"WHAT HAPPENED?" AND "WHAT NOW?": EXPLORING HOW REFORMED PASTORS MINISTER TO THE PARENTS OF APOSTATE EMERGING ADULTS

By

Joost Nixon

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
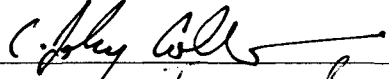FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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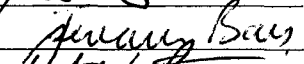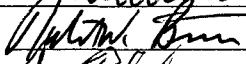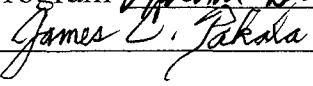DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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Dr. C. John Collins, Faculty Advisor _____

Rev. Jerram Barrs, Second Faculty Reader _____

Dr. Robert W. Burns, Director of D.Min. Program _____

Rev. James C. Pakala, Library Director _____

ABSTRACT

Many emerging adults drift away from the religion of their upbringing. Many Christian parents with wayward or apostate emerging adult children face intense grief, guilt, disappointment, and other emotions. This is especially true of Christian parents of a Reformed heritage, who have a high expectation that their children will follow in their faith. The purpose of this study was to explore how Reformed pastors minister to the parents of prodigal emerging adult children.

This study primarily focused on three key areas that affect how Reformed pastors minister to the parents of apostate emerging adults: the religious lives of emerging adults, biblical and theological concerns regarding baptism, apostasy, and covenantal status of children, and policies and procedures churches have employed to minister to apostate young adults and their parents. This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with seasoned Reformed pastors in the Northwestern United States. This study found that parents have a strong shaping influence on their children's religious faith, and that prevention through consistent reinforcement of covenantal indicatives and parental example is critical, and that redemptive solutions to apostate emerging adults must embrace the entire church community. The study further found that ministering to the parents of apostate emerging adults is intensely challenging and complex, but offers opportunity for transformative grace to work in the lives of children, parents, congregants and ministers alike.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my wife, Kristen, and to my children, Joshua, Josiah, Jedidiah, Johannes, Katerina, Judah, Jesse, and Hadassah—your delight in God is my great delight;

To my parents, Maria Biessels and Paul Nixon, for your loving support, and to my parents-in-law George and Diana Seitz for your support, especially the heroic childcare assistance as I was on sabbatical.

To the saints at Christ Church, for your love and steadfast encouragement in this and all my endeavors, and for your generosity in granting me a sabbath to study;

To my faithful, never-sleeping God, who keeps His people, lavishing them with grace;

My deepest gratitude.

CHAPTER ONE

Today's emerging adults—people in those exploratory years between high school

and full adulthood—are prone to religious drift and apostasy. A February 2010 report

from the *Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life* indicates a significant number of

emerging adults become less religious today compared with those of the Generation X

and Baby Boomer generations.[1] In *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives*

of Emerging Adults, Christian Smith writes:

> Emerging adulthood tends both to raise the stakes on and remove social support
> for being seriously religious. As a result, many youth do pull back from, or
> entirely out of, religious faith and practice during their transitions out of the
> teenage years.[2]

Christian parents are charged in Scripture to raise their children in the "training

and admonition of the Lord."[3] Though most parents "want to see their children inherit

their affiliations and beliefs,"[4] many Christians in the Reformed tradition especially have

the desire and expectation that their children will follow them in the faith. Joseph

Neumann, in a comparative study of the self-reported effects of covenantal versus

dispensational theology on the family, writes: "Covenantal theology stresses the

significance of infants and family units. . . .The distinct hope is that the child will receive

the blessings and obey the stipulations of the covenant as described in Genesis 17 and

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[1] Allison Pond, Gregory Smith, & Scott Clement, *Religion among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active Than Older Americans, but Fairly Traditional in Other Ways* (Washington, D. C.: Pew Research, 2010), 1. Pond defines her terms, "Fully one-in-four adults under age 30 (25%) are unaffiliated, describing their religion as 'atheist,' 'agnostic' or 'nothing in particular,'" 3.

[2] Christian Smith, with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 283.

[3] Eph. 6:4. Scripture taken from the NKJV Bible, unless otherwise noted.

[4] John Wilson and Darren E. Sherkat, "Returning to the Fold," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 2 (1994): 150.

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elsewhere."[5] Moreover, historically, many Reformed Christians have held the conviction that the Bible teaches that the children of believers *"are expected to succeed in the faith of their parents, and this is accomplished through the Divinely ordained means of covenant nurture."*[6] This doctrine has been called many things: most recently, "covenant succession."[7]

What happens to Christian parents when their emerging adult children "pull back" from the church and do not embrace their faith? Apostasy is always tragic, with seismic ramifications that affect not only the former Christian, but also the family, and especially the parents, of those who apostatize. For many parents in this situation, they experience what the apostle Paul described as "great sorrow and continual grief."[8] C. John Miller, whose daughter Barbara rejected Christianity for a time, reports feeling a broad array of conflicting emotions, including anger, guilt, shame, self-pity, betrayal and intense grief.[9] He writes, "I felt we were experiencing an amputation, a violent cutting way of part of our flesh. And the severing had not been a clean one, though it certainly was complete."[10] Miller's experience is not outside the norm.[11]

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[5] Joseph K. Neumann, "Covenantal Versus Dispensational Theology: A Pilot Study Concerning Self-Reported Family Effects," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 20, no. 4 (1992): 390.

[6] Benjamin K. Wikner, ed. *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005), xix. Emphasis original. Cf. Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1940; reprint, 2003); also Thomas Trouwborst, "From Covenant to Chaos: The Reformers and Their Heirs on Covenant Succession," in Wikner, ed., 59-103.

[7] Robert S. Rayburn, "The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession," *Presbyterion* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1996).

[8] Romans 9:1-3 (NKJV). Paul is writing regarding his "brethren, countrymen according to the flesh," who have not embraced Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah.

[9] C. John Miller and Barbara Miller Juliani, *Come Back, Barbara*, Second ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1988; reprint, 1997), 27-30, 38.

[10] Ibid.

[11] E.g. Jane Adams, *When Our Grown up Kids Disappoint Us: Letting Go of Their Problems, Loving Them Anyway, and Getting on with Our Lives* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003); John White, *Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Ministering to the parents of apostate or wayward emerging adults can be

difficult. Randy Booth alludes to some of the challenges Reformed pastors face in

ministering to parents enduring such violent and conflicting emotion:

> Sermons, lessons, or books about covenant succession can add to the heartache of
> the parents who are not experiencing such covenant blessings. As a result, many
> pastors are reluctant to speak out on these issues for fear of further injury to their
> suffering sheep.[12]

Booth only begins to unravel the pastoral complexities of ministering to the

parents of wayward or apostate emerging adults. Other questions abound. Parents often

report crushing guilt and shame. To what extent are they culpable for the apostasy of their

children? Is there value in analyzing past parental performance? Parents feel despair. Will

their children come back? Is the situation redeemable? What should they do? Parents

report confusion. How are they to relate to their children? Should they continue to

subsidize them financially, or withdraw such support? What about family celebrations

like Thanksgiving and Christmas, and events like weddings? How are parents to relate to

the church community when their children have acted shamefully? Parents experience

exhaustion. How long will the crisis continue? Will it ever end? Parents worry. Will the

other children also fall away? Will this one ever come back? And, if their children are

involved in self destructive behaviors, parents may be haunted with anxiety whenever the

phone rings or someone knocks on the door. Are the police calling? Is it the hospital?

Looming over all of this, parents are deeply perplexed by the question, *what went wrong?*

Ministering to the emotional and spiritual lives of parents whose children are

wayward or apostate presents significant challenges. But ministering to parents cannot be

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[12] See also Rayburn: 106-7; Randy Booth, "Picking Up the Pieces," in Wikner, ed., 158.

disconnected from ministering to their children. Pastors often have spiritual oversight of

both parents and child, and when they do have oversight of both, their actions toward one

will affect the other. Ministers, in consultation with other church leadership, must

consider what is to be done, and lead the parents through implementation. Sometimes

they must give parents hard counsel, calling them to show their children very firm and

principled expressions of love.[13] Sometimes the leadership determines that formal church

discipline is needed. The Lord Jesus Christ calls Christians to treat those who are

disciplined by the church as "tax-gatherers and sinners." Essentially, excommunicated

members are no longer members of the family of God.[14] However, while their formal

relationship with the church ceases, their relationships with Christian family members—

though often tattered—remain.[15] How should Christian parents interact with an

excommunicated child?

As challenging as that question might appear, it is made even more convoluted

because many modern churches do not practice church discipline, and even among the

Reformed community, there are differences in policy and procedure regarding the

discipline of wayward young adults. Some of this difference in procedure arises from the

practice in most Reformed churches of disallowing baptized children to take the Lord's

Supper until they are older and make a profession of faith. Until they make this

profession and are brought to the Lord's Table, what is the covenantal status of these

baptized non-communicants? Are they full members of the church, or not? Are they

Christian, or not quite? Are they subject to formal, public church discipline, or are they

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[13] For example, expulsion from the home. See White, 200-207.

[14] Matt. 18:15-18.

[15] John Owen, "Of Excommunication," in *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government*, ed. Thomas Russell, The Works of John Owen (London, UK: Richard Baynes, 1826), 565-6. This book was accessed online using Google Books.

not? [16] The ambiguity of being a baptized non-communicant causes perplexity in both pastors and parents as they try to determine what actions are biblically appropriate toward the child in question. For example, when church discipline is called for and administered, the parent has only one set of difficult questions: "What does it mean for me as a Christian parent to treat my own children as 'tax-gatherers and sinners' in this specific context?" But when church discipline is called for but *not* administered, and the covenantal status of the wayward child has not objectively changed, the parent is confronted by even more perplexing questions: "Should I treat my child as an unrepentant Christian, or as an unbeliever?" Two very different approaches entail. Helping these parents navigate the complexities of trusting the promises of God, while taking specific redemptive action, is more essential than ever. The church needs wisdom to handle this complex problem.

<div align="center">PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS</div>

With a greater proportion of today's emerging adults retreating from religious faith and practice, more and more parents are likely to experience the anguish of seeing their children fall away from the faith. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how Reformed pastors minister to the parents of wayward or apostate emerging adults.

In order to frame and guide the study, the following research questions were posed:

1. What challenges do Reformed pastors face in ministering to parents with apostate, emerging-adult children?

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[16] A significant controversy arose within the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in the 1850s and 1860s regarding just this matter, with a proposed revision of the Book of Discipline. One of the primary disagreements regarded whether baptized children who had not yet professed faith were subject to judicial procedure. See Schenck, 89-103.

2. How do Reformed pastors address the emotional life of the parents of apostate, emerging-adult children?

3. In what ways do Reformed pastors help parents to act redemptively toward their apostate, emerging-adult children?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study has significance for ministers, for the parents of apostate emerging adults, for the apostate emerging adults themselves, and for the church.

Significance for Ministers

More emerging adults are disaffiliating with the church and the faith of their parents, than have done so in previous generations. Ministers need to have the wisdom to think clearly through the biblical, theological, and sociological issues so they can minister to parents in a way that is effective and honors God.

Significance for Parents of Apostate Emerging Adults

When children disaffiliate from the faith they were raised in, their parents undergo what Miller described as "an amputation."[17] They are confused about how to consider their children covenantally. They ask, "Are my children apostate? Should I treat them as wayward Christians, or as 'tax-gatherers and sinners?' How much, and what kind of social interaction should I have with them?" And foremost, "How can I lead them (back) to Christ?" This research could significantly help them to answer these questions, as well as help correct parenting practices that may have contributed to their children's apostasy, thus removing obstacles that could hinder their remaining children from embracing their Christian faith and values.

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[17] Miller and Juliani, 38; ibid.

Significance for Apostate Emerging Adults

Emerging adults who have disaffiliated with their parents' faith are not likely to read this research. However, it may be that they will interact with others who have. When ministers, parents, and other friends act more biblically and wisely in calling those who have disaffiliated back to Christ, there is—on a human level—a greater chance of their heeding this call.

Significance for the Church

When emerging adults reject the faith of their upbringing, there is great grief and emotional trauma for the church. Relationships often run deep in churches, and are long-standing. Though parents feel the "amputation," so does the church, since the church functions as one body. "If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it."[18] Churches need wisdom to understand how baptized children relate to the covenant community. Are they subject to judicial censure? Should the church let them slip away quietly? Is some third way advisable? And how should members treat this person who, no doubt, many of them used to socialize with? Should they shun social interaction, as Paul tells the Thessalonians in 2 Thess. 3:15, while still holding them to be fellow believers, or should they treat them as "tax-gatherers and sinners," which would allow more normalized social interaction? These questions need to be answered if the church is to treat wayward emerging adults in a God-honoring way.

Another way this research is potentially significant for the church regards the effectiveness of its witness. As Rayburn points out, the evangelistic call of the church is undermined when our own children—raised within its nurture and care—reject it and turn to the world. The church needs to be better at retaining its young people, rather than

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[18] 1 Cor. 2:26.

merely "replac[ing] losses due to widespread desertion from our own camp."[19] Helping

parents understand the answer to "What happened?" might help pastors be wiser in

instructing parents in biblical childrearing. It might also lead to better answers concerning

the question parents raise, "What do we do now?"

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Affiliation/disaffiliation—The act of identifying a religious faith to which one adheres.

Disaffiliation is when one no longer so identifies.

Apostasy—"Deliberate repudiation and abandonment of the faith that one has

professed."[20] This definition raises the question of whether someone can apostatize from

a faith in which he or she was initiated as a child but has not yet formally "professed."

For example, when a baptized non-communicant leaves the faith, is it apostasy? This

person is leaving the church, but has never professed faith. The tension evident in this

scenario was the subject of debate during the proposed revision of the Book of Discipline

of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, a discussion that began in

1857.

Baptism—The application of water to a person in the name of the Triune God, baptism is

the initiatory rite of Christianity.

Children of the covenant—The children of baptized Christians are members of the

covenant community, and are thus subject to its covenantal blessings and curses. This

research assumes a paedobaptistic theological perspective. For a definition of

paedobaptism, see below.

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[19] Rayburn: 109.

[20] *The New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Apostasy."; ibid; *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Second ed. s.v. "Apostasy."

Church discipline—The process instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 18:15-17, whereby a sinning covenant member is called to repentance. It typically has four stages, the first two of them private, and the latter two public. Stage one is private admonition; stage two is private admonition with witnesses; stage three is suspension from participation in the Lord's Supper for a time; and stage four is removal from the church, or excommunication.[21]

Communicant/non-communicant—A communicant is a Christian who is partaking of the Lord's Supper. A non-communicant is usually a baptized child who has not yet made profession of faith, and is not taking communion.

Covenant Succession—*"The Scriptural teaching that the children of believers (covenant children) are expected to succeed in the faith of their parents, and this is accomplished through the divinely ordained means of covenant nurture."*[22]

Elder—An officer of the church entrusted specifically with the government, teaching, spiritual care, and discipline of a congregation. Normally, there is a plurality of elders who perform these tasks together. This group is called a "session," or a "board of elders."

Emerging adults—Eighteen to twenty-nine year olds, in between high school and adulthood, characterized by five features: identity exploration, instability, a self-focus, a feeling of being in-between adolescence and adulthood, and an optimistic outlook on the possibilities life has to offer.[23]

Erasure—An act of discipline without full judicial process, where the names of individuals are removed from the roles of the church. This form of discipline is one

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[21] "Chapter 30: Of Church Censures," in *The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)*.
[22] Wikner, ed., xix. Italics in original.
[23] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

which some churches opt for instead of excommunication, especially in the case of

baptized non-communicants who refuse to make a profession of faith.

Millennial—Though in Christian theology this term can be used in eschatological

contexts, in this research it is most often used in a sociological sense to refer to people

who were "born after 1980 and began to come of age around the year 2000."[24] Context

will determine whether the term is used eschatologically or sociologically.

Minister—Used as a noun, this term refers to a pastor, usually one set apart to serve the

body of Christ, govern and teach as a vocation. This term is also used as a verb to refer to

the act of shepherding or pastoring someone.

Paedobaptism—Baptism applied to the children, usually the infant children, of

Christians.

Profession of faith—The act of declaring oneself a believer in and follower of Jesus

Christ. In the context of this research, profession of faith is usually the requirement of

Presbyterian churches before a baptized member is allowed to partake of the Lord's

Supper. This profession is often made to the session of elders.

Sacraments—For the purposes of this research, sacraments refer to baptism and the

Lord's Supper. Baptism is the rite of initiation, acknowledging someone's inclusion in

the church. It happens only once. The Lord's Supper is the rite of continuation, and

occurs many times—for many churches, weekly. Temporary suspension of a communing

member from participation in the Lord's Supper is an act of restorative discipline by the

session.

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[24] Pond, 1.

Unaffiliated—"Those who describe their religion as 'atheist,' 'agnostic' or 'nothing at all.'"[25]

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[25] Ibid., 3.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore how Reformed pastors minister to the

parents of wayward or apostate emerging adults so that ministers can learn to do so more

effectively. Though there is scant literature specifically addressing this subject, there is a

great deal of literature written on apostasy (or disaffiliation) in young and emerging

adulthood, on the biblical/theological understanding of the covenantal status and how

wayward children relate to the church, and on policies and procedures churches have

adopted to minister to apostate young adults and their parents. Each of these three bodies

of literature advances our understanding of the research problem.

APOSTASY IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

What is emerging adulthood? What factors pertain to the retention or disaffiliation

of emerging adults from their religious communities? What factors come into play when

emerging adults who have left their religious community return?

The Emergence of Emerging Adulthood

"Emerging adulthood" is a relatively new field of study. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

coined the phrase in the late 1990s to describe the distinct period of life between late

adolescence and adulthood, "at least from age 18 to 25 and usually beyond."[26] The first

scholarly conference on the topic was held at Harvard University in November 2003.[27]

Since Arnett first identified emerging adulthood as a life phase, scholars have expanded

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[26] Arnett, vi.
[27] Ibid., vii.

the back-end boundary to around 29.[28] That scholars were struggling with the

inadequacies of previous terms to describe this period is evident by the litany of terms

that were previously employed but never found traction amongst researchers.[29]

Sociologist and author Christian Smith, in *Souls in Transition: The Religious and*

Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults, lists several terms that have never quite assimilated

into common language use: "extended adolescence," "youthhood," "adultolescence," "the

twixter years," "young adulthood," and "the twenty-somethings."[30] The Pew Research

Group refers to the current group of emerging adults as "Millennials."[31]

The term "emerging adulthood" finds traction among scholars where other terms

did not because it captures the vague and amorphous nature of the life period. Over the

last several decades the criteria of what constitutes adulthood have become more

nebulous. Arnett writes that in the past, "sociologists defined the transition to adulthood

in terms of distinct events, specifically, finishing education, entering full-time work,

marriage and parenthood,"[32] but now these markers are no longer embraced by young

people as decisive indicators that one has reached full adulthood. Though parents and

children disagree on precisely what constitutes the transition to adulthood, they do not

disagree much, and they do not disagree that "intangible" and "psychological" criteria[33]

have taken precedence over life events. Brigham Young University researchers Larry

Nelson and Laura Padilla-Walker, et al., compared emerging adults' and their parents'[34]

perceptions of what criteria are necessary for achieving adulthood; they found that both

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[28] Smith, 6.

[29] Arnett, 17-21.

[30] Smith, 6.

[31] Pond.

[32] Arnett, v.

[33] Ibid., vi; ibid.

[34] It is recognized that for many children only one parent is involved in the child rearing process. However, for simplicity's sake throughout this dissertation, the plural version is used in order to cover everyone.

valued "aspects of relational maturity as the most essential criterion for adulthood rather than events such as marriage."[35] Both emerging-adult children and their parents agreed that the criterion most necessary for adulthood was to "accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions." But after this, emerging-adults listed criteria like financial independence, determining one's own beliefs and values apart from parents/other influences, and establishing a relationship with one's parents as equals, as necessary for adulthood. Their parents, on the other hand, favored criteria such as avoiding drunkenness and petty crimes, and becoming less self-centered and more others-oriented.[36] Respondents rated "role transition" criteria such as completing education, getting married, or having a child second-to-last, just above "biological/age transitions" as essential transitions to adulthood.[37]

With Western industrialized society's preference for relational criteria as indicators of achieving adulthood, entering adulthood has become less of an event, and more of a process[38]—a process which seems to be taking longer and longer, and one that is not easily quantified. Once a step, now the transition to adulthood has become a road.[39] Chap Clark explains:

> Throughout time and in every society, the dominant culture has seen the young as its most sacred treasure. Because of this, historically there have been only two primary stages of the life span: childhood and adulthood. Children were viewed as a precious and nurtured resource and as such were guided into their place in the world by those responsible to care for them and their family and community. Once a child had completed the rituals, rites of passage, and training experience

[35] Larry J. Nelson and others, ""If You Want Me to Treat You Like an Adult, Start Acting Like One!" Comparing the Criteria That Emerging Adults and Their Parents Have for Adulthood," *Journal of Family Psychology* 21, no. 4 (2007).

[36] Ibid., 668. Their emerging adult children rated these criteria highly on which of them were *important* to achieving adulthood, but not as highly on which were *essential* to achieving adulthood.

[37] , (!!! INVALID CITATION !!!).

[38] Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004; reprint, 2008), 25-26, 45.

[39] Hence Arnett's sub-title *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties.*

necessary to be accepted into interdependent relationships within the adult community, he or she was fully assimilated as an adult member of that community. This process called rite of passage by Arnold van Gennep in 1908, had three elements: separation from the old status; transition, usually with a specified ritual; and incorporation into the adult community. Any type of formalized process of incorporating the young into adulthood has not been valued for over a century, especially in the United States.[40]

Youth no longer exit a rite of passage into the community as full adults. Now they emerge from high school and enter an "in-between" time.[41] The step to adulthood used to be a guided step. Parents and other adults in the community taught and exemplified to youth what it was to be an adult man or woman. But now, Clark argues, our frenetic society is guilty of systemic abandonment of its youth. Clark does not refer to financial abandonment. He speaks instead of parental absence—even when they are "present" ferrying children to soccer games, drama, and karate.[42] The road to adulthood is one our youth now largely walk alone.

> The fact is that adolescents need adults to become adults, and when adults are not present and involved in their lives, they are forced to figure out how to survive life on their own.[43]

One of the consequences of abandonment is that "the adolescent journey is lengthened, because no one is available to help move the developmental process along."[44] Clark argues that adolescence—which did not exist as a life stage in the nineteenth century—has lengthened from three years to as many as fifteen. Beginning at puberty, adolescence ends "somewhere in the middle to late twenties."[45] Though Clark is aware of

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[40] Clark, 25-26.
[41] Arnett, 8.
[42] In fact, he speaks of parents using financial subsidy of activities as a substitute for their companionship. Clark, 46.
[43] Ibid., 42-43.
[44] Ibid., 53.
[45] Ibid., 29. Clark acknowledges largely relational criteria for adulthood.

the terminology of emerging adulthood (see his bibliography), he does not employ it. He seems to subsume emerging adulthood into adolescence.

