what we lack. God promises to give wisdom to those who seek it (James 1:5), and what he gives is tailor-made for our children and for us. It's a practical expression of what it means to love God and love others. The thing to remember is that, while the biblical principles remain universal and unchanging, the way they are *applied* in specific ways

is unique to each family's personalities, gifts, difficulties, and circumstances. God gives much more liberty in how we live out godly principles in family life than we often give ourselves. And God does not give guaranteed outcomes. He wants us to always need him, to always seek help.

One of the common stumbling blocks to seeking biblical wisdom for our parenting is trying to fit our family into a pre-conceived “ideal” family mold.

The purpose of this article¹ is to explore what Scripture teaches about parenting and the freedom it brings to family life. We will begin by discussing how the myths we believe about what our families are supposed to look like send us in the wrong direction.

Your Picture of the “Ideal” Family

One of the common stumbling blocks to seeking biblical wisdom for our parenting is trying to fit our family into a pre-conceived “ideal” family mold. Perhaps you have a picture of that ideal family in your mind right now. Most of us do. Maybe the children are always respectful, the parents are always calm, and family devotions are deep and engaging. When you compare your family to that ideal, it's easy to feel defeated. Or perhaps your ideal family is more about accomplishments. The children are on the honor roll, they excel at sports, and have lots of friends. We are all good at finding families that seem to have it more together than we do.

But consider this: Is it possible that your picture of the ideal family is keeping you from understanding and loving your *actual* family? Does your image of the ideal family hinder you to live out the two great commandments to love God and others?

When we want our families to fit a preconceived mold, it's a small step

¹ The themes in this article will be further developed in my forthcoming book from New Growth Press: *Child Proof: Parenting by Faith, Not Formula*.

to begin looking for a parenting formula that will help us achieve that ideal. There always seems to be a new recipe for parenting success that guarantees that, if you follow it correctly, the result will be well-behaved, God-fearing young men and women. But for the most part, these formulas do not produce results because they have taken some ideas, maybe even good ideas, and made them paramount. They may help a small group of families, but for the most part they set up rules that do little more than frustrate and discourage the rest. Let me give you an example.

Years ago, there was a popular theory that parents should set strict schedules of eating and napping even for very young children. The promised result was well-rounded, well-behaved children—an ideal family! But the best it could offer was highly-structured homes. It was simply assumed that this structure was universally beneficial and the only correct way to parent.

As a result, many families tried to follow a formula that wasn't helpful for them. The idea wasn't completely bad; it was, in fact, beneficial to some families. The problem was that it was held up by those who liked it as “the only right way” to parent. It appeared to be godly because it established parental leadership in the home and avoided what many saw as child-dominated families. In many circles it was viewed as the model for all Christian parenting, and all families were held to that standard.

But many parents felt like failures when this structure did not work for them. Others felt frustrated because it forced them to parent outside their natural strengths and gifting, or it forced children who were wired differently into a mold that did not fit them. It did not make them calmer and better behaved; rather, it kept them from thriving according to the way they were individually created.

That's what happens when we are looking to get a particular result. We fall victim to parenting formulas that take something that is not an essential and make it a parenting imperative. Failure is sure to follow for many.

Beyond Parenting Formulas

Part of biblical wisdom then is to realize that there is no ideal family and that you are instead called to embrace the diversity of your family's life.

Let's say that you are a parent who comes to life after nine p.m. You work

more effectively at that hour. You accomplish more around the house, and you and your spouse have more meaningful conversations with your children, who are also wired to enjoy late nights. Family life comes alive in the evening, and the house does not wake up until late morning (at least on weekends!). Contrast that with a family full of morning people, who cheerfully rise at the crack of dawn and go to bed by eight o'clock. Is one family more spiritually mature and godly because of their schedule? Or are they just different? They are simply different. Wisdom and maturity are revealed in the way parents live their lives before the Lord and with their families—not in what time everyone goes to bed. Biblical wisdom equips you to create a home that is attentive to the individual people God has placed within it, so that you can raise your children to follow the Lord, and you can all live together in a Christ-centered way.