Although Clark emphasizes systemic abandonment of youth as one cause for a lengthening of adolescence, there are a number of other factors which scholars cite for the emergence of "emerging adulthood." Smith cites the dramatic increase in those who choose to go to college and university—and even on to grad school—a possibility because both the government and many parents are willing to subsidize further education.[46] Prolonged education is necessitated by another factor contributing to emerging adulthood—a changing job market. In today's more fluid job market, where employees neither expect (nor necessarily desire) to remain at a company for the bulk of their careers, further job training and flexibility is a necessity.[47] Arnett mentions the shift from a manufacturing to an information-based global economy as one motivator for emerging adults to stay in school longer.[48]

Still another factor is the dramatic increase in the median age of marriage in the United States from the 1950s to 2000. In the 1950s, the median age for marriage among women was 20, and for men 22. By 2000, these median ages were 25 and 27, respectively.[49] Arnett credits the invention of the birth control pill and the relaxing of society's sexual mores as two reasons for the delay of marriage.[50] Whereas previously having sex and living with your partner was usually achieved only through marriage, today this is no longer the case. And though emerging adults can more easily cohabit with

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[46] Smith, 5.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Socialization in Emerging Adulthood: From the Family to the Wider World, from Socialization to Self-Socialization," in *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, ed. Joan E. Grusec and Paul D. Hastings(New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2007), 208; ibid; ibid.
[49] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 4.
[50] Ibid., 5.

their partners, Arnett reports cohabitation does not seem to have the same maturing and

socializing effect of marriage:

> There seems to be something about the institution of marriage itself that modifies
> the behavior of people who enter into it. Despite marked increases in cohabitation
> and divorce, young people continue to believe in what Waite and Gallagher
> (2000) call "the power of the vow" (i.e., in marriage as a permanent union that
> obligates those entering it to modify their behavior so that it is less risky and less
> violative of cultural norms).[51]

Cohabitation does not move young people to relational maturity and adulthood

like marriage does. Usually accompanying the delay of marriage is also the delay of

childbearing. Both of these events have a "settling effect" on young people. Emerging

adults prolong education and delay marriage in order to explore their options, and—

another important factor—many parents seem willing to subsidize this financially. Smith

writes:

> According to best estimates, American parents spend on their children an average
> of $38,340 per child in total material assistance (cash, housing, educational
> expenses, food, etc.) over the 17 year period between ages 18 and 34. These
> resources help to subsidize the freedom that emerging adults enjoy to take a good,
> long time before settling down into full adulthood. . .[52]

Many emerging adults seem quite willing to take the long road to adulthood. They

seem to enjoy being "in between." Again, Arnett writes:

> There has been a profound change in how young people view the meaning and
> value of becoming an adult and entering the adult roles of spouse and parent. . . .
> In their late teens and early twenties, marriage, home, and children are seen by
> most of them not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided.[53]

St. Augustine famously prayed, "Lord give me continence . . . but not yet." The

attitude of emerging adults toward adulthood might be characterized similarly, "Lord

give me adulthood . . . but not yet." Emerging adults recognize the advantages of

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[51] Arnett, "Socialization in Emerging Adulthood," 223.
[52] Smith.
[53] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 6.

adulthood, but also the "constraints and limitations," and so they are somewhat

ambivalent regarding the value of embracing full adulthood.[54] So how is this period

between adolescence and adulthood characterized? Arnett identifies five main features of

emerging adulthood:

1. It is the age of *identity explorations*, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and in work.
2. It is the age of *instability*.
3. It is the most *self-focused* age of life.
4. It is the age of *feeling in-between*, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult.
5. It is the age of *possibilities*, when hopes flourish, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.[55]

Though all of these factors are germane to this research, the first, identity

exploration, is particularly relevant.

Religious Practices Wane, Beliefs Remain Relatively Stable

Smith has characterized this period of identity exploration as one in which there is

a "historically unprecedented freedom to roam, experiment, learn, move on, and try

again."[56] Though emerging adults tend to roam, many scholars argue that adolescence is

a more significant time for religious change than emerging adulthood.[57] In a study of

native British converts to Islam, Ali Kose found that though adolescence was not the

primary time for conversion, "for many of the converts, it was a period when they partly

rejected their childhood religion."[58] John Wilson and Darren Sherkat state that

"sociologists of religion, while recognizing their religious values and practices are often

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[54] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers? Myths and Reality About Emerging Adults," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, no. 1 (2007): 27.
[55] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 8. See also Arnett, "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers? Myths and Reality About Emerging Adults."
[56] Smith, 6.
[57] Laura B. Koenig, Matt McGue, and William Iacono, G., "Stability and Change in Religiousness During Emerging Adulthood," *Developmental Psychology* 44, no. 2 (2008).
[58] Ali Kose, "Religious Conversion: Is It an Adolescent Phenomenon? The Case of Native British Converts to Islam," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 6, no. 4 (1996): 254, 257.

inherited, have come to expect teenagers to reject their parents' religion, at least for a while, until they 'settle down.'"[59] This is often a part of identity differentiation.

But Smith writes that though identity differentiation is a powerful force during the teenage years, much of it occurs in the early 20s. Differentiation directly impacts emerging adults' practice of religion. They are still somewhat financially dependent on their parents. They do not want to sever relational ties with their families (indeed, most want stronger relational ties, but on a "renegotiated" basis). So in what area do they differentiate? Religion is a natural place.[60]

At this point in the literature review a larger introduction of Smith and Snell's research in *Souls in Transition* is called for. The authors base their research on the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), which included telephone surveys and personal interviews with the same youth in three waves, starting when they were 13-18, and ending five years later, when they were 18-23.[61] The data from second wave (2005) formed the basis of *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*,[62] and the data from the third wave formed the basis for the sequel, *Souls in Transition*. Smith and Snell used both quantitative and qualitative research methods for both books.

An example of identity differentiation is evident in the following exchange Smith had while interviewing an African American respondent of the NSYR:

> My mother is like, "We should go to church on Sunday, you should dress up at church," just be who the African American community says is a Christian. I'm

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[59] Wilson and Sherkat: 148.
[60] Smith, 78.
[61] Ibid., 6-7. Smith points out that though scholars agree emerging adulthood covers the period from 18-29, the data in this book only pertain to 18-23 year olds.
[62] Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).

more along the lines that it's 2008. Times are changing, and those things are not working anymore. So I told her not too long ago that I'm not a Christian, not religious. I just can't understand some things, so I don't really feel like I am a Christian. [And does that cause conflict or is she okay with that?] No, she's not okay with that. But I tell her all the time, if I didn't have my own opinion, then you failed me as a parent. A parent is supposed to raise up the child so they can stand back and make their own decisions, you know, not what the parents wants, but make their own decisions. I think a good parent does that, but she doesn't really understand. [Would you say she's happy or not with where you are in your faith?] I think she's torn. Happy I am able to make my own decision and when I say something I mean it and stand behind it. But at the same time she kind of wishes I was more like her in her thinking.[63]

In a similar vein, Arnett and Jensen write that for emerging adults, to whom their self-identity is so critical, merely to accept what their parents have taught them is a "kind of failure."[64] This notwithstanding, researchers have found there is not a wholesale departure among emerging adults from their religion. Religious beliefs remain largely intact during emerging adulthood, while religious practices—such as religious service attendance, Bible study and prayer—wane. Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler report that

> young adults are vastly more likely to curb their attendance at religious services than to alter how important they say religion is in their life or to drop their religious affiliation altogether. While attendance wanes for nearly 70 percent of these individuals, only about one fifth exhibit diminished religious salience, and even fewer - about one in six - disaffiliate from religion.[65]

Scholars suggest a number of reasons religious service attendance and other religious practices decline during the emerging adult years. Koenig, et al., suggest that "stopping attendance is an easy way to react against parental control"[66]; Arnett and Jensen suggest that religious service attendance among emerging adults sloughs off

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[63] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 150.

[64] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Lene Arnett Jensen, "A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 17, no. 5 (2002): 464.

[65] Jeremy E. Uecker, Mark D. Regnerus, and Margaret L. Vaaler, "Losing My Religion: The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood," *Social Forces* 85, no. 4 (2007): 1681. See also Koenig, McGue, and Iacono.

[66] Koenig, McGue, and Iacono: 539.

because they are no longer coerced by their parents to attend.[67] Hadaway and Roof write

that many youth who leave their religious community wish to do so because they

perceive the church as "irrelevant, boring, and not part of the lifestyle they wish to

pursue," and, because they are no longer compelled, they cease attending.[68] Hoge,

Johnson, and Luidens studied what factors contributed to the church involvement and

non-involvement of young adults who grew up in Presbyterian churches. They indicate

that the top reason their respondents gave for becoming inactive was that they "left home,

moved away from family" (32%), and the next highest response (31%) was that they

were "too busy, lack of interest, lazy."[69]

An active social and recreational life also seems to be a major reason why

emerging adults neglect religious service attendance. Smith writes that in the eyes of

emerging adults, after school and work comes play. Emerging adults have a very active

social/recreational life, which can compete with church activities:

> Fun-related distractions in many emerging adults' lives include going to parties,
> mixing with new people, watching movies, going camping or to the beach for the
> weekend, playing some golf, having a few drinks, playing paintball, filming a
> movie, just hanging out for hours at a time, or any other number of recreational
> and social activities that take time, energy, and sometimes money and planning....
> crucial with regard to religious community and practice in all of this are Friday
> and Saturday nights, the emerging adults' key times for recreational and social
> life.[70]

Add to this the natural disruption of relocating from home to a new school and a

new community, and it is often difficult to get connected with a church, or to focus on

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[67] Arnett and Jensen, "A Congregation of One," 451.

[68] C. Kirk Hadaway and Wade Clark Roof, "Apostasy in American Churches: Evidence from National Survey Data," in *Falling from the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley(Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1988), 148; ibid.

[69] Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, "Determinants of Church Involvement of Young Adults Who Grew up in Presbyterian Churches," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32, no. 3 (1993): 246.

[70] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 77.

religious activities like reading the Bible or praying.[71] The effects of dislocation on

religious practices have long been observed and are not unique to the last few decades.

Well before emerging adulthood was a recognized life phase, students had difficulty

remaining involved in churches once they transitioned to college. So much so that in

1861, in order to prevent backsliding and apostasy among students, Joshua McIlvaine

recommended in the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* that the Presbyterian

church establish churches "with all . . . accompanying ordinances and sacraments" *within*

"the colleges over which we have any control or influence."[72] McIlvaine's

recommendation never seemed to be embraced and implemented.

Higher Education Is No Longer a Secularizing Influence

This raises a related question. Many Christian parents whose children are

graduating from high school and considering higher education wonder what impact

attending college or university will have on the spiritual and religious lives of their

children. For many conservative Protestant parents, the concept of investing tens of

thousands of dollars on a college education that might shipwreck their children's faith is

extremely unsettling. And yet they see the value of a university education for their

children's future careers. Though at one time university attendance did indeed seem to

erode religious beliefs,[73] recent research indicates, somewhat surprisingly, that higher

education no longer has a secularizing effect on students. For example, in Lee's 2002

study of religion and college attendance, she reported that only 13.7% reported their faith

as weaker since starting their studies, 48.3% that their faith remained the same, and

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Joshua H. McIlvaine, "Covenant Education," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 33, no. 2 (1861): 253-6.

[73] E.g., Hadaway and Roof's profile of an apostate includes his being "young, single . . . and highly educated." Hadaway and Roof, 35. See also Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 248-9.

37.9% (almost three times the percentage of those who reported their faith weakening) that their faith was strengthened.[74] Even more strikingly, Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler write:

> Emerging adults that do *not* attend college are most prone to curb all three types of religiousness in early adulthood. Simply put, higher education is not the enemy of religiosity that so many have made it out to be.[75]

Religious Outcomes Among Emerging Adults Are Not Random

Is there a correlation between early religious training and the beliefs and practice of emerging adults? For highly religious parents of apostate emerging adults, and particularly for those categorized as Conservative Protestants, it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of this question. One of their most pressing questions, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually, is the question of responsibility, "Where did I go wrong?" For example, Jeff Lucas, a conservative Christian author who often speaks to "parents of prodigals" writes:

> Those who love prodigals, especially parents, often live in the dock of endless accusation. Convinced that their prodigal's trip to the far country is mainly their fault, they carry around with them a collection of "should haves" and "what ifs."[76]

There seems to be a stark disagreement among some scholars as to whether there is a correlation between the religious socialization emerging adults received as children, and their beliefs and practices as emerging adults. For example, in a 2002 study of 140 21-28 year olds, Arnett—with little of the qualification so frequently employed by the scholarly community—reports his research with emphasis:

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[74] Jenny Lee, "Religion and College Attendance: Change among Students," *The Review of Higher Education* 25, no. 4 (2002): 377.

[75] Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler: 1683. The three types of religious decline the authors refer to are: "1.) diminishing religious involvement, 2.) shrinking personal importance of religion, 3.) complete disaffiliation from organized religion," 1673.

[76] Jeff Lucas, *Will Your Prodigal Come Home?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 120.

In statistical analyses, there was *no* relationship between exposure to religious training in childhood and *any* aspect of their religious beliefs as emerging adults—not to their current classification as agnostic/atheist, deist, liberal believer, or conservative believer; not to their current attendance at religious services, not to their views of the importance of attending religious services, or the importance of their religious beliefs, or the importance of religion in their daily lives; not to their belief that God or a higher power guides their lives or to the certainty of their religious beliefs in emerging adulthood."[77]

Somewhat similarly, Hoge, Johnson and Luidens report some surprise in their findings of "only weak support for our expectation that young adults would be more church-involved today if their parents were church-involved. The influence of positive parent-child bonds was very weak." They attributed the divergence between their findings and those of other research to the difference in the ages of the samples. Theirs was an older sample (adults at least 33 years old) as opposed to much previous research focusing on persons of high school or college age. They suggested religious socialization of childhood and youth "wear[s] down under the pressure of later influences."[78]

If Arnett and Jensen are correct that there is "*no* relationship between exposure to religious training in childhood and *any* aspect of their religious beliefs as emerging adults," then parents might be justified in reasoning that religious socialization is an exercise in futility, and parental guilt at wayward children is misplaced, unfounded, and unnecessary. Furthermore, if parents looked at it from an entirely pragmatic viewpoint, they could dispense with the religious training itself, since it is bound to be fruitless.[79]

In contrast to the findings of Arnett and Jensen, however, other scholars find that there is indeed a relationship between the religious training of children and their beliefs

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[77] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 174. See Arnett and Jensen, "A Congregation of One," 460.

[78] Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens: 253.

[79] For evangelical Christians, who hold to the inspiration and authority of Scripture, obedience is not predicated upon results. Most conservative Protestants, reflecting on Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Ephesians 6:4, would impart religious training to their children despite any empirical data contradicting its effectiveness.

and practices as emerging adults. In a 2008 study, Milevsky, Szuchman, and Milevsky found significant correlation between childrens' and their parents' religious beliefs.[80] Naturally, every family is different and will experience different results from the parents' efforts to train their children in a particular faith. Wilson and Sherkat, for example, state perceptively that

> while we assume parents want to see their children inherit their affiliations and beliefs, we do not assume that all parents prize this conformity equally, nor do we assume that they are all equally capable of ensuring that happens.[81]

Some parents will be more effective at imparting religious beliefs and values than others. And religious socialization is more important for some parents than others, as they "sanctify" the parental role.[82] The strength with which parents desire their children to embrace their "affiliations and beliefs" does itself seem to be related to how well their children both understand and embrace their parents' faith. Lynn Okagaki and Claudia Bevis' study of female college students and their parents found that daughters were more likely to embrace their father's religious beliefs if they perceived religion was important to their dads. If their mother and father shared religious beliefs and values, and if they discussed their faith often with their daughters, their daughters perceived it more accurately. If they perceived it accurately and there was perceived relational warmth between parent and child, daughters were more likely to embrace their parents' religious

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[80] Ilana M. Milevsky, Lenore Szuchman, and Avidan Milevsky, "Transmission of Religious Beliefs in College Students," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11, no. 4 (2008).

[81] Wilson and Sherkat: 150.

[82] Aaron Murray-Swank, Annette Mahoney, and Kenneth I. Pargament, "Sanctification of Parenting: Links to Corporal Punishment and Parental Warmth among Biblically Conservative and Liberal Mothers," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 16, no. 4 (2006). This study reports that the more mothers embrace the sanctification of parenting (parenting as a significant, divinely-ordained task), the more we will consistently pursue what we take to be faithful parenting. For Biblically Conservative moms, this is expressed in more consistent spanking, hugging, and positive child-parent interaction. See also J. P. Bartkowski and X. Xu, "Distant Patriarchs or Expressive Dads? The Discourse and Practice of Fathering in Conservative Protestant Families," *Sociological Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2000); ibid.

beliefs and values themselves.[83] As relational warmth increases the correlation between parents' beliefs and those of children, so harshness and severity decrease the correlation. In a study of alienation from religion in fundamentalist homes, Roger Louis Dudley found a positive correlation between alienation and "authoritarianism and harshness on the part of the religious authority figures."[84]

What of those parents who self-consciously engage in training in their children? Does this training have any effect whatsoever? It seems to. Lee, Rice, and Gillespie report that frequent family worship—where youth are actively involved in prayer, reading Scripture, and discussion—is associated with positive outcomes, including active faith.[85]

Incidentally, not all forms of family worship yield positive outcomes. Those which are authoritarian, which do not actively involve the children, or which require involvement from the children in each expression (reading, prayer, discussion) each occurrence are associated with negative outcomes.[86] As to frequency of family worship, Joseph Neumann reports that families holding to Covenantal versus Dispensational theology place a heavier emphasis on the training of children and have more frequency of family worship.[87] This is significant because of the close association of Reformed and Covenantal theology. To reiterate Wilson and Sherkat, not all parents prize religious socialization of their children equally, and not all are equally capable of bringing it about.

Whether parents engage in religious socialization self-consciously or not, it seems inevitable that children pick up on their parents' true religious beliefs and values. Hoge,

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[83] Lynn Okagaki and Claudia Bevis, "Transmission of Religious Values: Relations between Parents' and Daughters' Beliefs," *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 160, no. 3 (1999): 316; ibid.

[84] Roger Louis Dudley, "Alienation from Religion in Adolescents from Fundamentalist Religious Homes," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17, no. 4 (1978): 396-7.

[85] Jerry W. Lee, Gail T. Rice, and V. Bailey Gillespie, "Family Worship Patterns and Their Correlation with Adolescent Behavior and Beliefs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 3 (1997): 380.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Neumann.

et al., suggest what is—for the purposes of this research—a significant insight. Religious

socialization does not appear to be so much a matter of whether, but *what*:

> Parents who maintain a religious identification but stress freedom of thought and
> the importance that their child make up his or her own mind later on religious
> matters . . . are likely to socialize their young into their own implicit attitude that
> "religion is unimportant" or "particular beliefs don't really matter." *Thus some
> apostasy from the religious tradition is not a rejection of familial religion, but is
> actually an acceptance of the parents' most basic assumptions* (see Hunsberger
> 1980; Ozorak 1989).[88]

To summarize, even parents who self-consciously choose not to impart religious

training to their children have implicitly done so by default.[89] Attempting to impart no

religious values is likely instead to convey the parents' value of indifference. Many

professing Christians live more like deists. God makes little practical difference in their

daily lives, and the children pick it up. In *Soul Searching,* Smith and colleagues

conjecture that the de facto religion of teenagers—learned primarily from their parents—

was something they identified as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (MTD). MTD has five

tenets:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on
   earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible
   and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is
   needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.[90]

In *Souls in Transition,* the sequel to *Soul Searching,* Smith reports that MTD is

alive and well, though as emerging adults leave the home and their parents' influence,

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[88] Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens: 243. The emphasis is added. Arnett and Jensen argue that the values in
which parents are desiring to socialize their children have shifted from obedience and respect for others to
independence and self-esteem, Arnett and Jensen, "A Congregation of One," 453.
[89] For the inescapability of religious socialization, see e.g. Smith, *Souls in Transition,* 286.
[90] Smith, *Soul Searching,* 162-3.

this becomes somewhat mitigated.[91] Perhaps Hoge's insight can help make sense of the

difference between Arnett and Jensen on the one hand, and other research (most notably

Smith[92]) on the other. Perhaps there is no relationship in Arnett's findings between the

beliefs and values of children and parents, not because religious socialization has failed,

but because it has *succeeded*. Wittingly or unwittingly, parents have trained their children

in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

Some of the research cited has focused on transmission of religious beliefs and

values to adolescents rather than emerging adults (e.g., Lee, et al.; Dudley). Is there a

connection between the beliefs and practices of adolescents and those of emerging

adults? One of Smith's recurring emphases is that the religious outcomes of emerging

adult children are not random. He writes:

> It is apparent that in the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years,
> the religious lives of youth in the process are not thrown up into the air to land in
> a random jumble. To the contrary where youth end up religiously as emerging
> adults is highly governed by the nature of their religious upbringings,
> commitments, and experiences in earlier years. Most lives during this transition
> into emerging adulthood, in other words, reflect a great amount of continuity with
> the past.[93]

Certain practices measured during the teenage years are significantly correlated

with higher religiousness during emerging adulthood. Smith lists the top five factors as

frequent personal prayer, highly religious parents during the teenage years, high

importance of religious faith in daily life, [having] had few religious doubts, and having

had religious experiences like making a commitment as a teenager to God, experiencing a

miracle or prayers answered.[94] Smith asserts that continuity is the norm between the

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[91] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 154-5.
[92] For which, see below.
[93] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 254.
[94] Ibid., 217-9.

religious life of a teenager and his religious life as an emerging adult. Dividing

religiousness into four quartiles (Lowest, Minimal, Moderate, and Highest religion),

Smith reports that teenagers who in the first-wave survey were most religiously devoted

have a 50% chance of remaining in that category as an emerging adult, a 32% chance of

becoming moderate, and only a 2% chance of joining the lowest group. Similarly,

teenagers in the lowest group had a 54% chance of remaining in that category as

emerging adults, a 38% chance of transitioning to minimal, and "only 6 and 2 percent

chances, respectively, of becoming moderately and highly religious."[95] Though there is

some pull "downward" (away from religion) in emerging adulthood, Smith indicates that

the shift is usually not dramatic between categories. Again, continuity is the norm.

Pathways to God

Factors do not work in isolation. Certain combinations of teenage factors were

most likely to result in the highest level of emerging adult religion, as measured by

religious service attendance, high professed importance of faith, and frequent personal

prayer.[96] In the chart on the following page,[97] Smith presents six "pathways" as those

which more often than not (50% or more) lead to the highest level of emerging adult

religion.

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[95] Ibid., 223-4.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., 226.

Path 1: [High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith] + [High teen importance of religious faith] + [Teen has many personal religious experiences] + [Teen frequently prays and reads Scripture]

Path 2: [High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith] + [High teen importance of religious faith] + [Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs] + [Teen frequently prays and reads Scripture]

Path 3: [High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith] + [High teen importance of religious faith] + [Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs] + [Teen has many personal religious experiences]

Path 4: [High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith] + [Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support] + [Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs] + [Teen has many personal religious experiences]

Path 5: [Low parental religious service attendance & importance of faith] + [Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support] + [Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs] + [Teen frequently prays and reads Scripture]

Path 6: [High teen importance of religious faith] + [Teen has many personal religious experiences] + [Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs] + [Teen frequently prays and reads Scripture]

→ Five years later: highest emerging adult service attendance, importance of faith, and personal prayer

Qualitative Comparative Analysis Showing Sufficient Combinations of Teenage-era Causal Factors Most Likely Producing Highest Emerging Adult Religious Practices (Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 127.

Source: National Surveys of Youth and Religion 2002-2003, 2007-2008
Note: "many religious experiences" means teen has committed life to God, had prayers answered, has experienced a miracle, and has had a moving spiritual experience.

In the first four of the six pathways, parental religious service attendance and importance of faith were a significant contributing factor. In the fifth, "in order to overcome the parental 'deficit,' they must have supportive religious nonparental adults in their lives."[98] Good relationships with highly religious adults during the teenage years are important factors in leading to highly religious emerging adults.[99] Smith suggests that religious socialization is obviously one possible causal mechanism behind this:

> Teenagers with seriously religious parents are more likely than those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training "sticks" with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood.[100]

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[98] Ibid., 227.

[99] Tom Bisset, *Why Christian Kids Leave the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1992), 150. Bisset prioritizes the ages between 13 and 21 as especially critical to parental involvement in passing on their faith to their children.

[100] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 232.

What about when it does not "stick"? Emerging adulthood is a time for exploration, but what happens when this exploration causes the emerging adults to run afoul of the church? This leads to a direct look at the literature pertaining to apostasy and emerging adults.

Emerging Adults and Apostasy

What are the factors that lead to apostasy among emerging adults, and exactly what is meant by the term "apostasy?" David Bromley, editor of *Falling from the Faith: The Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy,* points out that while there is some consensus on terms for affiliating with a religious group, "there is no parallel term for disaffiliation," and cites a number of terms used by researchers in the volume, including *"dropping out, exiting, disidentification, leavetaking, defection, apostasy, disaffiliation, disengagement."*[101] These terms are themselves too broad to serve the purposes of this research. All of them, except "apostasy," imply voluntary disengagement on the part of the person leaving the religious community. Even the term "apostasy" is given this connotation in the definition supplied by Hadaway and Roof in an essay in the same volume. They define "apostates" as "those who held a religious identity at one time, but who now have rejected that identity."[102] But though terms that imply voluntary detachment from the religious community circumscribe most cases, there are instances when the religious community initiates removal of someone from the community for doctrinal or moral aberrations. In such instances, someone would prefer to remain within

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[101] David G. Bromley, "Religious Disaffiliation: A Neglected Social Process," in *Falling from the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy,* ed. David G. Bromley(Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1988), 25. Italics are the authors'.

[102] Hadaway and Roof, 29. They write, "Profile studies tell us that apostates are most likely to be young, single, male, highly educated, liberal, and mobile, while studies of the reasons apostates give for leaving emphasize maturation, objections to church teachings, irrelevance and lifestyle conflicts," 35.

the religious community, but refuses either to renounce sub-Christian beliefs or scandalous conduct.[103]

This research is focused on exploring how Reformed pastors minister to the parents of apostate emerging adults. Given the ambiguity of terms, exactly who are the emerging adults in question? Those who merely switch churches, or even decline somewhat in religious service attendance, are not the focus of this research. Rather, this research is focused on the parents of emerging adults whose beliefs change or conduct declines to such a degree as to call for church censure.

Acknowledging the limitations of employing types, Smith devotes chapter six of *Souls in Transition* to identifying six major religious types of emerging adults. His types proceed on a sliding scale from strong to weak religiosity and spirituality. Reformed Christians are best described by his first type, "Committed Traditionalist."[104] According to Smith,

> Committed Traditionalists embrace a strong religious faith, whose beliefs they can reasonably well articulate and which they actively practice. Personal commitment to faith is a significant part of their identities and moral reasoning, and they are at least somewhat regularly involved in some religious group. The religions to which they adhere tend to be grounded in established mainstream faith traditions—typically conservative white Protestantism, black Protestantism,

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[103] Brinkerhoff and Burke propose a helpful distinction between religiosity and communality as they relate to apostasy. Religiosity "refers to the embracement of a set of beliefs or doctrines, whereas the other, communality—refers to the feeling of belonging . . . which grows from shared theological doctrine. . . . Confusion arises when apostasy is defined in relation to communality, but interpreted according to loss of religiosity, or vice versa. Is apostasy the loss of religiosity, communality, or both?" Merlin B. Brinkerhoff and Kathryn L. Burke, "Disaffliation: Some Notes on "Falling from the Faith"," *Sociological Analysis* 41, no. 1 (1980): 42, 44.

[104] Researchers often code Presbyterians as "liberal Protestants." However, the denominational affiliation of some Presbyterian denominations (for example, the Presbyterian Church in America, or the Orthodox Presbyterian Church) belongs more properly among "conservative Protestants" because they are fundamentalist and evangelical. Arnett and Jensen identify a Conservative Christian as someone who "expresses belief in traditional Christian dogma, for example, that Jesus is the son of God and the only way to salvation. Person may mention being saved or refer to afterlife of heaven and hell. Person may mention that Christianity is the only true faith." Arnett and Jensen, "A Congregation of One," 457. For an example of a failure to distinguish between conservative and liberal Presbyterians, see Bartkowski and Xu: 471.

and Mormonism—rather than being customized personal spiritualities or unusual faiths. They also seem to focus more on inner piety and personal moral integrity than, say, social justice or political witness. . . . The basic orientation of this group could be summarized by the statement "I am really committed." In size, Committed Traditionalists are a fairly small minority, probably no more than 15 percent of the total emerging adult population. [105]

The five types that follow "Committed Traditionalist" are Selective Adherent,

Spiritually Open, Religiously Indifferent, Religiously Disconnected, or Irreligious.[106] To

a Committed Traditionalist, the transition even to "Selective Adherent" is a significant

decline—enough, in most instances, to call for official church discipline.[107] Smith

describes selective adherents as those who "believe and perform certain aspects of their

religious traditions but neglect and ignore others."[108] They reject some of their religious

traditions' beliefs and practices as "outdated."[109] Furthermore, they

> often hold certain "different opinions" and desires from what their religion allows, so they pick and choose what they want to accept. Selective Adherents disagree, neglect, or ignore the official teachings of their faiths most often on the following religious issues: sex before marriage, the need for regular religious service attendance, belief in the existence of hell, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, and use of birth control (for Catholics); some Christians among them also doubt doctrines about the Trinity and the divinity or resurrection of Christ.... Their outlook can be summarized as, with a shrug of the shoulders, "I do some of what I can." In size they are significant minority, perhaps 30 percent of all emerging adults.[110]

Depending on what belief[111] or practice[112] is rejected or adopted, if a child of

"Committed Traditionalist" parents becomes a "Selective Adherent," it could certainly be

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[105] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 166.
[106] Ibid., 166ff.
[107] For example, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) identifies an actionable offense, "An offense, the proper object of judicial process, is anything in the doctrines or practice of a Church member professing faith in Jesus Christ which is contrary to the Word of God." *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, Sixth ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2009), 29-1.
[108] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 167.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Usually the low bar of Orthodox Christian doctrine is considered the Apostle's Creed.

considered apostasy, or at least "prodigality."[113] Furthermore, a central tenet of

conservative Protestantism is the Lordship of Christ. The attitude that a person could

"select" which of his dictates they would "adhere" to would militate against Christ's

Lordship, and itself might be of grave concern to the parents and pastors of the respective

emerging adult.

Thus, this research is focused on the parents of those emerging adults who begin

as Committed Traditionalists, and move to any of Smith's other five major religious

types. What factors contribute to apostasy among emerging adults? Summarizing and

assessing previous research on the social sources of religious decline in young adulthood,

Uecker and colleagues identify the three most common: "higher education, the cognitive

dissonance that accompanies deviance from religious norms, and life course factors.[114]

As has already been seen, the authors no longer find evidence of higher education as a

secularizing influence—quite the contrary. What of cognitive dissonance? When young

people engage in practices—premarital sex, cohabitation, or substance abuse, for

example—which are "out of step with the teaching and expectations of most American

religions,"[115] this creates cognitive dissonance, which causes them to distance themselves

from church.

> Framed as a social psychological causal mechanism: most emerging adults reduce
> a certain cognitive dissonance they feel – arising from the conflict of religious
> teachings against partying and sex before marriage versus their wanting to engage
> in those behaviors – by mentally discounting the religious teachings and socially
> distancing themselves from the source of those teachings. In this simple way, the
> role of sex, drinking, and sometimes drugs is often important to informing

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[112] See Ted G. Kitchens, "Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca sacra* 148, no. 590 (1991): 211-212.
[113] Here it is assumed that apostasy is a complete departure from the faith, while prodigality is intellectual assent to the tenets of the faith, but with behavior that would be likely to be sanctioned by it.
[114] Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler.
[115] Ibid.

emerging adults' frequent lack of interest in religious faith and practice. It also helps to explain why some emerging adults assume that they will become more religious when they finally settled down someday – because they will then no longer want to party so much or, being married, need to have sex outside marriage.[116]

In their research, Uecker and colleagues found "modest support" for the cognitive dissonance (or normative deviance) explanation for religious decline.[117]

The third social source for religious decline in young adulthood is life course factors like cohabiting, getting married, or having a child. Sharon Sandomirsky and John Wilson found that both getting married and having a child significantly reduce the odds of dropping out of the church.[118] Furthermore, in their study, Hoge and his fellow researchers found that the second most important indicator of church attendance among their Presbyterian sample was the number of children the respondent had—"the more children, the more church involvement."[119] Lee found getting married while in college was "a significant predictor in strengthening religious convictions."[120] The research of Uecker and colleagues confirmed that married young adults both attend church and retain their religious convictions at higher rates than singles, and that cohabitation is linked to religious decline.[121] Considering these findings, it seems that delaying marriage and childbearing—one of the distinctives of emerging adulthood—can have negative effects on the religious practices of emerging adults.

What about factors in the teenage years that affect religiosity in emerging adults? For this we turn to Smith, who identifies pathways for those teenagers who were in the

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[116] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 84.
[117] Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler: 1684.
[118] Sharon Sandomirsky and John Wilson, "Processes of Disaffiliation: Religious Mobility among Men and Women," *Social Forces* 68, no. 4 (1990): 1222.
[119] Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens: 248.
[120] Lee, "Religion and College Attendance: Change among Students," 377-8.
[121] Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler: 1684-5.

highest half of religiousness as teenagers, and five years later moved to the lowest half.
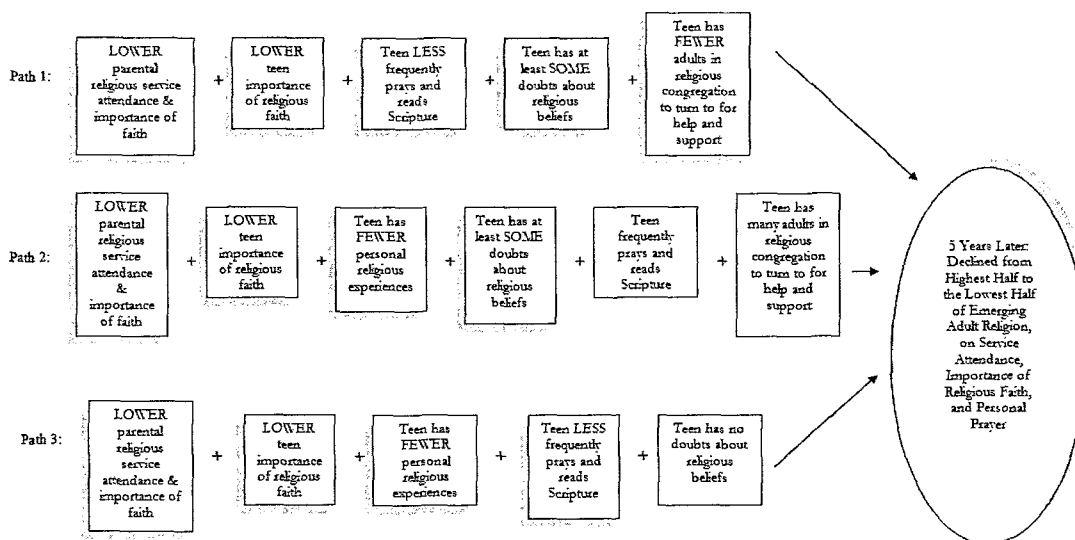
Qualitative Comparative Analysis Showing Sufficient Combinations of Causal Factors Most Likely Shifting the More Highly Religious Teenagers into the Least Religious Emerging Adult Religious Groups within Five Years. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, p. 130.

Source: National Surveys of Youth and Religion 2002-2003, 2007-2008
Note: "many religious experiences means teen has (1) committed life to God, (2) had prayers answered, (3) has experienced a miracle, *and* (4) has had a moving spiritual experience.

As can be seen from Smith's figure,[122] the same factors that were important in determining high religiosity, when absent, lead to religious decline: "the religiousness of parents, the number of supportive nonparental adults in one's religious congregation, the importance of faith, the frequency of prayer and scripture reading, doubts about religious faith, and multiple religious experiences."[123] For the purposes of this research, it should be noted that in each pathway toward religious decline, Smith records lower parental religious service attendance and importance of faith.

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[122]Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 230.
[123] Ibid., 229. See also Wilson and Sherkat.

Many Emerging Adults Who Drop Out Later Return

Emerging adulthood is a time of identity exploration, or "roaming," and many young people who drift away from their religious community return.[124] Wilson and Sherkat, who studied the factors that prompt people who have left their religious community to return, found that warmth of parent-child relationships was a factor.

> A warm and close relation to parents has a lasting impact. Children who were close to their parents while in high school, not only are less likely to rebel, but are more likely to return if they do so.[125]

Besides the effect of relations with the family of origin on retention and disaffiliation, Wilson and Sherkat's research indicates that those who got married between 18 and 25 were both less likely to drop out and more likely to return if they did. Childbearing has a similar result.[126] Consistent with these findings are those of Ross M. Stolzenberg, Mary Blair-Loy, and Linda J. Waite, who also found that "divorce increases the probability of religious participation for 32-year-old women, while decreasing it for 32-year-old men."[127] The Family Life Cycle often draws emerging adults who have left their faith back to it. However, Wilson and Sherkat report that life course factors like getting married and having children have less of a drawing power for women than men.

> Compared to men, women are less likely to reverse their decision [to drop out of religion] for the sake of their marriage or their children. The implication is that while for most women the norm is to stay within the church and form a family early, a minority of women break away, both from the church and from the family—not only from their church and family of origin, but also from *any* new church or family.... The "rebellion," if it takes place at all for women, is more likely than in the case of men to be total.[128]

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[124] Bisset, 147-8; Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 85; Wilson and Sherkat: 151.
[125] Wilson and Sherkat: 155.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ross. M Stolzenberg, Mary Blair-Loy, and Linda J. Waite, "Religious Participation in Early Adulthood: Age and Family Life Cycle Effects on Church Membership," *American Sociological Review* 60, no. 1 (1995): 100; ibid.
[128] Wilson and Sherkat: 158.

To summarize, men are more likely to drop out, and women are less likely to return if they do.

Were certain religious denominations more likely to have returning apostates than others? Wilson and Sherkat report that "conservative Protestants were no more or less likely to return than people brought up in any other denomination," but that Catholics who left were also less likely to return.[129]

Summary

In summary, emerging adulthood is a life stage that has come about in the last four decades or so which is characterized by individuals having more freedom than adolescents and less responsibility than full adults. Emerging adults are characterized by, among other things, identity exploration and instability, and this often eventuates in a decline of religious practices, while religious beliefs remain more stable. The religious lives of emerging adults are impacted by the religious socialization they received as children, the quality of their relationships with their parents, and their parents' own religious lives, among other factors. Life cycle does seem to impact religiosity, as does cognitive dissonance between behaviors emerging adults would like to engage in, and the teachings of most religious institutions. Higher education no longer seems to have a detrimental effect on religiousness. Many of those emerging adults who do decline in religiousness will return when they get married and begin to establish their own families.

Having reviewed literature pertaining to the religious lives of emerging adults, and what factors contribute to and detract from their retaining the faith of their parents, it is now necessary to turn attention to the biblical and theological literature pertaining to inclusion, faith retention, and exclusion from the covenant community.

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[129] Ibid., 155.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

The Bible speaks to the condition of parents of wayward children in more than a tangential way. The reader of Scripture regularly encounters accounts of faithful parents pursuing unfaithful children—and with various degrees of success.

Insufficient Intervention

When Eli was high priest, he had corrupt adult sons who did not know the Lord. These men, who served as priests, were guilty of both sexual lewdness on duty and oppression of the people when they came to offer sacrifice (1 Sam. 2:12-17, 22). Though Eli rebuked them (2:23-25), God did not consider this intervention adequate and charged Eli that he "did not restrain them" (3:13). Ultimately, Eli's priestly dynasty was forfeit.

Corporate Intervention

On the other hand, sometimes parents were seemingly faithful to instruct and discipline their children, and the children remained rebellious. When familial intervention is inadequate, corporate intervention is called for. Though details regarding each specific case may differ, Scripture provides a precedent to guide judges' decisions in a wide range of analogous cases. For instance, Deuteronomy 21:18-21 contemplates a situation where parents are admonishing and chastening an incorrigible youth, but the child does not heed. What actions should be undertaken? The instructions for the covenant community are decisive: the parents should present the youth to the elders of the city for stoning: "So you shall put away the evil from among you."[130] However, the death penalty does not seem to have been regularly instituted. Brian Rosner, Senior Lecturer in New Testament and Ethics at Moore College, in Sydney, observes that "in Targum Onkelos, Targum

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[130] This formula occurs several times in Deuteronomy to indicate the death penalty, e.g. 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; 24:7.

Psuedo Jonathan and Sifre and usually in the LXX, a curse of exclusion is substituted for

the death penalty in these formulae."[131] Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul substitutes

excommunication in the New Covenant community for execution in the Old Covenant

community.[132]

Intervention as Imitation of God

Another relevant text is found in 2 Samuel 14. Here Joab conspires with a wise

woman of Tekoa to restore banished Absalom to his father, King David. After her ruse is

over and her mission of reconciliation identified, she boldly appeals to David to imitate

the character of God by restoring Absalom:

> Why then have you schemed such a thing against the people of God? For the king
> speaks this thing as one who is guilty, *in that* the king does not bring his banished
> one home again.[14] For we will surely die and *become* like water spilled on the
> ground, which cannot be gathered up again. Yet God does not take away a life;
> but He devises means, so that His banished ones are not expelled from Him.[133]

Indeed, this seems to be the very heart of the gospel. God the Father "devises

means so that his banished ones are not expelled from Him." The means God devised to

restore his banished ones centered around the sacrificial death of His own Son. The

implication is that parents with estranged children will have similar attitudes and goals.

The wise woman of Tekoa seemed to have a solid grasp of the sweep of redemptive

history. Not only do we find in the Bible specific instances of parents seeking their

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[131] Brian S. Rosner, ""Drive out the Wicked Person" a Biblical Theology of Exclusion," *Evangelical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1999): 27; ibid. Cf. Kitchens: 204.

[132] See Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, & Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 61-91. In fact, Rosner argues in *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics,* that the three motivations for excluding someone from the covenant community found in the Pentateuch ("the covenant motif," "the corporate responsibility motif," and "the holiness motif," respectively) are present in 1 Corinthians 5. Rosner writes, "Why must the sinner be expelled in 1 Corinthians 5? . . . First, the man must be removed because he is guilty of covenant disloyalty, secondly, because while he remains, the church is implicated in his sin, and thirdly, he must be driven out for the sake of the church. A fourth reason for his expulsion, he must be ejected for his own sake, is not, it seems, related directly to the Scriptures," 91.

[133] 2 Sam. 14:13-14.

wayward children—as in the examples above—but the grand narrative structure of the

Bible contains this as a major theme. Lucas points out that God, the perfect parent, put

perfect children[134] in a perfect place—abounding with evidence of his generosity and

joy.[135] He gave them a perfect law, and still they rebelled against Him. "Children have I

reared," Yahweh says in Isaiah 1:2, "but they have rebelled against me." Though there

are some critical points of disjunction between God's fatherhood and ours,[136] he

understands the anguish and frustration of a parent with children in rebellion.[137] He even

understands what it is to expel his children for their rebellion, devoting both Northern and

Southern kingdoms to exile. God understands what it is to be the parent of prodigals.

Accordingly, just as husbands and wives "act out" the roles of Christ and the

church (respectively), so the parents of prodigals have the opportunity to "act out" the

glory of God's tenacious covenantal love for His wayward children as they pursue their

own. John White asserts that the basic rule of parenting is "As God is to me so I must be

to my children. As he has dealt with me, so must I deal with them."[138]

Just as the wise woman of Tekoa understood the way the Father seeks to restore

his banished children, so Jesus presents a similar picture of the heart of God in the

parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). Here, though the father waits for the prodigal's

return instead of pursuing him, his passion for reconciliation is nevertheless clearly seen

in Jesus' pregnant description, "But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him

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[134] But not immutably so.

[135] Lucas, 79-81; Rob Parsons, *Bringing Home the Prodigals* (Colorado Springs, CO: Authentic, 2007), 49.

[136] For instance, creatures rebel against God despite perfect parenting. God is in no way culpable for the rebellion of his children. As shall be seen in this research, generally speaking, parents appear to be culpable for the rebellion of their children.

[137] Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Second ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 179. Here Reymond writes, "Whenever divine impassibility is interpreted to mean that God is impervious to human pain or incapable of empathizing with human grief it must be roundly denounced and rejected."

[138] White, 209ff.

and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."[139] His father appeared

to be watching for him, and when he saw him, forgot his dignity in his eagerness to

embrace his son. Perhaps the parable of the prodigal son has inspired so many because

wayward children and estranged parent-child relationships are tragedies with which no

culture is unfamiliar.

The Scriptures present God Himself as the model for parents of children who

have fallen away. For example, Proverbs 3:12 says, "For whom the Lord loves He

corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights."[140] But in one critical way he is

different—he always does the right thing as a parent, and humans often do not. Our sinful

habits and choices impact the religious and spiritual lives of our children. But to what

extent?