Clinging to a certain formula and expectation for family life can get in the way of truly loving the family you have been given. Consider how formulas might impact people whose life circumstances make it impossible for them to conform to a particular ideal. What do you tell the widow or single parent who must fill the roles of both mom and dad? Does that mean that a godly home life is not possible for you? What if you value home-schooling but your child has a disability and would do better with a public school special education teacher? Will you insist on home-schooling because of your ideal? Will you consider other options? What is the loving decision in such a situation? What about a family where the father stays home or works part-time while the mother has a full-time career? How does a family structure home life to accommodate a child with significant medical needs who requires a great deal of time and attention? Consider the single adults who feel called to adopt or foster children: Are they outside God's best? Will their ability to form a biblical, loving environment always be inferior?

As many of these examples demonstrate, you cannot come up with a simple, standard formula to fit every situation. One size *cannot* fit all, nor should it. These scenarios force us to evaluate our biases about what we believe makes an ideal family. Do I assume that a certain family structure or family size makes for a good home? Do I think a particular procedure, disciplinary method, or daily routine will automatically produce a good family?

We, as parents, do not need a parenting recipe. God offers something much better—more challenging—but much better. Instead of providing a formula, God offers freedom to know your family and biblical wisdom that leads to a pathway forward. He calls parents to come to him and think biblically, wisely, and carefully about what love looks like in their unique family. This calling requires an absolute dependence on godly wisdom, on spiritual discernment regarding our families, and on personal holiness to be what our families need us to be. The goal is a home centered on Jesus Christ.

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This is not a formula we submit to, but neither is it a license to do whatever seems right in our own eyes. Far from it! Rather, it means a commitment to understanding Scripture's principles of godly relationships. It means the call and responsibility to lead a home in faith working through love.

God as Our Model and Source of Wisdom

Biblical wisdom for parenting is built upon God's character and his relationship with us. We see this displayed in Christ. As we grow in our understanding of the Father and the Son, our parenting will reflect their love and wisdom.

God the Father as our model. How do we know how to raise and love our children well? We look to the one who is our Father. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1).

God describes himself as a father and us as his children. He models how we are to live in relationships in our families. God is compassionate, gracious, steadfast in love, and slow to anger. This is how he describes himself:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and

transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation. (Ex 34:6–7)

God is faithful to his children. His steadfast love toward us is long-suffering and persevering. He unflinchingly commits to our good, despite our sins. Even in the midst of great grief and tragedy brought on by Israel's bad behavior, God demonstrates how his steadfast love never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness (Lam 3:22–23).

What a wonderful goal—to grow as parents who love our children the way our heavenly Father loves us! Instead of a formula, that is a calling.

God expresses his love, too, when people are suffering. Job's words testify to God's specific, fatherly care for him as he endured tragedies: "You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit" (Job 10:12). We can believe that in the midst of our hardest moments, God is intimately aware and present. No matter the circumstances or the sufferings that befall you, God can be trusted. He is for you, looking out for your interests and directing your steps. Your confidence is in his character. He is a loving Father.

Envision your children having that kind of confidence in you, in your steadfast love toward them, in your utter commitment to their good. What a wonderful goal—to grow as parents who love our children the way our heavenly Father loves us! Instead of a formula, that is a calling. That is our calling as parents.

God's personal love. Our heavenly Father's love is faithful, persevering, steadfast—and it is also personal. He does not treat us all the same. He meets us individually. He understands our hearts and motives. He convicts, encourages, and shepherds us according to our needs.

Several years ago, I saw this play out after our family experienced a house fire. It destroyed our home, everything we owned, and took the lives of all our pets. We each experienced the grief and loss in different ways. One of our children became withdrawn. Another was outwardly angry; another wanted to talk about it all the time. I was deeply impacted in a multitude of ways while also trying to shepherd our children through the loss. We were cared for and blessed immensely by our church, work, friends, and community. In numerous ways, these things were evidence of God's care and kindness toward us through others. Then there were more personal moments when God met me during times when I was alone, hurting, and questioning. God would bring verses to mind, songs on the radio, people who would call, write notes, and say just what the Lord knew I needed to hear. What ministered to my husband, Greg, was different but equally meaningful.

Just as God met each of us personally, as parents Greg and I also needed to meet each of our children personally. We sought to address each of our kids' suffering individually. One needed to be drawn out, cry, and know it was okay, that God cared about her suffering. Another talked about his fears and concerns that a fire might happen again. Another needed help to process his anger at God for allowing the fire to happen. There was no one-size-helps-all approach. God's Word, his character, and his truth did not change, but how we contextualized them to each child's suffering varied. Greg and I had to discern what each child was struggling with so we could then speak specific and timely truth, comfort, and hope. We needed to model God's care to them in the midst of their personal grief.

We see God's individual care for his people throughout the Bible. He cares for Abraham and Sarah by providing them with a son in their old age, and by speaking into their individual doubt or confusion. He provides just the right bride for Isaac. And despite his lies and deceit, Jacob is still under God's specific care as God gives him a vision of heaven and wrestles him to the ground. In 1 Kings 19, God models this in the way he comes to Elijah. Elijah is running for his life. He is fearful and tired. God provides food and water for him, and then addresses him personally. He knows what Elijah needs, and meets him there. God spoke into David's sin very powerfully and personally through a story and the prophet Nathan. God sent particular prophets to

particular nations and cities to deliver personalized messages they needed to hear. There are many more examples—and the greatest and brightest testament of God’s love for us is his Son.

Christ embodies God’s personal love. Jesus is the living example of God’s steadfast love toward us. God the Father sent his only Son to live among us and die for us. He is the ultimate expression of God’s fatherly care. In Jesus, we see God’s commitment to rescue us at great personal sacrifice. No greater love exists.

During his life on earth, Jesus modeled specific care as he personally interacted with those he encountered. He knew the woman at the well intimately and gave her grace, despite her many sins. He sought out Zacchaeus, a tax collector, for fellowship. He rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees and called them a brood of vipers. He knew each disciple individually; in fact, Jesus often demonstrated that he knew them so well that he put words to what they were thinking! And then he spoke into their doubt, unbelief, fear, and devotion.

Jesus’ life was the love of God in action.

Wisdom found in Christ. Wisdom is incarnated in a person, Christ (1 Cor 1:30–31). He is God’s wisdom to us, and he lives out God’s wisdom perfectly for us. He is the image of God and demonstrates to us how to be an image-bearer living in dependence on the Father. Christ lives out the life we are called to live and he calls us to follow him.

When we live independently from God, we become foolish. Adam and Eve sought to know wisdom apart from what God had given them. They heard from God himself, yet they were enticed and corrupted by what they wanted to hear. When we establish homes based on worldly wisdom, both our big goals (well-educated children, successful lives) and small ones (peace for an evening or children who will do their homework) are often unwise. We are always called to re-orient our homes away from a worldly perspective toward homes dependent on God’s guidance. Biblical wisdom comes from living under God’s truth and revelation, Christ’s model to us, and the Spirit’s guidance and help.

This means that my ultimate goal is not even the good desires I have for our family, things like peace and quiet and obedient, moral children. My

ultimate desire is to be a parent whose life rests on what has been graciously given to me by the Father, modeled to me in Christ Jesus, and supplied to me by his Spirit.

The Waterfall Effect

As God lavishes his love on us, it flows through us to others. Think of this as the waterfall effect. God loves, forgives, gives grace, instructs, encourages, admonishes, and disciplines you according to the need of the moment. You love, forgive, give grace, and so forth to your children as an overflow of the grace that God supplies. And our heavenly Father does not respond to us with a cookie-cutter format. He knows you personally, and he speaks intimately and specifically to you, according to your need. We can do the same with his help.

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As we learn more about God's love for us and live in his love, the waterfall of that love enables us to base our family relationships on the way God relates to us and cares for us. Instead of parenting "how to's" and formulas, we rely on who God is in relationship to us. We ask him for wisdom on how to reflect his love in our family. I can comfort my children in their struggles because of the comfort I have been given (2 Cor 1:4). I can forgive and bear with my children, just as Christ has forgiven me (Col 3:13). I discipline my children because my Creator lovingly, caringly disciplines me (Prov 3:12). I choose to love sacrificially because it was first done for me and I choose to be a fragrant offering in my home (Eph 5:2). All that we do is shaped by a commitment to mutual edification, sacrifice, building one another up, and offering grace in the midst of weakness. Every parenting choice is marked by the character qualities of a personal God who demonstrates intimate knowledge of us and

extends patience, lovingkindness, and guidance to us.