One of the central questions raised by many parents of apostate children is the one

of responsibility. Parents often ask, "Am I responsible for my child's apostasy?" What do

the Scriptures say to this question? Does God promise that children who are brought up

in the "training and discipline" of the Lord will embrace their parents' religious values

and beliefs without fail? Two passages are particularly relevant to this study. Exodus 34:7

and Proverbs 22:6 deal, respectively, with the negative and positive religious

socialization of children.

Exodus 34:7: The Impact of Parental Sin on Children

One approach to the question of responsibility of parents for the religious lives of

their children has to do with the effect the sins of parents have on their children. In

Exodus 34:6-7, Yahweh passed before Moses and proclaimed his name and character:

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[139] Luke 15:20.

[140] Deut. 8:5 is similar, "You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the LORD your God chastens you." Cf. Heb. 12:5-11.

[6] And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, [7] keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty,* visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."[141]

This description of God is repeated and alluded to throughout Scripture—usually in the context of praise.[142] For the purpose of this study, the central issue pertains to the latter half of verse 7, the "visiting" of the iniquity of fathers on their descendents to three and four generations. How is this text to be understood, especially in light of the difficulty in translation, and other texts which on the surface seem to contradict it? How does this text inform as to whether parents are responsible for the rebellion of their children?

The first difficulty is one of translation. The verb פָּקַד, is notoriously difficult to render. *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (*TWOT*) comments, "It has been said of this verb, which occurs more than three hundred times in the OT, 'There is probably no other Hebrew verb that has caused translators as much trouble as *pqd*' (Speiser, BASOR 149:21)."[143]

TWOT gives "number, reckon, visit, punish, appoint" as possible renderings. Of these, in the texts of Exodus 20:5 and 34:7, versions such as the KJV, NKJV, ESV and NASB favor "visiting," while the NIV, NCV and NRSV render the verb "punishing." Considering the potential confusion the latter translation brings (especially concerning Deut. 24:16 and Ezekiel 18, which will be discussed later), many translators have chosen to leave the ambiguity in the text, and render it "visit."

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[141] *The New King James Version.* 1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson. This phrase, "visiting the iniquity," first appears in the second commandment in Exodus 20:5.

[142] E.g. Lev. 26:39-40; Num. 14:18ff, 33; Deut. 5:9-10; 7:9-10; Jer. 32:16-19.

[143] "פָּקַד (Pāqad) Number, Reckon, Visit, Punish, Appoint," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament,* ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke(Chicago, IL: Moody, 1980).

However one translates the verb, God "visiting the iniquity of fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generations" makes interpreters uneasy. Gowan attributes this to a feeling of injustice arising from our "individualistic mindsets."[144] A. H. McNeile records how the interpretative difficulty is longstanding:

> The difficulty that this caused in olden times is illustrated by the necessity that Origen felt of explaining "the children" to mean "the sinful" and "the fathers" to mean "the devil"; for he is the father of the sinful (Jn. viii. 44) as God is of the good (Jn. iii.9); and Theodoret dismisses the matter by the remark that "threats with the Lord God are greater than punishments."[145]

A full range of interpretations eventuated. Paterius identifies the iniquity which God visits upon the children as Original Sin, which is mitigated through baptism.[146] He does concede, however, that another way to interpret the text is by understanding that children imitate the iniquity of their parents. Cassuto rejects this idea of imitation as "merely a modernization of the verse."[147] Cassuto's objection, however, is not convincing considering the "imitation view" has been around at least as long as Paterius, who died *circa* AD 606. Whatever one might say of Paterius, he was no modern. Cassuto also discards the view of those (he does not name them) who understand the text to be a "postponement of . . . retribution in order to provide an opportunity for repentance," because "the passage speaks of the divine attribute of justice not mercy."[148] While the "postponement" view certainly is not a majority position, most commentators reject

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[144] Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

[145] A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Exodus: With Introduction and Notes*, ed. Walter Lock, Westminster Commentaries (New York, NY: Edwin S. Gorham, 1908). It seems ironic that Theodoret attributes empty threats to God, seeing as empty threats are so infamous among parents.

[146] Joseph T. Lienhard, ed. *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, ed. Thomas C. Oden, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 153.

[147] Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans., Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, Israel: The Magnes Press, 1967), 243.

[148] Ibid.

Cassuto's premise. Most commentators[149] see God's mercy emphasized in these texts: God's mercy is to a *thousand* generations of those who love him; he visits iniquity of fathers on children to the *third and fourth* generation.

Cassuto's own interpretation is "the verse, in its simple signification, is directed to the entire nation as a single entity in time throughout its generations."[150] Is Cassuto interpreting the "fathers" corporately as "the nation," with the children as the future progeny, considered (again) collectively? Since Cassuto relates his own position with such brevity, it is difficult to understand exactly what the thrust of his position is, in order to relate it judiciously. However, one response to the "national" or "corporate" interpretation is to concede that national sins do indeed have implications on succeeding generations (considered corporately—the progress of the story of redemption makes this quite clear[151]). This, however, is not mutually exclusive with an "individual" interpretation. After all, individuals are the instruments through which the state must act. National idolatry requires individual idolaters to act out the sin. Corporate consequences and individual consequences are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive.

A few other interpretations should be noted. Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, in their massive volume published by the United Bible Society in order to assist Bible translators, write:

[149] E.g. John D. Currid, *Exodus* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2001); G. Henton Davies, *Exodus*, ed. John Marsh and Alan Richardson, Torch Bible Commentaries (London, UK: SCM Press LTD, 1967); Gowan; C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans); Martin Noth, *Exodus*, ed. G. Ernest Wright et al., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1962); Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, ed. Nahum M. Sarna, The Jps Torah Commentary (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991).
[150] Cassuto.
[151] Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1988). The conclusion to the Book of Kings puts this all rather succinctly. See 2 Kings 17-25.

Visiting the iniquity is literally "attending to [or, searching out] the evil." In this context, therefore, it means punishing because of the **iniquity**. But here the punishment is placed not upon **the fathers**, but rather **upon the children**.[152]

One wonders exactly what the authors mean. Are Osborn and Hatton understanding the text to say that fathers who sin remain unpunished, and the children are punished instead? Though their brief comments might be read to imply that sinful parents escape punishment, it seems more likely they are saying, with Keil, that

> the words neither affirm that sinning fathers remain unpunished, nor that the sins of fathers are punished in the children and grandchildren without any fault of their own: they simply say nothing about whether and how the fathers themselves are punished.[153]

Another interpretation to be addressed is advanced by Nahum Sarna. Sarna argues that the text is to be understood through the lens of "covenant community:"

> The Israelite conception of itself as a community bound to God by covenant has dual implications. Society is collectively responsible for its actions, and the individual too is accountable for behavior that affects the life of the community. There is thus forged the mutuality of responsibility and consequences. It is further recognized that contemporary conduct inevitably has an impact upon succeeding generations. These historical facts are perceived in terms of God "visiting the sins" of one faithless generation upon the next or of his "showing kindness," that is, rewarding fidelity, far into the future.[154]

Though Sarna maintains that Exodus teaches the reciprocal effects of the individual on the community, he suggests:

> Over time, however, intensification of the problem of evil led to a revision of this view, for it was perceived as engendering or deepening a pervasive feeling of hopelessness and apathy in an era of acute national crisis. The popular mood is well illustrated in Lamentations 5:7, "Our fathers sinned and are no more; / And we must bear their guilt." Jeremiah and Ezekiel felt compelled to deny cross-generational punishment: "People shall no longer say, 'Parents have eaten sour

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[152] Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1999), 474. The *boldface* is from the original.

[153] Keil and Delitzsch, 117.

[154] Sarna, 110.

grapes and children's teeth are blunted,' but everyone shall die for his own sins; whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be blunted."[155]

This view has the support of the Talmud. Sarna cites Makkot, 24a, "Moses pronounced an adverse sentence on Israel – the visiting of the iniquities of the fathers upon the children – and it was revoked by Ezekiel."[156] Do Jeremiah and Ezekiel revoke the statement in Exodus? This interpretation runs up against two rather formidable objections. First, Jeremiah alludes to the "visiting the iniquity" phrase when praising the justice of Yahweh:

> Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You. [18] You show lovingkindness to thousands, ***and repay the iniquity of the fathers into the bosom of their children after them***—the Great, the Mighty God, whose name *is* the LORD of hosts.[157]

If Jeremiah intends to revoke these words, is it likely he would he use them in praise?

With the Ezekiel passage, Currid argues that both Ezekiel 18:20, along with Deuteronomy 24:16, does not contradict Exodus 34:7. Rather, they

> relate(s) to the administration of justice within the Hebrew legal system. The Second Commandment is not so limited in its scope, but rather it describes how life on earth normally operates. Plus, a person is not to be put to death for his father's crime, but the consequences of the father's act will certainly be felt by future generations in a variety of ways.[158]

Instead of viewing Jeremiah and Ezekiel as revoking Exodus, McNeile holds that they teach the "complementary truth that every man must suffer for his own sins."[159] This

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[155]

[156] Ibid.

[157] Jer. 32:17-18, emphasis mine.

[158] Currid. Sarna explicitly agrees that the statement in the Decalogue "concerning the generational extension of punishment has nothing whatsoever to do with the administration of justice in Israel's legal system. There, vicarious punishment is never mandated; indeed, it is explicitly outlawed in Deuteronomy 24:16." p. 111. However, he makes no such statement regarding Ezekiel.

[159] McNeile, 117.

view seems to commend itself strongly, especially in light of the second major obstacle

the "revocation view" runs into, namely, that it does not revoke an action but an attribute

of God. However, this is impossible because God's perfect character is unchanging.[160]

God is saying to His people, in essence, "I am the kind of Person who faithfully visits the

iniquity of image bearers on their children."

Therefore, the covenant community view expressed by Sarna seems most

commendable, except that God "visiting the iniquity of the father on the children" was

never revoked because it is a description of God's immutable character. This is the view

held—to a greater or lesser extent—by Currid, Ellison, Gowan, Keil, and McNeile.

Gowan provides a helpful summary:

> This is clearly an example of the sense of corporate responsibility that appears so prominently in the Old Testament. The good that a person does brings good for the whole family, or tribe or nation, and the evil a person does likewise brings suffering. Some families today may have five generations alive at the same time, but it is not very likely that in ancient Israel, when the average lifespan was probably about 40 years, there were ever more than four generations contemporary with one another, and usually it was probably only three. That may explain the reference to third and fourth generation. It may be a limiting factor, hence also to be associated with God's grace, saying that indeed the sins of one family member will bring suffering on the whole family, all the generations now alive (we know that is true), but that person's iniquity will not be visited on an unlimited number of generations.[161]

The "visitation" eventuates in three ways, each of which has obvious implication

for the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults. First, children learn to imitate the

sinful practices of their parents.[162] Second, God visits the iniquity of fathers on children

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[160] See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Fourth ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949; reprint, 1977), 58-59. cf. Reymond, 177-184.

[161] Gowan.

[162] Keil and Delitzsch; ibid; Lienhard, ed.

as children live with the consequences of sinful choices their parents make.[163] Third, on a

macro level, the sin of a particular generation can have corporate ramifications.[164] God is

gracious, "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Throughout the history of Israel

we see Him relenting and softening promised retribution when His people repent.

Forgiveness, however, does not bring with it total elimination of temporal retribution, for

he "will be no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and

the children's children. . ."[165]

A central text that explicates the corporate ramifications of sin is Numbers 13-14.

The children of Israel have just received word from the spies returning from their

reconnaissance of Canaan. Though they confirm the bounty of the land, they also warn

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[163] Currid; H. L. Ellison, *Exodus*, ed. John C. L. Gibson, The Daily Study Bible (Old Testament) (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982); Gowan; McNeile.

[164] Cassuto.

[165] John Piper, in wrestling with the infinitive absolute in Exod. 34:7, has chosen to render it, "but he shall not leave completely unpunished." In support of this he writes, "Concerning this GKC 113n says, 'The infinitive absolute [is] used *before* the verb to *strengthen* the verbal idea, i.e. to emphasize in this way either the certainty . . . or the . . . completeness of an occurrence.' The usual translation of our phrase here construes it to negate the *uncertainty* of retribution. My translation construes it to negate the *completeness* of absolution." While Piper's translation seems unfortunate, his explanatory comments are especially vulnerable to misinterpretation. Consider, first, that the section in GKC 113n which Piper replaced with an ellipsis is a parenthetical remark which could directly undermine his translation. Uncut (and with the words Piper cut out emphasized with underline), it reads, "The infinitive absolute used *before* the verb to *strengthen* the verbal idea, i.e. to emphasize in this way either the certainty (especially in the case of threats) or the forcibleness and completeness of an occurrence." Whether it is negating the "*uncertainty* of retribution" or negating the "*completeness* of absolution," Exodus 34:7 certainly seems a threat. Accordingly, even if we are to follow GKC here (which is itself questionable, see Waltke & O'Connor, 584-588), the infinitive absolute is more likely emphasizing *certainty* and not *completeness*. Thus, the text should be translated as negating "the uncertainty of retribution," or to remove the double-negative, emphasizing the certainty of retribution. So GKC does not appear to support Piper's emphasis on "completeness." Second, turning to Piper's explanatory comments, is it accurate (and helpful) to say God forgives but His absolution is incomplete? Would this even be in harmony with the immediate context? It seems that Piper himself has in mind, not that God's absolution is incomplete, but rather that forgiveness does not necessarily entail the eradication of temporal consequences. This follows from the example he cites from Bush (*Notes,* 247), "'Thus in the case of David, while his great sin was forgiven . . . , yet in "clearing he was not wholly cleared." A series of chastisements and afflictions followed him to his dying day.'" This is precisely what is being argued above. In other words, God will surely repay. Forgiveness is extended, but His fatherly discipline remains. He has made a world where actions have consequences, and he allows His children to learn this by tasting some (but not all!) of the temporal consequences of sinful choices, including how our sins impact our children. See John Piper, "Prolegomena to Understanding Romans 9:14-15: An Interpretation of Exodus 33:19," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22, no. 3 (1979): 213-16, esp. 212, n. 35. B. K. Waltke and M. P. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

the people that they would be "grasshoppers" in comparison with the inhabitants of the land (13:33). Israel demurs in unbelief, and Yahweh threatens to disinherit them, making Moses a great nation instead. Moses intercedes (14:18), quoting Yahweh's own self-description back to him:

> [17] And now, I pray, let the power of my Lord be great, **just as You have spoken,** saying, [18] "The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears *the guilty,* visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth *generation.*" [19] Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.[166]

Yahweh's response to Moses' prayer serves almost as his own exposition of this perfection of His, which fallen humans find so perplexing. First, and very significantly, Yahweh pardons when confession is made and forgiveness, asked (v. 20). Second, he judges. Forgiveness does not exhaustively eradicate the consequences of sin: the first generation would die in the wilderness, and their "sons shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and bear the brunt of your infidelity, until your carcasses are consumed in the wilderness" (Num. 14:33). The second generation could enter the Promised Land—they were not guilty—but their entrance would be delayed. The sins of parents have ramifications on both the physical and spiritual lives of their children. Though parental faith and practice is not the only factor influencing children's religious lives, parents with wayward emerging adult children may bear significant responsibility for their child's rebellion.

Proverbs 22:6: The Impact of Parental Faithfulness on Children

In literature addressed to the parents of prodigal children, another text that is regularly treated is Proverbs 22:6, which reads, "Train up a child in the way he should go,

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[166] Num. 14:17-19. *The New King James Version of the Holy Bible,* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982). My emphasis is in bold. The translators supplied the italics.

And when he is old he will not depart from it."[167] One common understanding of this

verse is to take it as a promise that if parents train their children to walk with the Lord,

the child will remain faithful when he is older. Understood this way, Ted Hildebrandt,

formerly of Grace Theological Seminary, writes:

> This proverb has brought encouragement, hope, anxiety and guilt to countless
> parents who have faced the uncertainty and confusion of child-rearing. . . . This
> verse has also provided rays of hope to those who, having reared their child in the
> best way they knew, have had their hearts broken as their child rebels and goes
> astray. They agonize under the pain that God recognized to be one of the deepest
> sorrows of human existence (Matt 23:37; Hos 11:1–2; Prov 10:1). To those
> parents this verse gives hope that when he is old the prodigal will return. Another
> group of young parents, sensitive to daily feelings of inadequacy, experiences
> intense anxiety over the possible long-term damage they see themselves doing to
> their child. If the child does go astray, this verse seems to point the finger of guilt
> at them.[168]

If this interpretation is correct, the implication is that parents of apostate children

are responsible for their children's spiritual drift.[169] If they had trained them correctly,

then they would still be walking in the way. Since they are not walking in the way, they

must not have trained them correctly. The parental guilt can be overwhelming.

For the purposes of this research, two interpretive questions are central.[170] First, is

the text referring to child training, or something else? Second, should this text be taken as

a promise or not? How these questions are answered will have significant implications

for the parents of apostate emerging adults.

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[167] Ibid.

[168] Ted Hildebrandt, "Proverbs 22:6a: Train up a Child?," *Grace Theological Journal* 9, no. 1 (1988).

[169] Nelson D. Kloosterman, "Proverbs 22:6 and Covenant Succession: A Study of the Promisory Character of Biblical Wisdom," in *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*, ed. Benjamin K. Wikner(Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005).

[170] The division of these problems was suggested by Randy Jaeggli, "Interpreting Proverbs 22:6," *Biblical Viewpoint* 33, no. 2 (1999): 41.

The first question is whether the text refers to child training. Several interpretations have been suggested. Hildebrandt[171] suggests that the text is not referring to child training at all, but rather to the formal initiation of a "squire" or high-born adolescent/young adult into his role and responsibilities in society. This position, identified as the "status view," maintains that though *na'ar* ("child," v. 6a) has a broad semantic range in the Bible, in the context of Proverbs it is not referring to a "child" but "a late adolescent or young adult" and particularly a high-born "squire."[172] Moreover, the status view emphasizes that in the Hebrew the verb rendered "train up" more properly refers to the dedication (in cultic contexts) or initial use (in non-cultic contexts) of something—in this case inaugurating the *na'ar* with much celebration, into his societal role. But this view, which Clifford dismisses as "banal,"[173] has not been convincing to many scholars.[174] Fox asserts Hildebrandt's translation of *na'ar* as a squire is anachronistic;[175] Waltke, that

> a child is certainly in view in 20:11 and probably implied in the verb "dedicate." He can be molded by verbal instruction (1:4; 23:13; 29:15) and, according to its parallel in 22:15, by corporal punishment. Since he is teachable, the dedication must take place while there is still hope (23:13; cf. 19:18).[176]

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[171] See also ibid.

[172] Hildebrandt: 17.

[173] Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Lousiville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999), 197.

[174] So writes Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

[175] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 698.

[176] Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*.

While conceding that the Talmud would place the *na'ar* between ages sixteen and twenty-four, Ross presumes the *na'ar* of 22:6 is "in the youngest years. . . . when change for the better was still possible."[177]

Scholars who may agree that child (and not young adult) training is in view may differ as to which "way" the child is to be committed. The Hebrew idiom the NKJV, NASB and ESV translate as "in the way he should go" could literally be rendered "according to the mouth of his way."[178] Some scholars, embracing the "vocational view" have taken this to mean the child is to be trained according to his aptitudes, and then later in life he will excel. Clifford mentions Sa'adia, Delitzsch and Toy as proponents of this view.[179] However, Delitzsch seems to expressly deny that Proverbs 22:6 is speaking of calling,[180] but rather that the "manner . . . and matter" of instruction should be accommodated to a child's nature.[181] Clifford—rejecting the traditional (or moral training) view, the status view, and the personal aptitude view—advocates an ironic interpretation, "Let a boy do what he wants and he will become a self-willed adult incapable of change."[182]

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[177] Allen P. Ross, ed. *Proverbs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and Richard P. Polcyn, The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 1061.

[178] Murphy indicates that "the way he should go" is a common translation of the Hebrew. Roland Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 164-5.

[179] See also Bisset, 134-5.

[180] Franz Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, ed. C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, vol. 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, c1950); ibid.

[181] See also D. A. Garret, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2001).

[182] Clifford. See also Bruce Ray, *Withhold Not Correction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1978), 32-34. The truth conveyed in this view seems to be supported by the rest of Proverbs, and indeed, the Bible. However, this does not seem to be the thrust of the text in this specific passage.

The traditional view—that of early moral training of children—is articulated by

Waltke, Fox, and others[183] and seems best supported by the data. Fox paraphrases the

verse, "A child educated to go in the right path will stick to it throughout his life."[184] In

support of the moral view, Fox writes, "his way (*darko*) must refer to the *right* way, the

way he ought to go in . . . for that is the only one from which he must never depart."[185]

This cannot be said of a vocation, which presumably could be changed given the right

circumstances.

The moral view also seems best supported by the context. Speaking to contextual

matters, Waltke observes that Proverbs 22:5-6 is "the center of a subunit on the Lord's

sovereignty over wealth and poverty (22:1-9)" which focuses on "educating youth in the

way that leads to true riches."[186] Therefore verse 6 should not be interpreted in isolation,

but as part of a unit. Verses 3-6 speak of pathways the youth walk. In verse 3b, the

gullible youth blunders along a pathway, even in the face of danger, and is punished. In

contrast, the prudent—demonstrating a fear of the Lord—hides himself and is rewarded

(v. 3a, 4). The counsel of verse 5, directed toward youth, speaks of the "way of the

perverse" in which way (*bᵉderek*) are traps intended for the unwary. The prudent will

"keep far" from the perverse way (v. 5), hide himself from evil (v. 3) and reap rewards

(v. 4). Complimenting the previous verse, verse 6 is addressed not to youth, but to those

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[183] Gleason L. Archer Jr., "Proverbs 22:6 and the Training of Children," in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, ed. Roy B. Zuck(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995); Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of the Book of Proverbs* (New York, NY: Robert Carter, 1847); Fox; George Lawson, *Expositions of the Book of Proverbs* (Edinburgh, UK: W. Oliphant, 1829); Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, ed. Peter Ackroyd et al., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1970); Murphy; Ross, ed; David Thomas, *Book of Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1982; reprint, 1982); Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*.
[184] Fox, 698.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*.

who educate them ("primarily parents") and speaks of the importance of setting them in a

different way (*b^ederek*) than the disastrous way the perverse take. So two ways are

contrasted in the context of Proverbs 22:3-6—the same two pathways which are

presented throughout the book of Proverbs.[187] In summary, when context is considered, it

is evident that the way of the perverse is not being contrasted with the way of wise

vocational selection, but with the way of righteousness.

Thus the data seem to indicate that children (not adolescents or young adults) are

indeed in view, and that moral/spiritual and not vocational instruction is in view. But this

raises a third interpretive problem in 22:6a, namely, how should the verb *hanak* be

rendered? Here Hildebrandt complains, "Most commentators accept, without discussion,

the translation of 'train up' as the meaning of the word En)j& in Proverbs 22:6."[188]

Elsewhere in the Bible, the verb means "to dedicate" something (like the temple in 1

Kings 8:63 and 2 Chron. 7:5), or to put something (like a house) to its initial use (Deut.

20:5).[189] Considering this usage, Hildebrandt argues that in Proverbs 22:6 the word has

"specific reference to the inauguration process with the bestowal of status and

responsibility as a consequence of having completed an initiation process." He applies

this to marking significant first-time events and activities in a youth's life with

appropriate dignity and celebration.[190] As important as such celebrations and initiations

are, this does not seem to be the sense of the imperative, especially in light of verse 6b,

and the contextual contrast of wicked versus righteous pathways. Though he does not

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[187] Cf. McKane.

[188] Hildebrandt: 5.

[189] See Clifford, 196; Hildebrandt: 6-9.

[190] Hildebrandt: 19.

embrace Hildbrandt's status view, Waltke does agree that rendering *hanak* as "train up"

misses important emphases:

> The relatively rare imperative *dedicate* (*hanok*) means to start the youth off with a
> strong and perhaps even religious commitment to a certain course of action. . . .
> To be sure, dedication entails continual training, but the almost ubiquitous
> translation "train up" misses the lexeme's emphasis on inauguration and possibly
> consecration.[191]

Early consecration of children and their subsequent training in light of their

covenantal status was not a foreign concept to Hebrew parents. On the eighth day after

birth, Hebrew boys were to be circumcised (Lev. 12:3), receiving the sign of the covenant

(Gen. 17:11), indicating they belonged to God and were part of his special people (Exod.

19:5-6). Similarly, many Christian parents dedicate their children to God through the

sacrament of water baptism. Commenting on Proverbs 22:6, Bridges brings together the

ideas of dedication, baptism, and Christian training:

> Yet the religious training must not be a border of the garment, which might be
> easily cut off. It must be the pervading substance throughout. Begin, as Hannah
> did, with the dedication of the child to God. (1 Sam. 1:28.) This done—train him
> as God's child, entrusted to your care. Ask guidance from day to day—"how shall
> we order the child, and how shall we do unto him?" (Judges 13:12.) Train him, as
> a baptized child, in the principles of his baptismal engagements. Pray for him.
> Teach him to pray. Instruct him "from a child in the Holy Scriptures," as the sole
> rule of faith, and directory of conduct.[192]

Bridges seems to be saying that parents should remain aware of to *whom* and to *what* the

child was dedicated through baptism, and train him accordingly.

The first interpretive question of Proverbs 22:6 was whether this text is referring

to child training. The data seem to confirm that it is. The second interpretive question was

whether this Proverb should be understood as constituting a promise. Here, the majority

assert that given the genre of wisdom literature, Proverbs 22:6 should not be taken as a

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[191] Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, 204.
[192] Bridges, 402.

promise, but rather something more of a confident expectation—all other things being equal.[193] Hildebrandt advises that the verse "gives a single component of truth that must be fit together with other elements of truth in order to approximate the more comprehensive, confused patterns of real life."[194] Waltke refers to other Proverbs whose focus is not parents, but the youths, and which "recognize the youth's freedom to choose sin (cf. Ezek. 18:20) and apostatize by taking up with villains (Prov. 2:11-15) and whores (5:11-14)."[195] Thus, the emphasis of this position is that faithful parents might apply the Word that their children—as free agents—choose to reject.

Those who reject the view that Proverbs 22:6 constitutes a promise often caution readers of the dangers of this "misinterpretation." For example, Longman warns:

> Proverbs advises its hearers in ways that are most likely to lead them to desired consequences if all things are equal. It is much more likely that a child will be a responsible adult if trained in the right path. However, there is also the possibility that the child might come under the negative influence of peers or be led astray in some other way. The point is that this proverb encourages parents to train their children, but does not guarantee that if they do so their children will never stray. This insight into the form of the proverb is particularly important for parents to grasp when their adult children have not turned out well; otherwise, the verse becomes a sledgehammer of guilt.[196]

A small minority, however, assert that this text should indeed be taken as a promise.[197] Yet even here, Kloosterman, who asserts the promissory character of biblical wisdom, is careful to make qualifications. He distinguishes, for instance, between a

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[193]E.g., Archer Jr; Hildebrandt; Charles Hodge, "Bushnell on Christian Nurture," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 19, no. 4 (1847): 505; Lawson; Longman III; Mary Somerville, "Counselling Mothers of Rebellious Teens " in *Women Helping Women: A Biblical Guide to the Major Issues Women Face*, ed. Elyse Fitzpatrick and Carol Cornish(Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997), 289-90; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*; White, 42-44; ibid.

[194] Hildebrandt: 16.

[195] Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, 206.

[196] Longman III, 405.

[197] E.g., Bridges; Kloosterman; Robert S. Rayburn, "Parental Conditions and the Promise of Grace to the Children of Believers," in *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*, ed. Benjamin K. Wikner(Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005).

promise and a guarantee—words which Jaeggli seems to treat as synonyms.[198]

Kloosterman observes, "A promise entails a personal relationship, with all its

contingencies, its twists and turns. A guarantee expresses a contractual relationship,

arranged in terms of a *quid pro quo*."[199] Later, he writes, "the proverbial truth about

child-rearing is . . . a generalization to which there can be exceptions," such as

"inconsistencies of God-fearing parents [which] vitiate their good instruction," or

children who "resist" or "reject" instruction.[200] Given these qualifications, it seems

difficult to differentiate Kloosterman's position from the position of those who would

argue that Proverbs 22:6 is a general principle. In contrast, Rayburn asserts that the text

contains a solid promise which is always true—given that the conditions are met. He

argues,

> It is by no means true that all or even most of the teaching of Proverbs is
> proverbial in the sense of being only widely or generally true. That is especially
> the case with those proverbs that contain what we might call *theological* truth,
> that is, truth that is taught first and foremost in those parts of the Bible that set
> forth its doctrine regarding God, man, and salvation. For example, it is certainly
> no mere proverb that "the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the
> Lord" (16:33) or that "the Lord works out everything for his own ends—even the
> wicked for a day of disaster" (16:4). We know those statements are not merely
> proverbial truths—that is, usually but not necessarily always true. . . . In the same
> way, the material regarding covenant children, their nurture, and the hope that
> springs from that nurture is taught everywhere in the Bible and especially in those
> great texts which lay down the Bible's doctrine of the covenant, the place of our
> children in the covenant, and the promise and the means of their salvation.[201]

To summarize Rayburn, because the promises regarding children, their salvation,

and their covenantal status and nurture are so well-attested elsewhere in the Bible, this

Proverb should be taken at face value—as a promise. It seems that to Rayburn, there is a

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[198] Jaeggli: 41.
[199] Kloosterman, 42.
[200] Ibid., 43.
[201] Rayburn, "*To You and Your Children*," 19.

connection "in every case" between a failure of parental faith and nurture and "the

spiritual death of certain children."[202] Since even the most faithful parents are terribly

inconsistent, Rayburn argues:

> The condition of faithful parental nurture is, like all other conditons by which the promises of God's covenant are realized, *a gospel condition.* That is, what believers do in obedience to God's summons is made effective not by the perfection of their obedience but by the condescension of God. The faithful nurture of children, as blameless faith or blameless obedience, is not perfect by any means. . . . The entire Bible bears witness to the fact that God counts as living faith and true obedeince what is manifestly very far from sinless or perfect faith and obedience. The Lord, in His grace, treats this imperfect faith and obedience a great deal better than they deserve.[203]

If Rayburn is correct about the promissory nature of Proverbs 22:6, as he seems to

be, the ramifications for parents are immediate and deep. When children do grow up to

walk faithfully with God, God's grace, and not the parents' skill in childrearing, is to be

credited. If children become wayward, parents should embrace responsibility, confess

their sins to God and (where appropriate) to their children, and receive God's mercy.[204]

To languish in guilt is another failure to apprehend the gospel.[205]

Parents must navigate between presumption and unbelief, between imagining

promises where there are none, and being blind to promises that are truly there. Thomas

Trouwborst suggests that the latter alternative seems to result in some measure of

hopelessness and helplessness because it removes the connection between parental

nurture and the faith of the child.

> Has God given promises concerning the faithfulness of children born in covenant families? If so, has He graciously equipped the covenant community to cultivate

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[202] Ibid.

[203] Ibid., 22.

[204] Randy Booth, "Picking up the Pieces," in *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession,* ed. Benjamin K. Wikner(Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005).

[205] It is acknowledged this may seem glib to heart sore parents laboring under crushing loads of guilt. However, this does seem to be the root of the problem. Parents who needed to have believed God for grace for their children, if those children go astray, need to believe God for grace for themselves.

this faithfulness systematically in our seed? Or is passing the faith to successive generations accidental, haphazard, arbitrary, indiscriminate, and hit-or-miss? The church has been given the latter answer far too long, but this has not always been the case. . .[206]

One example of this perspective is found in Edward Lawrence, a seventeenth-century Puritan pastor and father of nine. Two of Lawrence's nine children had been in a backslidden condition, which occasioned the writing of his booklet titled, *Parents' Groans over Their Wicked Children.* In it, Lawrence seems to assign a certain arbitrariness to the providence of God in the salvation of believers' children. He writes:

> The children of godly parents often prove wicked when God sanctifies, blesses, and saves the children of ungodly parents. . . . It is no new sight to see children of the best saints on the way to hell, and children of atheists and persecutors on the way to heaven. Nay, though some parents persecute their own children for loving and fearing God, yet they cannot debauch them, while all endeavors of godly parents may not prevail to make their children hate sin and love God.[207]

Again, concerning the experience of being a godly parent of ungodly children, Lawrence writes, "Consider what I have proved, that this is an affliction which ordinarily befalls God's dearest children."[208] Though Scripture and history contain many accounts of this phenomenon, considering how many more children do indeed embrace the faith and values of their parents than those who do not, one wonders if the percentage of those who fall away could justify the term "ordinarily." If Lawrence is correct, parents who have raised their children "by grace through faith" should not cling to the expectation that their children will embrace their faith. This conviction is not uncommon among those who write to the parents of prodigals. Indeed, John White, in his book *Parents in Pain:*

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[206] Thomas Trouwborst, "From Covenant to Chaos: The Reformers and Their Heirs on Covenant Succession," in *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession,* ed. Benjamin K. Wikner(Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005), 59.

[207] Edward Lawrence, *Parents' Concerns for Their Unsaved Children,* ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1681; reprint, 2003), 11-12.

[208]Ibid., 43.

Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children, titles one chapter "False Comfort," in which he devotes a section to "Infant Baptism and the New Covenant."[209] White's point in this section is not so much to object to infant baptism, but rather to object to parents drawing comfort from it regarding the salvation of their children.

But the very attitudes, expectations, and perspectives parents have toward the salvation and covenantal status of their children seem to be a significant factor in whether the children follow their parents in the faith, or not. How should the sacrament of baptism inform Christians regarding their children? Does a parent's understanding of the meaning of baptism affect childrearing? Can a child who has been baptized but has not yet come to the Lord's Supper apostatize, or is that an impossibility? The church has asked and answered these questions before, but the answers have been by no means uniform.

The Shaping Influence of Parental Assumptions

Attitudes, expectations, and perspectives parents have toward their children and the parenting role itself are powerful shaping influences from their children's earliest days.[210] For example, Murray-Swank and colleagues have demonstrated that the more a parent "sanctifies" the role of parenting, the more such parents "will invest of themselves in their parenting effort" to do "what they believe is important as a parent."[211] For conservative mothers in the study, the more they sanctified the parental role, the more consistently they would spank. For mothers with more liberal theological leanings, the more they sanctified parenting, the less they would spank. Theology affected practice.

But even among Christians who are theologically conservative, there are different emphases which bear fruit in different practices. Neumann compared the effects of

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[209] White, 52-55.
[210] Hodge: 511-12.
[211] Murray-Swank, Mahoney, and Pargament.

covenant versus dispensational theology on family life. According to Neumann,

dispensational theology stresses "an individuals' relationship with God after reaching an

'age of maturity' (Yoder 1959)," while covenant theology emphasizes "infants and

family units."[212] Neumann reports that families holding to covenant theology typically

had larger families, were more consistent with family worship, were more likely to

dedicate or baptize their children, and had a greater frequency of second-generation

missionary families.[213] Lee and colleagues, in turn, correlate many forms of family

worship with positive outcomes in adolescents.[214] Theology effects practice (Neumann),

and practice bears fruit in outcomes (Lee), including theology. Neumann concludes that

"theology does impact family life in a behavioral sense."[215]

Narrowing still further, among those who embrace covenant theology and infant

baptism, there are significant differences in understandings of the meaning and basis of

baptism. These different views have differing shaping effects on children. Robert S.

Rayburn, whose "provocative" 1996 journal article has revived much debate and

discussion on the subject of the meaning of infant baptism, writes:

> Too often today we find Presbyterians quite capable of fighting the good fight on
> behalf of infant baptism, but who then think of their children and raise them
> according to what are indubitably baptistic principles.[216]

Rayburn contends that the majority view of Reformed churches is that "the

children of Christians are not to be regarded as Christians until they profess faith," and

that this view reflects "where one is left if a commitment to paedobaptism is jointly held

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[212] Neumann: 390.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Lee, Rice, and Gillespie, "Family Worship Patterns."
[215] Neumann.
[216] Rayburn, "Covenant Succession," 78. The adjective "provocative" is suggested by the editor of *Presbyterion*, V. Philips Long, who appended questions and concerns for the author, 109-112.

with a revivalist and voluntarist view of salvation."[217] Furthermore, he suggests "the

substantial number of the church's children that are being lost to the world in our day"

can at least be partially attributable to this view of the church toward its children. [218]

As Christians, we must assume *something* about the spiritual state of covenant

children. Samuel Volbeda, former professor of Calvin Theological Seminary, writes

regarding presumptive regeneration,

> Let it be remembered that if objection be taken to presumptive regeneration of
> covenant children, objection must be taken equally against presumptive faith and
> good works of adult church members, if consistency is not to be sacrificed. For
> we know the adults' heart [sic] no more infallibly than we know the child's heart.
> In both instances their Christian subjective condition is and can only be
> presumptive; in the case of adults presumption is based upon *their* words and
> works; in the case of covenant children it rests upon God's testimony.[219]

If something must be presumed about the regeneration of covenant children, and

"theology does impact family life in a behavioral sense," what impact does this

presumption have on how parents raise children, and how they turn out?[220] Joel Beeke,

President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Church History, and Homiletics at

Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, asserts that "the fruits of presumptive

regeneration are tragic. Parents who consider their children regenerate by virtue of their

covenant status will see no need for personal conversion."[221] William Young, of the

Presbyterian Reformed Church, contends regarding presumptive regeneration that "a

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[217] Rayburn, "To You and Your Children," 16.

[218] Rayburn, "Covenant Succession," 78.

[219] Cited in J. Mark Beach, "The Promise of the Covenant and the Enigma of Unbelief: Reflections on Covenant Promise," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15, no. (2004): 149-50. The italics are in the original.

[220]The term "presumptive regeneration" is itself problematic, and is open to confusion. Rayburn writes, "Whether it is wise to speak of covenant infants as presumptively regenerate, as do Kuyper and Schenck, is a separate question. Even Kuyper himself was careful to say that to speak thus was not to suggest that all covenant infants were born again in infancy, only that they were to be considered regenerate and treated accordingly." Rayburn, "Covenant Succession," 99. cf. Trouwborst, 96-100.

[221] Joel R. Beeke, *Bringing the Gospel to Covenant Children* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2001; reprint, 2004); ibid.

system for breeding Pharisees, whose cry is 'We are Abraham's children,' could hardly be better calculated."[222] To the critics of presumptive regeneration, proponents do a great disservice to their children, because the children of believers must be evangelized.

Those who embrace covenant succession through Christian nurture are equally critical of those who do not. They assert that the evangelism methodology which flows from presuming covenant children are unchristian until they make a profession of faith is spiritually damaging to covenant children, and ultimately has its roots in the theology of "Independents and Anabaptists." Lyman Atwater, for instance, writing of the effects of the depreciation of the doctrine of baptism in nineteenth-century America, complains that "great numbers" of parents "discern in the rite nothing more than a solemn token of parental desire that the child may be the Lord's."[223] Because of the Great Awakening, Christians began to expect that regeneration and conversion could only happen through a crisis, and the results were tragic for the people of God:

> The fruit has appeared in the distinguishing features of our American Christianity for better and for worse; in a remarkable vigour of aggressive evangelism upon those that are without, and in too often putting without the fold the lambs of the flock, so far, alas! that immense numbers of them are lost, past recovery, upon the dark mountains of sin![224]

What happens to children of the covenant when their parents presume they are unconverted and practically excluded from the people of God? Trouwborst asserts that it instills within them a "theology of doubt."[225] Atwater speaks to this at length:

> Does not the attitude in which one is placed, have much to do in deciding what can be made of him? And in all its bearings upon the kind of training which will

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[222] William Young, "Historic Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism, Part 2," *Westminster Theological Journal* 36, no. 2 (1974): 167. Both Young and Beeke are critiquing presumptive regeneration as articulated by Abraham Kuyper, which can be distinguished in points from that of the reformers. See Trouwborst, 95-100.

[223] L. H. Atwater, "Children of the Church and Sealing Ordinances," *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, XXIX, no. 1 (1857): 6.

[224] Ibid., 16.

[225] Trouwborst, 88.

be given to a child, and the effect which that training will have upon him, is there not a heaven-wide difference between the question, whether he shall apostatize from the Church, in which he was born and reared, to the world from which he was taken, by the mercy of God, while yet a babe; or whether he shall renounce the world, and all its associations, to which he has been wedded by a life-long habit and association, to take his place in the Church? These and similar questions speak their own answer in the light of reason, experience, and the word of God.[226]

Both proponents and opponents of covenant succession believe that the gospel must be regularly delivered to covenant children.[227] The former contend, however, that the manner in which the gospel is delivered to those within and without the covenant is fundamentally different. To them, evangelism is only appropriate for those without, while covenant nurture is suited for those within—and indeed the only biblical "paradigm of childrearing in the covenant home."[228] Is there a difference? What does covenant nurture look like? William Still, a pastor of Gilcomston South Church in Edinburgh between 1945 and 1997, and an advocate of covenant succession, describes covenant nurture to his parishioners:

> Tell the children, and keep telling them, that they are the Lord's. Do not do so in a frantic manner, for with dawning intelligence the little ones will believe and accept what you say. When they begin to question, do not resort to frantic affirmations, as if you were, or had become, unsure - you are standing by faith upon God's promise, not on your own wavering hope. Quietly, sweetly and with supreme assurance in the promises of God, affirm that they are the Lord's by birth into a Christian home and by the prophetic gift of faith exercised; and that you as Christian parents are standing upon God's promise in order that they may grow up in the Lord and come to voluntary commitment to Him, acknowledging their sin and their need of a Saviour, gladly falling in with God's offer of mercy in Jesus Christ, and receiving Him as their personal Saviour. It would be right and proper, therefore, in circumstances of crisis and tension, simply to assert that these children are overtaken and overcome by the grace of God through the exercise of

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[226] Atwater: 32-33.

[227] Indeed, the gospel is for everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike. See Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994).

[228] V. Philips Long, editor of *Presbyterion* at the time Rayburn's article appeared, questions him on whether the distinction between covenant nurture and evangelism is indeed necessary and helpful. Rayburn, "Covenant Succession," 99, 111.

His gift of faith, and that, wriggle as they may, there is nothing they can do about it![229]

Furthermore, Still maintains that those who practice infant baptism

> yet bring up their children as little sinners to be saved . . . and not as children regenerate . . . . [These] ought not to christen their children, or, perhaps even dedicate them to the Lord, for they are not acting in faith, but, despite the rite, are simply waiting to see what will happen to them, Christian nurture notwithstanding.[230]

In summary, then, both those who embrace covenant succession and those who do not agree that the implications of our presumptions for childrearing are sweeping.

What has been the historic understanding of reformed Christians on the matter of the status of children within the covenant? In *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, Lewis Bevens Schenck exhaustively documents his case that historically, the Reformed tradition treated covenant children as fully Christian, and members of the elect, but the church drifted from that conviction as a result of the Great Awakening.[231] Similarly, Trouwborst writes that in sixteenth-century Reformed theology, "the norm was to view and treat covenant infants as forgiven saints and to have confidence they would continue as such."[232] Representative of the early Reformed position regarding the nature of covenant children, John Calvin writes:

> The offspring of believers are born holy, because their children, while yet in the womb, before they breathe the vital air, have been adopted into the covenant of eternal life. Nor are they brought into the church by baptism on any other ground than because they belonged to the body of the Church before they were born. He who admits aliens to baptism profanes it. . . . For how can it be lawful to confer the badge of Christ on aliens from Christ. Baptism must, therefore, be preceded

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[229] William Still, *Child Rearing within the Covenant of Grace: A Study in Headship in the Christian Home*, Second ed. (Aberdeen, UK: Gilcomston South Church, 1988; reprint, 1988), 10; ibid.
[230] Ibid., 25.
[231] Schenck.
[232] Trouwborst, 61. .

by the gift of adoption, which is not the cause of half salvation merely, but gives salvation entire; and this salvation is afterwards ratified by baptism.[233]

As might be expected, Calvin is not alone. Trouwborst demonstrates that other magisterial Reformers such as Heinrich Bullinger, Guido De Bres, Caspar Olevianus, and Zachary Ursinus shared the same fundamental position.[234] Illustrative of this is a passage in Ursinus' commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism:

> Those are not to be excluded from baptism, to whom the benefit of the remission of sins, and of regeneration belongs. But this benefit belongs to the infants of the church; for redemption from sin, by the blood of Christ and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult. . . .
> Those unto whom the things signified belong, unto them the sign also belongs. . . .
> Baptism ought to be administered to infants also; for they are holy; the promise is unto them; the kingdom of heaven is theirs.[235]

Representing Princetonian Presbyterianism of the nineteenth century, Charles Hodge writes:

> The status, therefore, of baptized children is not a vague or uncertain one, according to the doctrine of the Reformed Churches. They are members of the Church; they are professing Christians; they belong presumptively to the number of the elect. These propositions are true of them in the same sense in which they are true of adult professing Christians.[236]

In his review of Bushnell, Hodge critiques and bemoans the

> prevailing theory of religion which leads believing parents to expect their children to grow up very much like other children, unconverted, out of the church, out of covenant with God, and to rely far less on the peculiar promise of God to them and to his blessing on their religious culture, than on other means, for their salvation? We cannot doubt that this is the case, and that it is the source of incalculable evil.[237]

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[233] Quoted in Schenck, 13.

[234] Thomas Trouborst in Wikner, ed., 62-76.

[235] Cited in Trouwborst, 67.