Parents and children need Christ equally and are able to express Christ-likeness equally. All can confess sin and offer forgiveness. All need grace and can extend it. Each one is at a different level of spiritual maturity, but all can demonstrate a commitment to follow Jesus. All pursue mutual edification in humility, having the posture that they are “for each other,” not against each other. When one person is struggling, everyone should be there to help, encourage, pray, and remind each other of what is true and good.

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family, the overflow of God’s love enables us
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This is not an easy or natural way to relate to one another in families. I speak with many families in which the working attitude is “every man for himself.” If one person fails, everyone abandons ship, runs for the hills, points and says, “I told you so,” or criticizes. Imagine living in a very different family, where no one wants to see you fail. They aren’t waiting to expose your failure to prove that they are superior to you. Rather, they lift you up when you are weak; they are forgiving and gracious when you have sinned against them. They know your worst and your best, and they love you regardless.

To love this way is to live out the calling in Ephesians to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (4:32). My children may need forgiveness for disobedience or dishonesty; I may need it for frustration or a short temper. But our need for humility and forgiveness is the same. We often tell our kids, “All ground is level at the cross. We need Jesus just as much as you do.” Our struggles may look different, but our need is always the same. We also say to our kids that we are all black sheep in our home, which is a way to say we all struggle with sin. We all need the Shepherd to lead us, guide us, and bring us back when we are prone to wander away. We all need Christ. Parents and children alike need forgiveness

and daily grace.

As we live together in the community of family, the overflow of God's love enables us to mutually sharpen one another and help one another toward godliness, but as Paul demonstrates in his writing, this godliness is expressed uniquely in each community.

Paul and the New Testament Churches: A Model for Family Life

In the New Testament, we see biblical principles of life together applied specifically. When we read Paul's letters to the early church, we observe him addressing each church personally, according to its specific needs. He offers individualized correction, rebuke, encouragement, reminders, cautions, praise, and hope to each church. What Paul says to the church in Ephesus is different from what he says to the church in Philippi. Why? Because they wrestled with different issues.

Each church faced specific challenges. They needed wisdom to respond to heretics, to specific sins in their community, and to a wrong view of the law. They had to deal with challenging individuals and circumstances. Particular gifts and persons who excelled in service were commended by Paul as examples to others. Every church body was distinct; each had a God-given individuality. The way a church lived out that individuality was sometimes celebrated and sometimes corrected.

It's clear that Paul had no formula in mind. There was not one correct way to help a church grow up. There is freedom to be godly according to the needs of the body. Paul consistently called New Testament churches back to foundational biblical truths, and the rest was up to them. We have the same call to imitate Christ-likeness in our personal lives and in community with others. But there is liberty in our expression of biblical truths and principles.

For example, though Jesus washed his disciples' feet as an example of humility and service, not every early church practiced foot washing, and very few churches do today. Why? Because it was a practice that was culturally informed. Though the principles of humility and service are universal and unchanging, the way they are practiced may be shaped by the needs of the local church body. Foot washing might be seen as archaic and unnecessary, while cleaning a neighbor's garage or bathing a quadriplegic demonstrates the

same quality of humility.

There are many parallels to family life. We must be committed to the unchanging truths of God's Word while also granting freedom to live them out in a way that edifies the family God has given you. This requires a dependence on God that fuels a dedication to personal holiness and a tenacious commitment to wisdom. With his help, we will be able to celebrate the uniqueness God has placed in each individual and family, and live out his love and wisdom in the midst of that uniqueness.

We can borrow Paul's metaphor of the body as another way to think about life as a family. The family is a body, a community where there is authority and leadership, but also a reciprocal nature of ministry and need. Look how nicely Paul's description in Romans maps onto family life and dynamics.

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. (Rom 12:4–6)

Parents are in a position of decision-making and authority, but also respect each person's individuality and uniqueness. All work together for the good of the whole. All are equally valuable and necessary, and all learn to engage life together.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he again uses the body as a metaphor for the church of Christ. Here we see the principle that not all members function in similar ways or with equal authority, but all are of value. No parts are less a part of the body; all deserve to have honor bestowed on them (12:14–27). We can consider each member of a family in a similar way. Some have more abilities. Some need more protection and patience. Each one is an integral part of a community. God does not give all the same gifts, the same role, or the same perceived level of honor, authority, or prominence, but each is there to work within the whole. Each one is there to be a blessing and to be blessed in the family.