[236] Charles Hodge, "The Tecnobaptist . . . By R.B. Mayes," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 30, no. 2 (1858): 389. Granted, to presume election and to presume regeneration are different things. But they seem to be intimately connected in the minds of thinkers like Hodge, Atwater, and McIlvaine. Ultimately, it seems these writers objected to paedobaptists who did not look for and expect signs of God's saving grace in their children.

[237] Hodge, "Bushnell on Christian Nurture," 516.

As seen already, Atwater's position is in harmony with that of Hodge.[238] Other

authors whose articles were published by the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*

also reflected Hodge's position. For example, McIlvaine, writing of Presbyterians who

had absorbed Baptist "ideas and tendencies" regarding children of the covenant, writes

that

> instead of regarding and treating their children as presumably of the elect, instead
> of reckoning with covenant assurance upon the regenerating grace of God for
> them, and aiming thereupon to train them up in the way they should go, to bring
> them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, they assume - a fearful
> responsibility! - that they are not in the church, not "in the way," not "in the
> nurture."[239]

Though covenant succession seemed to be the position of many of the sixteenth-

century Reformers (and later the Princetonians), this began to change in the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries.[240] Trouwborst cites one example of this paradigm shift as "the

Dutch pastor Jacobus Koelman (1632-1695), [who] wrote in 1679 that we should 'try to

save our children with all appropriate means prescribed by God.' And he elsewhere

pleads that we should 'pray that [God] may regenerate them.'"[241]

The Puritans, especially in America, furthered the belief in child evangelism and

conversion. Later, during the Great Awakening, it remained a strident emphasis. Schenck

presents Gilbert Tennent as one example. Gilbert Tennent was a well-known evangelist

of the time, the son of William Tennent, the founder of the Log College—the precursor to

Princeton. Schenck writes:

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[238] Atwater.

[239] McIlvaine: 248-9.

[240] To assume Calvin had the same understanding of what it means to be regenerate that obtains today
among Reformed theologians would be mistaken.

[241] Wikner, ed., 81.

In his sermon, *A Solemn Warning* . . . Gilbert Tennent declared that conviction and conversion *in the manner in which he presented them* were always necessary in salvation. "The necessity is absolute. . . . Without it God will tear you in Pieces."

Schenck's analysis touches the heart of how certain Great Awakening

assumptions regarding the non-negotiables of conversion militated against the view of

covenant succession held by the Reformers:

> It was unfortunate that the Great Awakening made an emotional experience, involving terror, misery, and depression, the only approach to God. . . . Preaching the experience of God's love and peace, it was believed necessary to have an awful sense of one's lost and terrifying position. Since these were not the experiences of infancy and early childhood, it was taken for granted children must, or in all ordinary cases would, grow up unconverted. Infants, it was thought, needed the new birth, as well as adults. They could not be saved without it. But the only channel of the new birth which was recognized was a conscious experience of conviction and conversion. Anything else, according to Gilbert Tennent, was a fiction of the brain, a delusion of the Devil. In fact, he ridiculed the idea that one could be a Christian without knowing the time when he was otherwise.[242]

Tennent's view, and the view of many who followed him, contrasted sharply with

those of the early Reformers cited previously. The ramifications of these differing

theological positions are far-reaching. To those demanding a similar conversion

experience for all—regardless of age, temperament, and upbringing—the concept of

covenant succession through Christian nurture would be odious. To those who allow for

greater diversity in the manner the Spirit moves, however, the methodology of the

evangelists of the Great Awakening toward children would result in many covenant

children being wrongly excluded.[243]

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[242] Schenck, 70-71. Princeton's first professor, Archibald Alexander, seems to argue directly against Tennent's thinking when he speaks of the variety of ways the Holy Spirit works salvifically. Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, 3rd ed. (Carlilse, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1844; reprint, 1989), 21-30.

[243] Schenck, 71.

How children of the covenant are to be understood in relationship to God, salvation, and the church directly informs the policies and procedures of the church toward covenantal children who turn away from Christianity.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES OF THE CHURCH REGARDING CHILDREN WHO GREW UP IN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND LEFT

The tensions resulting from shifting theological paradigms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries naturally produced questions for the church. If the children of believers are the proper subjects of evangelism rather than covenant nurture, then this affects how we interpret when they leave the church. If they were only quasi-members of the church,[244] then how could they leave or be expelled from something they never joined? If children are not full-members of the church, is apostasy even possible? And is church discipline ever appropriate for them? As James Henley Thornwell was to write, "to those who profess no faith in Christ it is as unmeaning and absurd to dispense the spiritual censures of the Church, as it would be to tie a dead man to the whipping-post and chastise him with rods."[245] If, however, the children of Christians are presumed regenerate and nurtured in the faith; if their baptism brings them into full membership with the covenant community, then they can indeed "leave" because they once belonged. Thus, apostasy *is* possible, and church discipline on some level may be appropriate (depending—as always—on circumstances). The Presbyterian church debated these questions throughout the bulk of the nineteenth century.

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[244] See discussion in Atwater. Also Schenck, 80ff.
[245] J. H. Thornwell, "Revised Book of Discipline," in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*(Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1859), vol. IV, 328; ibid.

The Revision of the Book of Discipline, circa 1857

A prominent Southern Presbyterian minister, A. W. Miller recounts that in 1799,

the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America

received the following overture: "How far and in what sense are persons who have been

regularly baptized in infancy, and have not partaken of the sacrament of the Lord's

Supper, subject to the discipline of the Church?"[246] Just over a decade later, the Synod of

Kentucky asked the Assembly of 1811, "What steps should the Church take with baptized

youth, not in communion, but arrived at the age of maturity, should such youth prove

disorderly and contumacious?"[247] Ultimately, these questions came to greater prominence

and were debated at length through the able voices of Dr. Charles Hodge, of Princeton,

and the Southern Presbyterian pastor and scholar Dr. James Henley Thornwell. In 1857,

the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America

selected a committee to propose a revision of the Book of Discipline.[248] Thornwell

chaired the revision committee, of which Hodge was a member. Thornwell was also

principal author of the first draft of the revisions.[249] Controversy settled on one revision

concerning the status of the children of believers. Schenck narrates:

> For the first proposition it substituted the words, "are under its government and
> training."[250] At the end of the paragraph it proposed to add the following—"only
> those, however, who have made a profession of faith in Christ are proper subjects
> of judicial prosecution." The precise question was whether the jurisdiction of the
> church should be exercised in the same way over baptized children, as over
> professed believers. . . . the proposed revision restricted the mode of judicial
> prosecution exclusively to professed believers.[251]

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[246] A. W. Miller, "The Relation of Baptized Children to the Discipline of the Church," *The Southern Presbyterian Review* XVIII no. 1 (July, 1867): 48.

[247] Ibid.

[248] Charles Hodge, "The Revised Book of Discipline," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 30, no. 4 (1858).

[249] Schenck, 90.

[250] This, instead of "are under its government and discipline."

[251] .

Hodge, in favor of retaining the old formulation that all baptized persons are members of the church and thus subject to its "government and discipline," identified three views within the Committee for Revision. The first, his own, was the "general conviction of the Christian world." The second held that "while admitting that baptized persons were in some sense members of the church, [it] seemed to regard them as only under its fostering care, but not subject to its government or discipline."[252] The third view, which Hodge identifies as a compromise position, held that "while all baptized persons are members of the church, and under its care and government, yet the proper subjects of judicial process are those who have professed their faith in Christ."[253]

James Henley Thornwell argued his "compromise" position. He held that the children of believers who had not yet made a profession of faith should be under "standing censure," and should be treated as "slaves" of the Devil and "enemies of God."[254] He contended that because true heart-obedience is impossible without regeneration, it was unwise to subject them to the discipline of the church, just as it would be wrong to subject a pagan to church discipline.[255]

On the other hand, Hodge's elder colleague at Princeton, Samuel Miller, identified the theological and pastoral implications that result from exempting baptized members from judicial censure:

> That baptized children should be treated by the Church and her officers just as other children are treated: that they should receive the seal of a covenant relation to God and his people, and then be left to negligence and sin, without official

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[252] Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* XXXI, no. III (July 1859): 603; Schenck, 90-91.

[253] Hodge, "The General Assembly."

[254] J. H. Thornwell, "A Few More Words on the Revised Book of Discipline," *The Southern Presbyterian Review* XIII, no. 1 (1861): 6.The Collected Works of J. H. Thornwell, IV, 341.

[255] . It seems Jack Miller agrees with Thornwell, at least in practice, in that his daughter Barbara does not seem to have been subjected to church discipline. Miller and Juliani, *Come Back, Barbara*, 39.

inspection, and without discipline, precisely as those are left who bear no relation to the church, is, it must be confessed, altogether inconsistent with the nature and design of the ordinance, and in a high degree unfriendly to the best interests of the Church of God.[256]

A. W. Miller demonstrated that historically the Reformed church subjected baptized children to judicial censure.[257] And in answer to the objection that subjecting a baptized non-communicant to discipline was equivalent to "excommunicating a person for not being regenerated," Miller writes,

> Why may it not, with equal force, be objected, that it would be unjust in God to cast any into *hell*, "for not being regenerated" - since this was not in their power? If the phrase "for not being regenerated" renders ridiculous the idea of casting out of the church, on this ground, it also renders still more ridiculous the idea of casting any into hell, on the same ground.[258]

Another prominent Southern Presbyterian, Robert Lewis Dabney, of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, is often associated with Thornwell on his understanding of the relation of baptized children to the covenant.[259] However, when it came to the proposed revisions to the Book of Discipline, Dabney's disagreement was stark, referring to some of the changes as "mischievous ambiguity," and specifically asserting the changes gave credence to the charges of inconsistency leveled by "Anabaptists and Immersionists" against paedobaptists.[260]

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[256] Quoted in Schenck, 83.
[257] He gives examples in the Scotch Church, the Reformed Church of France, the Bohemian Church, John Calvin, Martin Chemnitz, Cotton and Increase Mather, up through men of his day, Miller, Rice, and Hodge. Miller, "The Relation of Baptized Children to the Discipline of the Church."
[258] Ibid., 78.
[259] See Rayburn, "To You and Your Children," 15-17; Schenck, 84-87.
[260] Robert L. Dabney, "A Discussion of Some of the Changes Proposed by the Committee of the General Assembly in Their Revised Book of Discipline," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 12, no. 1 (1859). In this article, Dabney makes a forceful case against the proposed revisions on the subjects of judicial procedure. Though Schenck refers to this article of Dabney's on several occasions (e.g., 90-91, 97), he never mentions the central thesis. Instead, he refers to the article as evidence of Dabney's agreement with Thornwell's view of children in the covenant. This leaves a possible impression with the reader that Dabney and Thornwell agreed where they did not.

Ultimately the controversy over the revision of the Book of Discipline was settled along the lines of the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches—the North restoring the original wording of the Book of Discipline "with a slight addition in reference to the general sense of discipline,"[261] while the South adopted Thornwell's proposed revisions.

Judicial Procedure Regarding Wayward Baptized Non-Communicants in Contemporary Reformed Churches

Today, many Reformed denominations seem to reflect the tensions of the Hodge-Thornwell debate of the nineteenth century[262], and the complex interrelationships and multiple priorities involved when a covenant child veers from the faith: reclaiming wayward children in a postmodern culture, treating covenantal signs and seals with respect, employing the restorative measures of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18, and optimizing the many purposes of church discipline. Over all, the uniform sense one gets from the breadth of literature regarding the policies and procedures of the church toward wayward covenant children is that caution is especially necessary because the pastoral situations are often deeply complex.

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) seems particularly tentative. For example, they ruled in their Book of Discipline, "All baptized persons, being members of the Church are subject to its discipline and entitled to the benefits thereof" (27-2). This would seem,

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[261] Schenck, 100.

[262] For instance, John Murray, who taught Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary for many years, writes, "Here it is necessary to correct an error that is widespread, that only those who go to the Lord's table are members of the church, that merely baptized persons are not making a profession. This is a pernicious underestimate of the meaning of baptism. It so happens that most of us have been baptized in infancy. . . . Unless we have repudiated our infant baptism we *are* professing." He then emphasizes that "Baptized persons are under the discipline of the church and therefore subject to censure in the event of delinquency." See John Murray, "Baptism," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 370-1.

on the face, to reflect the historic position of the Reformed church,[263] as exemplified in Hodge

and Princetonian Presbyterianism.[264] However, the next chapter reads that children who have

come to years of discretion, "If they are wayward . . . should be cherished by the church

and every means used to reclaim them" (28-3). On the surface, there is little controversy.

But *every* means? Should, for instance, judicial process be used? It does not seem so. The

next paragraph has the following:

> **28-4.** Adult non-communing members, who receive with meekness and
> appreciation the oversight and instruction of the Church, are entitled to special
> attention. Their rights and privileges under the covenant should be frequently and
> fully explained, and they should be warned of the sin and danger of neglecting
> their covenant obligations.

What exactly is the "special attention" to which they are entitled? "Special

attention" seems to comprise explanation of their rights and privileges, and warning of

the sin and danger of neglecting their covenant privileges (28.4). Are not those who fail

to receive oversight "with meekness or appreciation" entitled to explanations and

warnings? It seems possible a large portion of those resistant to making a profession of

faith are doing so because of cognitive dissonance,[265] and thus intentionally distancing

themselves from the church. Such emerging adults would be unlikely to be either meek or

appreciative. Presumably, they *do* not receive explanations and warnings because they

will not receive them. In such cases, is judicial process appropriate? Again, it seems the

PCA scrupulously avoids the language of judicial process. In Chapter 29 of the Book of

Discipline, an offense is defined:

> **29-1.** An offense, the proper object of judicial process, is anything in the doctrines
> or practice of a Church member professing faith in Christ which is contrary to the
> Word of God. . .

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[263] Miller, "The Relation of Baptized Children to the Discipline of the Church."
[264] Hodge, "The Revised Book of Discipline."; Hodge, "The General Assembly."
[265] Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler: 1670.

Following this definition, it would seem impossible for a baptized member in the

PCA, who has not yet come to the Lord's Table, to commit an offense leading to judicial

process. Though all baptized persons are subject to discipline (27-2), no one is subject to

judicial process who does not profess Christ (29-1). The PCA seems to reflect the

position of Thornwell and the revisionists. But the position remains the subject of

criticism. Timothy Bayly, an ordained PCA Teaching Elder and former Executive

Director of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, suggests that an

unwillingness to employ the keys of the kingdom on wayward covenant children will

result in the emasculation of the church:

> It's when we turn to the neglect of the discipline of children of the covenant—
> particularly those in their teens and early 20's—that an organic connection
> between the emasculation of the church and the decline of the doctrine of
> covenant succession begins to emerge. Officers of the church who operate more
> from fear than faith are unlikely to apply to their children the tools God has
> ordained as the means for the accomplishment of covenant succession,
> particularly discipline.[266]

Though discerning the position of the PCA requires some close attention, the

position of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) is more explicit. In its Book of

Discipline, Chapter 1, paragraph 4, it indicates that

> all members of the church, both communicants and those who are members by
> virtue of baptism only, are under the care of the church, and subject to
> ecclesiastical discipline including administrative and judicial discipline.[267]

However, the Book of Discipline also makes provision for non-communicant

members who refuse to profess faith in Christ to be erased from the church rolls (V.2.6).

> (6) When a noncommunicant member neglects the ongoing exhortation of the
> session to profess faith in Christ and rejects the covenantal responsibility of

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[266]Timothy Bayly, "Covenant Succession and the Emasculation of the Church," in Wikner, ed., 144-152.
[267] *The Book of Discipline of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), I.4 (p. 87).

submission to home or church, the session may upon prior notification erase his name from the roll.[268]

The OPC seems to allow for judicial process, but not require it in pastoral situations where discipline would seem imprudent.

The United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) allows for exclusion (presumably the final stage of discipline, putting out of the church), but requires counsel be sought before employing this measure. Article 59 of the Church Order of the URCNA reads:

> Mature members by baptism who are delinquent in doctrine or life shall be admonished and, if they persist, shall be excluded from the church of Christ. The advice of classis must be sought before proceeding to such exclusion.[269]

The Church Order does not indicate what action should be taken should classis advise against judicial procedure. The chart on the following page summarizes the procedures of OPC, PCA, and URCNA toward wayward non-communicant members.

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[268] Ibid., V.2.6 (p. 108).
[269] *Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America*, Fourth ed. (United Reformed Churches of North America, 2007).

Procedures of the OPC, PCA, and URCNA Toward Wayward Non-communicant Members		
Denomination	**Non-judicial Procedure**	**Judicial Procedure**
OPC	"under the care of the church" BOD I.4	Subject to administrative and judicial discipline. BOD I.4 Those who fail to profess faith can be erased from rolls. BOD V.2.6.
PCA	"should be cherished. . . every means used to reclaim them" (BOD 28.3) "entitled to special attention" explanation of rights and privileges, warnings of sin and danger. (BOD 28.4)	Non-professing members cannot commit an offense subject to judicial procedure. BOD 29.1
URCNA	Delinquent mature members by baptism "shall be admonished" Art. 59	Subject to exclusion, upon advice from classis Art. 59

It is evident that both the OPC and URCNA allow for judicial procedure toward wayward non-communicant members. Their purposes in their Book of Discipline and Church Order, respectively, do not seem to be to outline non-judicial procedures. The PCA, in contrast, seems strongly to emphasize non-judicial procedures. While it encompasses non-communicant members under the discipline of the church theoretically, its definition of "offense" necessarily excludes baptized non-professors from judicial procedure.

Many reformed churches require youth to undergo confirmation, after which, if they become wayward they are subject to judicial procedure. Indeed, the early Reformer Martin Bucer envisioned church discipline quite broadly, of which confirmation was a necessary part. Amy Nelson Burnett, who as Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln specializes in early Reformed tradition, writes:

In his mature works, his understanding of discipline had four elements: religious instruction for both children and adults; a public confession of faith and obedience, especially as part of a confirmation ceremony; fraternal admonition combined with the oversight of morals by pastors and lay elders; and in cases of grave sin, the imposition of public penance and, if necessary, excommunication.[270]

To Bucer, discipline was truly a community commitment. Confirmation—which he suggested should occur between the ages of 10 and 12—was not optional.[271] Those who refused to confirm their faith were to be excluded from the church.[272]

Considerations if Church Discipline Proves Necessary

Literature on church discipline seems uniformly to emphasize the need for great pastoral caution and wisdom. The Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, counsels "great caution and prudence" and singles out younger pastors as those who should seek the counsel of others "for the more cautious proceeding in such work."[273] Though White concedes that while "younger spiritual leaders tend to be less patient, and err on the side of being too precipitous . . . . older leaders can be too hesitant." Therefore, "experience, prayer and fasting," and "the direction of the Holy Spirit are all of great importance in exercising judgment of this sort."[274]

J. Carl Laney emphasizes the importance of love as the motivation for discipline. Reasoning from Hebrews 12 that discipline is an indicator of legitimacy, Laney argues that when the church fails to discipline a wayward member, it illegitimatizes his sonship. To him, instead of ecclesiastical discipline being unloving, the opposite is true. Laney

[270] Amy Nelson Burnett, "Church Discipline and Moral Reformation in the Thought of Martin Bucer," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22, no. 3 (1991): 440.
[271] Amy Nelson Burnett, "Confirmation and Christian Fellowship: Martin Bucer on Commitment to the Church," *Church History* 64, no. 2 (1995).
[272] Ibid. Cf. Martin Bucer, "De Regno Christi," in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadephia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1550).
[273] Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (London, UK: S. Couchman, 1656), 109-110.
[274] John White and Ken Blue, *Church Discipline That Heals* (Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 146.

emphasizes that the design of discipline is to restore and not punish.[275] John White explicitly disagrees, maintaining that this distinction is a false dichotomy,[276] though he asserts if reconciliation is put in first priority, it will be a check against cruelty and the deleterious effects of incorrect discipline: "Inappropriate discipline hardens sinners. Not only does it fail to restore. It reinforces wrong attitudes and petrifies distorted character."[277] Brian Rosner, footnoting Laney, observes, "When the purpose of exclusion is discussed, its remedial intent in helping to reform the sinner is often emphasized to the detriment of other motives."[278]

D. B. Garlington writes, concerning Galatians 6, that a "balance of love of truth and love of people" is the problem of church discipline—since the church seems to go in excess to one extreme or another.[279] He emphasizes the importance—regardless of what action is taken—of understanding "*why* people are in the circumstances in which they find themselves. Christians, as anyone else, sin for reasons; and our treatment of those who sin must be intelligent as well as compassionate."[280] This seems particularly important when addressing the spiritual drift, and sometimes outright departure, of emerging adults. It seems wise for ministers to consider issues such as cognitive dissonance, family life cycle, and parent-child dynamics when engaging with wayward emerging adults.

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[275] J. Carl Laney, "The Biblical Practice of Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143, no. 572 (1986): 354-5.

[276] White, *Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children*, 190-192. White is contemplating familial discipline of wayward children in this passage, not ecclesiastical discipline. However, the principles seem to be equally applicable to familial and ecclesiastical discipline.

[277] White and Blue, *Church Discipline That Heals*, 52, 72.

[278] Rosner, "'Drive out the Wicked Person" a Biblical Theology of Exclusion," 26.

[279] Don B. Garlington, "Burden Bearing and the Recovery of Offending Christians (Galatians 6:1-5)," *Trinity Journal* 12, no. 2 (1991).

[280] Ibid., 9.

Francis Turretin cautions that unless a "spirit of kindness" accompanies the

severity of discipline, the "remedy [will be] turned into his destruction." He recounts the

"immoderate austerity of the ancients" where repentant sinners were subjected to

"privation from the sacred communion, now for seven, then for four years, and again for

a whole lifetime." The fruit from this would be "either great hypocrisy or the deepest

desperation."[281]

John Owen emphasizes the importance of proceeding in church discipline with

patience, waiting an appropriate time between steps:

> A crying out, "I admonish a first, a second, a third time," and so to
> excommunication, is a very absurd observation of a divine institution, and the
> least appearance of haste or undue precipitation herein, is to be avoided in all
> these cases, as the bane of church-rule and order.[282]

He also emphasizes the importance of congregational and pastoral prayer and

mourning. "The administration of any solemn ordinance of the gospel, without prayer, is

a horrible profanation."[283] In what is perhaps an interesting interaction, Owen asks and

answers the question posed by voluntary withdrawal. If someone—seeing perhaps that

they are likely to receive the church's judicial censure—voluntarily withdraws, is it

necessary to proceed with excommunication? Owen argues that indeed, discipline should

proceed for, among other reasons, the sake of the unrepentant sinner, the honor and purity

of the church, and—perhaps most telling—as a witness "unto the future final judgment of

Christ against impenitent sinners."[284]

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[281] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. Jr. James T. Dennison, trans., George Musgrave Giger, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1696), 294.

[282] Owen, 551; cf. Parsons, 15ff. He writes that hasty or ill-considered discipline can create prodigals who are not, in reality, truly wayward.

[283] Owen.

[284] Ibid., 558-9.

One major question for the parents of apostate emerging adults who have

undergone discipline is what level of interaction is appropriate between them and their

wayward children. Owen answers this by maintaining that excommunication does not

suspend the duties of familial and civil relationships:

> No suspension of duties antecedently necessary by virtue of natural or moral
> relation, is allowed or countenanced by this rule. Such are those of husband and
> wife, parents and children, magistrates and subjects, masters and servants,
> neighbours, relations in propinquity of blood. No duties arising from or belonging
> unto any of these relations, are released, or the obligation unto them weakened by
> excommunication. Husbands may not hearon forsake their wives if they are
> excommunicated, nor wives their husbands; magistrates may not withdraw their
> protection from any of their subjects, because they are excommunicate.[285]

Francis Turretin likens the relationship of the excommunicant to the church to be

similar to that of a contumacious son turned out of his father's house. Though Turretin's

point is to illustrate that excommunicants are not cut off absolutely, his assumptions

about parental engagement with contumacious children are also instructive:

> As a father, when he turns out of his house a contumacious son and deprives him
> of his presence and the testimonies of paternal favor, still not as yet on that
> account does he wholly disinherit him or divest himself of all fatherly affection
> towards him; nay, then using this remedy to bring him to repentance, even by this
> deed exercises his love towards him, although not acknowledging it then, will
> afterwards acknowledge it, when by true conversion he shall have returned into
> favor with his father. Thus excommunication is the rod of a pious mother upon a
> wicked child whom she does not consider as not her child because she chastises
> him but severely punishes him that he may reform that he may not become
> altogether not a son: not to destroy, but to heal; not to cast them away from, but to
> bring back the wanderer to herself.[286]

A.W. Miller outlines how the non-judicial and judicial procedures of the church

work together to bring wayward youths to repentance. Miller's plan of restoration for a

wayward youth is worthy of an extended quote:

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[285] Ibid., 565-6.
[286] Turretin, 295.

If a youth prove refractory, and parental admonition have no effect, then let an elder of the Church be sent for, who, by faithful counsel and admonition, accompanied with prayer, shall endeavor to reclaim the offending youth. Should he be unsuccessful, let him take with him another elder, and let them conjointly use the proper means, and in a proper spirit, for the recovery of the erring youth. Should their efforts prove unavailing, let the pastor's counsels, admonitions, and prayers, be added to theirs. Then, if no suitable effect follow, let the offender be brought before the session, and there rebuked in love, and reminded of the ultimate consequence of impenitence—exclusion from the kingdom of God, on earth and in heaven—and his case be tenderly and solemnly commended to God in prayer. Let the censure so administered, be suited to the age, the character, the feelings, the understanding, the state of the youth; everything like unnecessary severity or harshness being carefuly [sic] avoided. . . . Let all their proceedings be marked with such solemnity, affectionate tenderness, as to show that they are acting under a deep sense of their responsibility to the Head of the Church. And let all that is done, whether by parent, pastor, or session, be done *in faith*, without which no service can find acceptance with God. Let such a course be faithfully pursued, and, in the great majority of instances, it will be crowned with success. The Church would have the blessed satisfaction of seeing the greater number of her wayward, offending, rebellious youth, recovered, by this judicious procedure.[287]

What if this approach has failed to restore the offending youth?

But, if . . . her oversight has proved in vain, and all the means used to lead them to comply with covenant-obligations have utterly failed, and these obligations are *deliberately, wantonly, willfully*, disowned; then is she called of Christ to disown them, and terminate their church-membership by excommunication. Let her not shrink from that duty, painful though it be, to which God himself has called her.[288]

Pastoral Issues for the Parents of Apostate Emerging Adults

Perhaps one of the most significant ways Reformed ministers can attend to the pastoral needs of the parents of wayward children is to attend to these children themselves. Accordingly, thus far the focus of this section of the literature review has been on judicial and non-judicial procedures toward these wayward children. But the parents of these prodigal children themselves have significant pastoral needs. Several emphases were present in the literature.

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[287] Miller, "The Relation of Baptized Children to the Discipline of the Church," 107-9.
[288] Ibid.

Guilt. Most authors who write to parents of wayward children address the subject

of guilt. Jeff Lucas writes, "Those who love prodigals, especially parents, often live in the

dock of endless accusation."[289] Parsons devotes a chapter to "Letting Go of False Guilt"

in which he focuses on the myth of perfect parenting, arguing that even if we could have

a second chance at parenting, "we would probably just make different mistakes."[290]

Social psychologist Jane Adams observes, "We are not the sole determinants of how our

children turn out, after all; it is grandiose and ultimately self-defeating to think that we

are." Guilt can be well-deserved, but more often is "out of proportion" to the parental

mistakes we have made. Adams further observes that "often, guilt, blame, and

responsibility are heaped on us by our kids, who know better than anyone how to push

our buttons, where we are most vulnerable, and how easy it is to manipulate us into

believing" their problems are our fault.[291] Gross, while conceding parents are "partially to

blame for the unbelief of their children," reminds readers that blame also rests on the

unbelieving individual.[292] Nevertheless, he maintains that "in some very real sense, the

blood of our children will be on our hands if we do not keep our part of God's covenant

with us."[293]

Randy Booth, a Reformed pastor in Nacogdoches, Texas, and author of the

chapter, "Picking up the Pieces" in *To You and Your Children*, emphasizes the

importance of self-evaluation. "Failure in various aspects of child-rearing is usually due

to ignorance, negligence, laziness, rebellion, or a combination of these." Booth advocates

that parents initiate reconciliation by confessing their sins to their children and taking

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[289] Lucas, 120.

[290] Parsons, 49.

[291] Adams, 57-58, 66.

[292] Edward N. Gross, *Will My Children Go to Heaven?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1995), 131.

[293] Ibid., 133.

responsibility.[294] C. J. Miller, a well-known Presbyterian pastor, professor, and author, writes that God used the rebellion of Miller's own daughter to expose and deliver him from sin in his own life.[295]

Envy. One emotion Adams identifies as a "dirty little secret" and a cause of self-blame is "envy and resentment of [the parents of] those kids who turned out just fine."[296] Lawrence, who was not only a pastor to parents of prodigal children, but a parent of two wayward children himself, writes that comparing the godly children of others with their own wayward children "aggravates sorrow."[297]

Fear. Lawrence identifies fear as another pastoral problem for parents of prodigals. Parents are afraid to hear tidings of their children's sinful exploits, of harm that may have come to them because of foolish choices, and ultimately of the judgment of God.[298] Several authors suggest this fear is seen in the difficulty parents have with watching their children face the consequences of their choices without intervening. Allison Bottke, whose own son struggled with drug addiction, emphasized parental fear as a cause for enabling the destructive behavior of our children.[299] Adams ties this fear to selfishness. She maintains that "parents who give too much do so out of their own needs, not their children's."[300] Lucas contrasts the fear that motivates parents to shield their children from consequences with love. Reminding that "love is something far more stern and splendid than kindness," he advocates that parents pray their children will feel the

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[294] Booth, 163-4; Gross, 133.
[295] Miller and Juliani, *Come Back, Barbara.*
[296] Adams, 10.
[297] Lawrence, 26.
[298] Ibid., 17-18; Lucas, 29.
[299] Allison Bottke, *Setting Boundaries with Your Adult Children: Six Steps to Hope and Healing for Struggling Parents* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2008), 45.
[300] Adams.

pain of consequences.[301] White writes that allowing children to face the consequences of their actions is the only approach that is consistent with their human dignity.[302]

Furthermore, shielding them from consequences can be morally culpable:

> Parents who cling to their erring children must realize that by paying debts and legal expenses beyond clearly set guidelines, or even by offering continued shelter, food and clothing, they can morally become a party to their delinquent behavior. Their actions make it possible for rebellious children to continue to live as they have in the past.[303]

He asserts that the decision to dismiss children from the home should be made on the basis of justice, not expediency. He suggests a number of questions that should be considered:

> Is it morally just to keep children at home when other family members suffer deprivation in one form or another because of them? Are they old enough to care for themselves, that is, to hunt for work and provide for themselves food and shelter? Are they of legal age? Have they had plenty of warning about what will happen if they continue in the same way? Have the warnings been merely angry threats or serious talks explaining why such a measure should be adopted? Has a deadline been set of which they are well aware? Has the matter of visiting rights been well thought out? How often may they come home for meals? Should they ever stay the night? Or should we avoid the thin edge of the wedge until and unless the sow has completely abandoned the mire?[304]

Marital stress. Parents whose children have rejected their faith are also likely to encounter greater marital stress.[305] Spouses can be tempted to blame one another for their contribution to the child's delinquency, and

> crises . . . involving adult children impose a particular burden because they often occur at a time when our marriages are coming under renewed scrutiny, part and parcel of the reconsolidation of identity that takes place in the second half of adulthood.[306]

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[301] Lucas, 40-41.

[302] Cf. Adams. Writing of chemically dependent children Adams says that instead of rushing in and taking over, which "infantilizes them. . . . the best thing we can do for them—if we have the courage—is nothing. . .at least, not right away," 123.

[303] White, *Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children*, 204.

[304] Ibid., 205.

[305] Adams, 165-168; Bottke, 31, 43, 64, 67.

[306] Adams, 166.

White emphasizes that a united front among spouses is essential—not merely for the couple, but also for the wayward child. "The welfare of children rests more on parental unity than on any child-rearing expertise the parents may have. Parents can get away with many mistakes if their children see them as a solid, loving alliance."[307] But this can be more difficult when there is the stress of prodigal children. Lawrence writes of the emotional pain of a wicked child curtailing the ability of spouses to be of mutual comfort:

> The good parents cannot be so comfortable and delightful to one another as they would be when both are in bitterness for their wicked children. The husband cannot be such a comfort to his wife when he is almost in continual anger and sorrow for his wicked child, nor the wife such a delight to her husband when her heart is bleeding for her ungodly child.[308]

There may also be differences in "rules and policies": "Children quickly pick up the difference and play one parent against another."[309]

Altered home life. Furthermore, Lawrence observes how even one ungodly child among a family of several godly children can dominate the ethos of the home.[310] White warns that if parents do not deal with the sin of prodigal children judiciously, it could provoke bitterness among the non-problem children.[311] The way the misbehavior of one child can dominate home ethos is particularly evident during holidays or family celebrations such as weddings and birthdays.[312] Parents may wonder whether to invite their wayward children home. If they do, will they negatively influence the other children? Will their presence dominate? This may further be complicated if their child

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[307] cf. Bottke, 67; White, *Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children*, 106.

[308] Lawrence, 23.

[309] White, *Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children*, 116.

[310] Lawrence, 24.

[311] White, *Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children*, 204.

[312] Lucas, 32-33.

has been the subject of judicial process of the church, and is in a stage of discipline where fraternal socialization is being prohibited.

Hopelessness. A major theme in literature addressed to the parents of prodigal children is hopelessness. Considering the sometimes crushing guilt some parents feel, once they have repented, parents "must not grovel in hopelessness. . . . Christ dies for the hopeless. There are no lost causes with an all-powerful God!"[313] Bisset, observing that many who do leave will eventually return, encourages parents to "anticipate the 'returning curve' and work with it." He mentions completion of college, marriage, childbearing, and when their own children experiment with teenage rebellion, as open doors for spiritual renewal in the lives of leavers.[314] In a chapter titled "Reasons for Hope," Lucas encourages parents of prodigals that God is still engaged in the lives of our children, pursuing them—wherever they are, and however much they run from Him.[315] Because of God's faithfulness, Booth observes that

> As long as there is breath, it is never too late for grace to conquer even in the worst of situations. As long as there is life, it is never too late for the prodigals to come home.
> Often, these trials with our children turn out to be bad chapters in otherwise good books.[316]

Thus, parents of prodigals and the church communities of which they are a part should pray toward and *expect* the repentance and restoration of wayward covenant children. When these children return and their repentance has been demonstrated, they should not be received tentatively, but with great celebration.[317]

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[313] Gross, 133.
[314] Bisset, 150-151.
[315] Lucas, 89-102.
[316] Booth, 171.
[317] Lucas, 151-169; White and Blue, *Church Discipline That Heals*, 151-3.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This chapter addressed the problem of religious drift among emerging adults, biblical principles on how parents influence the spiritual formation and malformation of their children, and policies and procedures the church has adopted toward children who were raised in evangelical homes and subsequently departed.

Much has been written on the sociology of affiliation and disaffiliation in young and emerging adulthood, on the parental role and responsibility of religious socialization of children, and on parenting wayward children. However, little study has been done on the unique personal challenges faced by Reformed parents of apostate emerging adults, and how they are to act redemptively toward their children. Therefore the next focus of this study will be to examine how Reformed pastors minister to the parents of apostate emerging adults.

CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore how Reformed pastors minister to parents of emerging adults who are drifting away or apostatizing from the church. A growing percentage of emerging adults are becoming less religious today, compared with the Generation X and Baby Boomer generations.[318] Given this trend, Reformed pastors may more frequently experience emerging adults within their congregations distancing themselves from the faith and values of their parents and their home church. When children leave the faith of their parents, it creates a complex challenge for pastors as they shepherd the grieving parents and their congregation, while seeking to instruct all to act redemptively toward the wayward child. A qualitative study was thus proposed in order to explore how Reformed pastors minister to the parents of apostate emerging adults.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, identifies five characteristics of qualitative research. First, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning others have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world." Second, data collection occurs primarily through the researcher, rather than through questionnaires and statistical analysis. Third, because data collection is conducted primarily by the researcher, the study "usually involves fieldwork" that enables the researcher to observe and gather data closely. Fourth, rather than "testing

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[318] Pond, 1.

existing theory," qualitative research uses "an inductive research strategy" that "builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses and theories"; and finally, qualitative research is "richly descriptive," using "words and pictures rather than numbers to convey what the researcher has learned."[319] The inductive and field-intensive nature of qualitative research fits the purposes of this study because it provides a "richly descriptive" window into how other Reformed pastors have ministered to the parents of apostate emerging adults. It also allowed the researcher, by interviewing seasoned Reformed pastors, to learn from their experiences and perspectives, and thus achieve the research objectives more readily.

INTERVIEW DESIGN

For the purposes of this study, the researcher sought interviews with Reformed and evangelical pastors who would be identified as conservative Protestants. Traveling to their cities, to the places where they minister, enabled the researcher to conduct the interviews in their dining rooms, church offices, and in one case, a coffee shop. So that the study would reflect the perspectives of pastors who were most likely to have the broadest experience ministering to parents of wayward children, age and number of years in ordained ministry were factors in subject selection. Interviews were relaxed and personal, and a semi-structured format was adopted.

In each interview, subjects were asked about how they ministered to the parents of apostate or wayward emerging adults. The interview questions were structured around three major research areas. First, they were shaped to uncover what the ministers perceived were the specific challenges they faced while ministering in these situations.

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[319] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, Second ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 6-8.

Second, considering the intensity and breadth of emotion many parents report,[320] the questions prompted pastors to describe how they minister to the emotional lives of parents whose children have fallen away. Lastly, the pastors were asked to describe how they guide these parents in their attempts to act redemptively toward their wayward children—how they help attempt to restore them to the church. An interview guide was employed, and is available in Appendix A.

The study was composed of interviews of the pastors of nine Reformed congregations. All nine interviews were conducted by the researcher in the cities where the churches were located, or in the cities where the pastors resided.

PARTICIPANT SAMPLE SELECTION

This research required participants who were able to communicate in depth about how Reformed pastors minister to parents of apostate or wayward emerging adults. Therefore, the purposeful study sample[321] consisted of pastors from Reformed and evangelical denominations which would be identified as "conservative Protestant" by many researchers. Because many sociologists make a distinction between "conservative protestant" or "evangelical," and "mainline" Christians,[322] and there are those who would self-identify as "Reformed" in both groups, interviews with ministers in mainline Presbyterian churches were not sought. Because the research was addressing a specific ministerial situation involving emerging adults, the age of the minister was a factor. It seemed more likely that older pastors would have encountered emerging adults who had drifted away from the church, and of special interest was the perspective of those pastors whose own children either were in, or had passed through, the emerging adult years.

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[320] Miller and Juliani, *Come Back, Barbara*, 27-30, 38.
[321] Merriam, 61.
[322] E.g.Pond; Also Smith, *Souls in Transition.*

Therefore, interview subjects who were at least fifty years old were sought. Furthermore, since not all pastors enter the ministry as their first careers, and since pastors with more experience in the ministry might be more likely to have encountered waywardness among emerging adults, subjects were sought who had been ordained ministers for at least fifteen years. One potential participant was screened out after an initial phone interview because, while he had been a minister for decades, he had only recently been ministering in a Reformed denomination. Other potential participants were screened out because of distance. Though Skype interviews were possible, the researcher reasoned that the best data would be collected from live, on-site interviews. Finally, though no sample criteria were set for it, it was of interest to the researcher to discover how many generations of Christians had preceded each subject in his family line. This was of interest because maintaining covenant faithfulness along multiple generations, and what factors contribute to and militate against this, was a significant part of the study. Perhaps a connection would be discovered between ministers who came from a long line of Christians and their own children's faithfulness.

Participants were purposefully chosen to provide variation in denomination. They also varied in the size of congregations where they ministered. The final study was conducted through personal interviews with nine pastors, located in four states of the Northwestern United States. Three were ministers in the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC); three were members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC); two were members of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA); and one was a minister of an independent Reformed Church, which had formerly been of the denomination known as the Protestant Reformed Church (PRC). Ministers were sought

from a range of Reformed denominations in order to allow for breadth in responses.

Subjects were identified through networking with other pastors and denominational

online directories, and were invited to participate via phone and/or email. All expressed

interest and gave written, informed consent to participate.

Each participant completed a one-page, demographic questionnaire before the

interview. The questionnaire asked for information concerning the selection criteria

above. It also requested information of particular interest in this study. Because the

subjects all resided in the Northwest, where there is a relatively low concentration of

Reformed churches, there was concern about maintaining the anonymity of the subjects.

If even a relatively small amount of personal data of each subject were presented with the

identity of their denomination, subjects could very well be identified. Therefore, in order

to help protect anonymity, subject data is presented below in the aggregate. To further

protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were assigned to each: "Jim, "Jonathan,"

and "Robert" are all CREC pastors; "Peter," "Sam," and "Seth" serve in the OPC; "Eric"

and "Frank" belong to the PCA; and "Andrew" is an independent Reformed pastor.

Subjects, with one exception (who was thirty-six at the time of the interview), met

the age selection criterion. Average age of the sample was just under fifty-nine years old.

Moreover, subjects demonstrated substantial longevity in the ministry, one respondent

having been ordained fifty-four years previously. The average number of years in

ordained ministry was just over thirty years, and the lowest was nine years. The latter was

an aberration, as the participant with the next lowest years of ordained ministry had

served twenty-five years. The ministers selected also demonstrated longevity within their

current pastorates, the subjects having served in their current congregations for an

average 18.33 years. The subjects ministered to congregations of various sizes, ranging from seventeen households (about eighty in attendance at Sunday morning worship) to one hundred sixty-eight households (about six hundred fifty in attendance at Sunday morning worship).

Four of the ministers were raised in homes that believed and taught covenantal theology. Two came from Baptist and dispensational homes, and three from neither. This seemed significant because research shows a correlation between one's theology and parental practices. For instance, Neumann reports that families holding to covenantal versus dispensational theology place a heavier emphasis on the training of children and hold family worship with greater frequency.[323] In this study, three of the four subjects who were raised in homes that embraced covenantal theology could not specify what generation of Christian they were because the line extended past their memories and familial records. One respondent noted that he was shown records by his father, indicating that his family had been Christians as far back as seventeenth-century Holland, where their records ceased. Those who indicated that they were raised in either dispensational or "other" homes reported fewer generations of Christians in their family line. Two participants were first generation Christians.

Though education was not a sample selection criterion, it was of interest to this study. Was there perhaps a correlation between the level and type of education the participant had received, and his approach to this ministry challenge? The participants indicated that as far as education and ministerial training, all but one of the nine participants had completed their undergraduate degrees. The one exception had been personally educated and trained for ministry by his father—who had also been a minister.

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[323] Neumann.

Six of the nine ministers had been to formal ministerial training in seminary. Six had graduate degrees, and two, postgraduate.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to explore participant's responses to complex issues.[324] Employing an interview guide at each interview, the interviewer, however, also tailored the precise questions, order of questions, and the extent and nature of follow-up questions to each specific interview. Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to reveal common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[325]

Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.[326]

Nine pastors were interviewed for ninety minutes each. In order to accommodate participant schedules, and to facilitate a relaxed and confidential atmosphere, the researcher met with subjects in their studies or in their homes. One interview occurred in a coffee shop. Each subject was informed of the purpose of the research, signed a consent form, answered initial demographic questions, and then proceeded to the semi-structured portion of the interview. Interviews were somewhat informal and unhurried, structured around the three areas of research interest previously stated. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. While the interview was underway, the interviewer took field

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[324] Merriam, 74.
[325] Ibid., 11, 178ff.
[326] Ibid.

notes. Once completed, the interviews were transcribed. Two of the interviews were personally transcribed by the interviewer, and seven were sent out for transcription. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed and coded using the constant comparative method. All interviews occurred within the three week period between August 22, 2010, and September 13, 2010.

ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

As soon as possible and always within one week of each meeting, computer software was used to play back the digital recordings of the interviews so that they could be transcribed. The software allowed the transcriber to slow the playback of the interview in order to achieve greater accuracy in transcription. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.[327] When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were printed out, coded and analyzed. Using the constant comparative method, the researcher identified themes under each research question, and then correlated, contrasted, and cross-referenced the data within each interview, between the various participants and the Reformed denominations they represent.

RESEARCHER STANCE

The researcher is a pastor who views apostasy as undesirable, and who has ministered to the parents of emerging adults who have apostatized. At times, such ministry was the cause of great emotional and psychological distress both for the

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[327] Ibid., 159.

researcher and for the parents in question. For the researcher, these situations also at times caused significant periods of perplexity. They therefore serve as an impetus to study and research the questions posed in this study. The researcher is biased against pastoral approaches that are largely passive. Desiring to avert pain in both parents and their children, and to see covenantal continuity between generations, the researcher is biased in favor of proactive pastoral solutions. A theological bias is also present. As one initially trained in the dispensational theological position, and who has moved to a Reformed theological understanding of children in the covenant, the researcher is sensitive to unstated dispensational assumptions, and is biased against them. He is also the father of eight children, and deeply desires them and their posterity to continue as Christians and not to apostatize. This desire has also motivated this study. Finally, the researcher serves as a minister in the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC). Three of the study's nine participants are of this denomination.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As stated in the previous section, with one exception,[328] pastors interviewed for this study were serving in the CREC, OPC, and PCA denominations. Because none of these denominations ordain women, all research participants were male. This research does not examine how female pastors minister to the parents of apostate emerging adults. Though it seems plausible that many pastoral approaches would be similar between male and female ministers, male and female pastors might very likely emphasize different approaches.