Sometimes in the body of Christ it appears that we value conformity and uniformity over individuality. But our God is a creative God who has demonstrated his creativity, personality, and uniqueness in every aspect of

nature. I believe he intends to give that same kind of liberty to families in the way they live out their lives.

Scripture's principles for relationship are the foundation and the guardrails for the way we express our individual uniqueness. There is great liberty within a framework of wisdom. Within that framework, families can live in a way that's glorifying to God, loving to one another, and truly unique according to their needs and their gifts. As we do, the hope is that each member of a family will grow in the image of our Savior. That is the goal. So often parents seek mere behavioral change—children who no longer lie or fight with their siblings, who complete homework or chores, or who demonstrate obedience and compliance. But God wants to bear so much more fruit in our family life!

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The End Result

Ultimately, we want to teach and model to our children all we know about the love and wisdom of God. Instead of a formula to create compliance and good behavior, we want a child to know God's character so he or she will be shaped by it. Can you see the difference?

God calls us to be who we need to be as parents even if our children do not respond as we hope. This frees us to love them and respond wisely to them, to have hope even when we do not yet see the fruit of our labor. When we desire to model Jesus' character to our children more than we desire to have them act a certain way, it allows us to respond in ways that are consistent with his character. When we are motivated by a love for God and our children, our parenting choices are no longer driven by our need to attain particular results. My parenting is no longer controlled by my personal motives, agenda, fears, or hopes, even when those desired outcomes are good things. When we

focus on what *our* role should be in our children's lives and knowing them personally, we focus less on their behavioral improvements and more on how the Lord is calling us to shepherd them. Having done this, we can rest in the fact that we have done the most important piece of parenting. Whether our children then change or not depends on their hearts in interaction with the Spirit of God and his Word.

Focusing on your role will also require you to evaluate your own responses in family life. You will always wrestle with your own sins in parenting. I always wrestle with this. And we must always be mindful of how our agendas can subtly warp our parenting choices. Do not be afraid to be humble before your children, to apologize for your sins, and seek their forgiveness. It shows them that we all need the Savior. It endears you to your children when you walk alongside them, not as a perfect person, but as someone who can sympathize with their weaknesses.

When your focus as parents shifts to reflecting the image of Christ, you no longer see your children as personal achievements that bring you glory or shame. You begin to see them as fellow strugglers with whom you live, eat, grieve, forgive, and do life. They are people who are entrusted to your care by God. They are individuals you strive to know well, speak to meaningfully, and love unwaveringly. As 3 John 1:4 says, we will have no greater joy than when our children walk in truth. But even that outcome is not the result of any formula. Outcomes are in God's hands.

It's Never Too Late

Perhaps as you read this, you are filled with regret (a universal parental pastime, I'm afraid). You feel as if you've already blown it with your kids, or you've instilled fear and unrealistic standards in your home. Perhaps you have been driven by your desire for your children to love you and affirm you as a parent. Maybe you've been driven to insist on outward compliance and good, moral character. Maybe you've held yourself or your children to unhelpful standards. If that is how you are feeling, then hear this: you can turn things around.

Whether your children are toddlers, teenagers, or adults, it is never too late. There is always an opportunity to repent and reflect Christ. Relationships can change and healing can occur. There may be more work to do (or undo),

there may be failures to confess, and there may be relationships to be restored. But the Spirit can intercede and bring life to the lifeless places in your home.

For most, parenting is rewarding but exhausting—overflowing with multiple schedules to manage, problems to solve, various appointments, sports, clubs, and youth group. I've heard many parents say that they woke up one day and wondered where the time had gone because they feel so disconnected from their children. We easily get caught up in demanding routines even though we wish things were different. *Don't let this be your story.* It is never too early to start doing things differently, and it is never too late. Do what is counter-cultural, because even passively submitting to society's norms for parenting can turn into a formula that rules your home. I hope this article challenges you to question such things and their impact on your family. I hope it frees you to begin brainstorming about how your family might live in meaningful, rich ways, and embrace the freedom from God to love and parent your children in the wisdom only he can provide.

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