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[328] A minister in an independent Reformed church, which had formerly been part of the Protestant Reformed denomination.

Another limitation was geographic. Participants all lived within a 550-mile radius of

Spokane, Washington, where the researcher resides. Four states in the Northwest are thus

represented: Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. Ministers served in a variety of

settings, from rural ranching communities, to university towns, to major metropolitan

cities. Because the Northwest has a lower density of Reformed churches in the respective

denominations compared to other regions of the nation (most notably the Southern and

Eastern portions of the United States), this limitation may have decreased the sample size

from which I could draw participants. Also, because the participants resided in the

Northwest, their approaches may have been biased against some of the theological

assumptions of "Southern Presbyterianism"[329] that predominate in the South. Had

research been conducted in the South, different findings may have eventuated. Readers

who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions for their

pastoral settings should test those aspects in their particular contexts. As with all

qualitative studies, the readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be

appropriately applied to their contexts.

SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the qualitative research approach used to study how

Reformed pastors minister to the parents of apostate emerging adults. After purposeful

participant-selection criteria were designed, participants were selected. Some were

selected through the means of a network of other pastors. Others were selected through

denominational Internet directories. The participants were then contacted, screened, and

interviewed using a semi-structured interview method. Interviews were recorded and then

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[329] As articulated by theologians such as James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney.

transcribed. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative

method. Themes, patterns, and areas of agreement and contrast were noted. Categories

were identified under each research question.

The next chapter is devoted to the subject of how Reformed pastors minister to

the parents of apostate emerging adults, and is structured around the three research

questions posed in chapter one.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which Reformed pastors minister to the parents of apostate emerging adults. This study included interviews with Reformed pastors from three different Reformed denominations: the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). One participant ministered in an independent Reformed church. Reasoning that pastors who had been ministering for many years were more likely to have encountered this ministry situation, the researcher sought out nine participants who had long tenure in ministry. To maintain anonymity, each participant has been assigned a pseudonym. Jonathan, Robert, and Jim represent the CREC; Seth, Peter, and Sam represent the OPC; Frank and Eric represent the PCA; and Andrew is Pastor of an independent Reformed church. The average number of the participants' years in ordained ministry was just over thirty. The interviews with these ministers sought to answer the following three research questions:

1. What challenges do Reformed pastors face in ministering to parents with apostate emerging adult children?

2. How do Reformed pastors address the emotional life of the parents of apostate emerging adult children?

3. In what ways do Reformed pastors help parents to act redemptively toward their apostate emerging adult children?

The first research question dealt with the specific challenges Reformed pastors face in ministering to the parents of apostate emerging adults.

COMMON THEMES REGARDING SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

As the pastors were interviewed, several themes emerged regarding the challenge of ministering to parents whose children fall away.

Ecclesiastical Challenges

The pastors reported challenges associated with the broader ecclesiastical landscape, challenges presented by their respective denominations, and challenges pertaining to their own local congregations.

Participants reported difficulty arising from the ecclesiastical landscape. In the United States, there is great diversity among churches on a number of topics. Particularly relevant to these pastors was diversity of conviction regarding issues of church government, such as church membership, baptism, and church discipline, and how this diversity affected their policies and procedures pertaining to wayward emerging adults. Seth expressed the difficulty of shepherding people who came to his OPC church from different theological traditions. He told of one young man whose family came to his church from a Baptist church. This young man, who had not been baptized, had run away from home and begun to live in dissolution. He rebuffed attempts from parents and pastor to call him to repentance. Seth recounts,

> We could not exercise church discipline over him. We couldn't officially do this because he was never baptized, and never received even as a non-communicant member of the church. So the ministry we performed to him was almost like an outsider, which was really hard. . . We had no traction.

Robert reported a lack of unity among the churches in his small, rural community, on the practice and propriety of church discipline. When his church excommunicated one young woman for unrepentant fornication, "Other churches came in and tried to nurture her along. We had to cut herd on them, so we looked like big bad guys who condemn and

so forth." Robert felt the need to "cut herd" on other churches in town because the young

woman's ability to be absorbed immediately into another church community after being

excommunicated from Robert's congregation depreciated the effectiveness of church

discipline. Peter also has decried the "trivialization of everything ecclesiastical" as "not

only the disease of the culture; it is the disease of the church." As a result of this

trivialization, the modern church "doesn't carry a big club," at least not humanly

speaking. Peter, clearly frustrated with the apparently diminished power of ecclesiastical

sanctions, speculated:

> I have jokingly said in the past, if we've got a guy in the church [who is
> mistreating his wife], we'll just send a few elders over and rough the guy up and
> say, "This isn't the way you treat women, dorko." Smack him around. . . [laughs].
> Again, that's a kind of fun clowning. But would it be effective? I bet you'd see
> some changes.

He then concedes the changes would not be redemptive. So according to Peter, discipline

is "a faith enterprise through and through" because it "operates in an invisible arena,

where the sovereignty of God may or may not employ your efforts to actually bring

people back." Both pastors were frustrated that church authority is not respected in our

modern culture.

Pastors also reported challenges from within their denominations. These

challenges took two forms: unclear standard operating procedures regarding dealing with

the spiritual care of wayward young people and the lack of support of the local church's

discipline by the broader body.

Though no CREC respondents reported unclear direction from the denomination

(which is understandable, considering the CREC leaves the matter of discipline almost

entirely up to the local congregation), pastors in both the PCA and OPC reported that

when disciplining a baptized non-communicant, church standards were interpreted differently by various churches. Peter said, "I don't think [church policies and procedures] are all going to be cut from the same mold. . . . On paper, things might get mapped out in a certain way, but I think in actual practice there are going to be some significant variants," particularly whether erasure or excommunication in a certain instance is more appropriate. Eric, a PCA minister, reports similar latitude in the interpretation of the Book of Church Order. "There are congregations who very definitely would discipline even non-communicant church members who were thirteen and fourteen years of age. And then I would say the lion's share of PCA churches would never do that." Eric continues, with significant irony in his voice:

> And they wouldn't do it, not because they had a carefully reasoned argument, it's because the whole "blessing and benefit" of our two-tiered system. When the kids go bad, you don't have to do anything about it. You just never bring them into the membership of the church, the true membership of the church by profession, which they're not clamoring for anyway. So, in a sense it's a family problem and it's not a church problem. The fact that they're baptized honestly doesn't mean much of anything.

The second difficulty denominations presented to ministering to the parents of apostate emerging adults is how respective denominations occasionally nullified the decisions taken by the local church. Jonathan, a CREC minister, reports of his previous experience within a Reformed denomination known as the Christian Reformed Church, "The consistory would work and work and work and work, and [classis] would say, 'Ah, well, don't be so tough. Give them a little bit more time' and so it nullified the work of consistory. And it affected discipline." Pastors were frustrated when their denomination either gave unclear instructions, or worked against their decisions because of philosophical differences.

Pastors also reported challenges they faced within their own congregations. One challenge mentioned was getting the congregation to embrace their role in discipline, instead of regarding it as an elders' and deacons' responsibility. Jonathan emphasizes:

> It's necessary to have a congregation involved in the whole process, right? Because, in a certain sense, Matthew 18 talks about the church doing something, right? And the church is not exclusively made up of elders and deacons. We are not the church. The church is the body. So finally excommunication is an action by the body.

In response to my follow-up question of how he involves his congregation so they look at discipline as something the body does—not merely elders and deacons, Jonathan replies, "I don't think we have properly addressed that as a church. . . . In my estimation (it) should be there, and is not necessarily there."

"Dodging, Drifting and Keeping His Distance": The Challenge of Non-cooperation

All three of both the OPC and CREC respondents, and one of the PCA respondents, mentioned non-cooperation as a challenge in ministering to the parents of apostate emerging adults. Uncooperativeness was reported to have come from two sources: the wayward emerging adults and their parents.

Respondents indicated that simply tracking down, meeting with, and communicating with wayward emerging adults is difficult. For instance, Seth invested significant time with a young man, who later left a message on Seth's answering machine. The young man's message said he was leaving the church to become a Roman Catholic. Peter, who disciplined an extended family member for deserting her spouse, tells of the efforts his session made to call this wife to repentance:

> Well, she just. . . she said, "Look, I'm not talking to you guys anymore. I'm gone. I'm done with it. Discussion's over." So we just had to carry on in her absence. She just threw off the yoke of the word of God . . . She threw off the yoke of the session's authority and basically cut us off.

In another pastoral situation, Peter describes a young man who was on the books as a baptized member, but rarely attended church. He was drifting spiritually and spending most of his time alone with his girlfriend. "So I decided, well, I want to get together with him, and just say 'Look, where're you at?' And I made several attempts to get together with him. He always wound up dodging me. . . . He'd always kind of kept his distance." Seth and Sam report similar situations. Emerging adults who begin to act in a wayward fashion become much harder to contact.

Lack of cooperation takes other forms besides avoidance. Often it involves rationalization of sin. In one situation, Jonathan describes an emerging adult who went to great lengths to justify his sin, although he grew up in the church and knew better. The young man had left the church and was living with a young woman. Although he was always willing to meet with Pastor Jonathan, he would spend their time rationalizing his behavior. Jonathan said regarding the young man's rationalizations, "He's just full of B.S., okay?"

Other emerging adults detect and exploit a lack of unity in the parents. Robert tells of the daughter of an officer in his church:

> The parents' attitude was "We don't want to lose our child." That was somewhat the problem. They didn't want to come down real hard on her, particularly the mother. She didn't want to lose the relationship. The father was caught between. He wanted to come down a little stronger. The mom didn't. . . . They [the child] played the parents. If they saw some divided authority, they played that.

Because the child was exploiting a division in her parents, it made it more difficult for the parents, pastor, and church to act in unison. When they did not act in unison, they each were especially vulnerable to manipulation.

The lack of unity just described brings up the second source of non-cooperation, which is the parents themselves. Jonathan asserted that when the family of the apostate young person cannot work with the church, the "prospect of success is pretty dim." Although certain brothers in Jonathan's congregation were on an unhealthy trajectory, their father told Jonathan to leave his boys alone. This unwillingness or inability to work with the church can take a number of forms. Pastors report that some parents, in fear of losing their children, would coddle and indulge them. Frank tells that in his experience some parents effectively say, "I want my child back so badly, when they are fornicating with someone, and living on their own, I'll help out financially. Get them a cell phone. Keep them on the medical." Robert's experience corroborates Frank's: "Bridgette was like the prodigal child who, when she ran out of money, texted home and said, 'I need more.'" [Would she get it?] "She would get it. Yeah, she continued to be made happy in her rebellion. It was very frustrating." Seth tells of a parent, not a member of the church, covering for a wayward child who was a church member, who was trying to avoid accountability from the elders. This parent would say, "Oh, he's sleeping. Or he's this or that or the other thing."

Another type of parental noncooperation which is less deliberately defiant and seemingly unintentional is acquiescence. When asked what practice of parents of apostate emerging adults he would most like to correct, Jim replied:

> I would most want to correct acquiescence. . . . Families go through crises . . . and once the kid's left the faith or become a Unitarian or moved in with his girlfriend, you know, once the crises is over, the family tends to adjust to the new normal. . . . And so I would say, if you've got a wayward sheep, you want to be a good shepherd: you leave the ninety-nine and you do what it takes to get the one. So you want to make sure when you adjust to the new normal, that your adjustment budgets time, energy—for seeking to retrieve that kid.

[Parents or pastors?]

Both, primarily parents.

Jim's point was that when parents give up hope of their child repenting, they are less likely to act redemptively.

"I Have No Formula": The Challenge of Complexity

Eight of the nine pastors mentioned the very complexity of pastoring the parents of emerging adults as itself a challenge. Their responses to my questions were riddled with the language of complexity. For example:

> Seth: "This was a difficult decision," "It's a wisdom call," "...too many issues," "...no common practice..."

> Peter: "...a wisdom question on a number of levels," "We are pastors of people that are personally complex, and situations are complex, and I think there are nuances involved."

> Frank: "...Wisdom call...," "I don't have all [the answers]," "...a lot of dynamics."

> Eric: "Life is so complicated," "It depends," "Don't know about that and can't figure out why," "...created another dimension, another layer of complexity..."

> Robert: "That's a pastoral call."

> Jonathan: "I have no formula," "I don't know how. . . but that is their duty," "We don't have a code; We have to struggle with each case individually."

> Sam: "Every case is so different," "There is no one solution for every problem, and there are degrees," "[Pastors] can't prepare. You can't begin to prepare."

> Jim: "...not trivial questions. . . not trivial challenges."[330]

Pastors mentioned a number of factors that added further complexity and difficulty to pastoring these parents and their wayward children. Peter and Eric mentioned health issues such as mental illness and depression in those who were

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[330]Pastor Andrew, formerly of the Protestant Reformed Church, but now independent, was the only participant not to allude significantly to complexity in his answers.

wayward. Pastors need to make allowances in their care for these issues. Several pastors mentioned the complexity of applying their denomination's book of discipline. Both Frank and Jonathan mentioned the complexity of pastoring emerging adults who lived hundreds of miles away, attending college, for instance. Pastors Jonathan and Jim both mentioned the complexity of ministering to the parents of adopted children. In their experience, there is a higher rate of apostasy among adoptive kids. Jim reports, "The ratios that I've seen for adoptive parents are much worse than for natural children, and not because the parents aren't good parents. . . . It's like buying a business that's one hundred fifty thousand dollars in the hole, and that's not your problem—till you buy it."

Discerning the true spiritual state of the wayward child is also extremely difficult for pastors and parents. How serious is this child's spiritual state? Sometimes it is hard to tell. Speaking of two sisters who were spiritually "wobbly," Robert says, "I regret that we had tell-tale signs. But we were always hoping for the best for them, and it was kind of a glaze-over." While in this case Robert regrets not acting more decisively, Jim emphasizes that when children hit "the rapids," parents should not panic and overreact. According to Jim, overreaction sometimes creates prodigals, where before the child was merely a struggling Christian. In his words, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, under-reacting, as in the case Robert mentions above, also has potentially adverse consequences. Judging appropriate levels of intervention is clearly complex, and parents and pastors must consider a host of factors.

While it is difficult to judge the spiritual state of the wayward child and what level of intervention is appropriate, it is also challenging to determine when excommunicants are truly repentant and ready to be restored. Robert reports one instance

when a young woman repented and wrote a letter of repentance to the congregation. The elders eagerly restored her. Not long after her restoration, she turned back to her sin and required church discipline again.

Theological Challenges

Theology drives practice; therefore, it was not surprising that one significant challenge participants mentioned involved theology. All nine pastors mentioned some form of theological challenge they faced while ministering to parents whose children were wayward or apostate.

The interviewed pastors largely mirrored the theological spectrum present in the literature regarding the central tenets of covenant succession. Seth emphasized the importance of pastors coming to a settled conclusion on the matter.

> That's a theological question first of all that our pastors need to deal with before they get into that particular situation [where parents are asking, "Isn't God faithful to His promises?" And you quickly realize that the Reformed have never . . . they have a terrible time agreeing about how to answer that. You have everything from presumptive regeneration to Baptists, essentially, right? . . . You've got a variety of answers to that question.

Out of the nine pastors I interviewed, four embraced covenant succession, four did not, and one pastor was somewhere in the middle. Of the four pastors who did not embrace covenant succession, two were OPC, one PCA, and one independent. Three of the four had themselves had adult children who were wayward (professing faith but not partaking of communion, either by virtue of discipline, or on their own determination), with two of these three currently engaged in the challenge of calling their adult children to faithfulness to their Lord. Of the four pastors who embraced covenant succession (two CREC, one OPC, one PCA), none of them did so without qualification. All of the pastors who embraced covenant succession had all their children communing, with the exception

of Seth, whose children were too young, in his estimation, to partake of the Lord's

Supper. Jonathan's (CREC) position seemed a middle-ground between the two. When

queried about covenant succession, he emphasized mystery and said he did not know if

he agreed. There seemed to be some differences in the counsel given to parents by

ministers who either embraced or did not embrace covenant succession.

Several pastors mentioned the relationship between baptism on the one hand and

membership, profession of faith, and discipline on the other. Andrew remarked:

> I think the demarcation that the Reformed heritage has between confessing
> members and baptized members . . . is a false disjunction. . . . A person, according
> to God's covenant, is a member of that church according to his baptism. So you
> take that child, you discipline that child, you make sure to say to that child, you
> know when we erase you, that's exactly the same as excommunication. . . There's
> no difference there. Absolutely none.

Eric calls the distinction between confessing members and baptized members the

"two-tiered system" and says that it essentially creates a loophole that allows churches to

be passive "when kids go bad." He says this "two-tiered system" reflects a "standard

Southern Presbyterian" position. CREC pastors, who typically minister in churches that

practice paedocommunion, only mentioned this distinction in the context of ministering

to people who transfer in from other churches as baptized non-communicants.

When asked what misconceptions of covenantal theology they typically have to

address in parents whose children fall away, three of the four pastors who teach covenant

succession (and one who did not) replied they had to address the misconception that the

parent is responsible for saving his children through faithful parenting. In other words,

Eric explains, parents believe that "salvation rests not on the grace of God and the

promises of God." Jim identifies this approach as not grounded on faith, but on

sentiment. In his experience:

> Parents who have made this mistake oscillate between two errors. One is . . . to believe that covenant succession and faithfulness over generations is just sort of automatic. You know, we can just put it on cruise control and drive across Wyoming. . . . This is just easy, man. And then when . . . serious problems start to develop, it's easy to flip over to the opposite of covenant presumption, which would be covenant faithfulness over generations by works, parental works. So, "Oh no! We've got to pull them out of public school. We've got to homeschool. We've got to put them in the Christian school. And we've got to have family night. We'd better have family worship." You know. "We've gotta, we've gotta, we've gotta..."

Another confusion pastors who teach covenant succession seem to encounter in dealing with parents is that they sometimes think God promises their children an easy ride. Eric described this error:

> The notion that God would be a God to our children after us means that they should have a largely unfettered, untrammeled, untried passage through the Christian life. Whereas a convert may have a lot of baggage to deal with and so on, the covenant child's Christian life is going to be different than the description of the Christian life we are given in the Bible—a life that's marked by crises, a life that is set upon by the devil, a life in which there are steps taken backward as well as forwards, and so on. . .

Two of the OPC pastors (Seth and Peter) mentioned the theological difficulty of ministering in a country where Baptist assumptions prevail. It made pastoring difficult, and messier than it would be otherwise. A third pastor, Eric (PCA), alluded to this problem in saying that Southern Presbyterianism, which is a huge influence in his denomination, functions somewhat on fundamentally Baptist presuppositions.

Of the four pastors who embraced covenant succession, two also mentioned the challenge certain passages presented to the doctrine of covenant succession. For instance, in Isaiah 1:2, God complains, "Children have I raised up, but they have departed from me. . ." In response to this text, Eric responded that he believed "biblical teaching is virtually universally dialectical. So reconciling passages is something I don't do much

of." The other pastor sought to reconcile the apparent problem theologically by appealing to the incommunicable versus communicable attributes of God.

Overall, it seemed that a number of theological challenges presented themselves to the pastors interviewed. The theological challenges included covenant succession, the propriety of bringing small children to the Lord's Supper, the "two-tiered system" of baptized non-communicants, the idea that the doctrine of covenant succession means our children will not enter the kingdom through hardship and struggle, and Baptist assumptions that prevail in the broader culture and even in Reformed congregations.

"Touchy Parents": The Challenge of Parental Defensiveness

The pastors reported another challenge of ministering to the parents of apostate emerging adults: the defensiveness of parents themselves. Andrew reports, "And that's the most difficult thing . . . . It's when you touch the children [of] your parishioners, their little Johnnies and their little Suzies can do no wrong." Some of the parents embraced their children's grudges against the church. In Robert's congregation, heads of households were encouraged to write a letter to a wayward young woman explaining why they were or were not attending her wedding, in which she was to marry the unbeliever who had impregnated her. Robert reports this strategy became the cause of offense among the parents. "The [young woman's] parents took up that grudge: *You just said that about my daughter?* Well, they should have said, 'You don't know the half of it.' . . . Never protect your sin. Show it. You'll get further along." Robert says the excommunication of this young woman put a "rift" between his family and theirs. The two families had once been very close. He describes the relationship as "conflict without

words." Seth reports that some hurting parents have become indignant with him when he has confronted them about their anger toward their child for the child's betrayal.

In addition to parental defensiveness, a few pastors reported an obtuseness and unwillingness to be taught in some of the parents to whom they ministered. Jonathan tells of one situation:

> Dad was such a colossal failure. He knew the solution to every problem in the world, except his own. All the problems in Washington DC, the United Nations, the local police force, everybody! *Except his own.* His daughter ran away from home. So somebody says, "I know where she is." He stands there, and says, "Oh, forget it." So I am the one that finds his daughter. He doesn't care. He got up in the morning, and there is a noise in the house. Five o'clock in the morning. He gets up and opens the door to his daughter's room. And there is a boy, climbing out the window. He shuts the door and goes back to bed.

Jim describes obtuseness in a completely different type of parent. It is particularly difficult to speak to these parents about their children before an imminent crisis, because what pastors recognize as a problem, they view as a virtue.

> Everybody's scrubbed and clean and sitting in a row at church. But I remember one family where none of the kids had fallen away from the faith completely yet, but two of them were wobbly on the edge, but I remember saying to [my wife] fifteen years ago, saying to my wife about this family who looked scrubbed and cleaned and hair ordered and hair combed and everything, I told her that family's going to blow. And that family blew. The reason it was so difficult for me to get at, because all the things I would have to point to were things that family would consider virtuous. And that's why we have to "repent of our virtues."

> [Why were you reluctant to address the sin issues earlier? Were you afraid of being met with self-righteous anger? Or hostility?]

> Or befuddlement. And so what I want to do is, let's say I see my pastoral vibe-o-meter is buzzing and arcing and sparking about a situation, and I do not yet have handles to speak into that family particularly, at some point I almost always will have handles, and I'll have handles with one kid and then I can bring up the others.

Another challenge presented by parents is that sometimes they simply disagree with one another about how to handle the crisis presented by the apostasy of their

children. Robert reported struggling with a family where the mother adopted a more

lenient approach to her daughters, while the father preferred a firmer approach. Because

there was disunity, the daughters played the mother against the father. Eric mentioned

that, at times, this lack of unity is evident before the crisis occurs—that the child's

unfaithfulness can be more attributable to one parent than the other, and this makes for an

awkward and difficult pastoral discussion. To avoid this division in parenting philosophy,

Andrew emphasized that Christians should not only exclusively marry other Christians,

but also seek to marry someone who is of the same Christian tradition, so there is

theological and methodological unity.

The Challenge of Personal Pastoral Pain

Another challenge reported by the study participants was the personal cost pastors

paid in shepherding people through such difficult circumstances. Jonathan suggested one

example of this: the demonization of the leadership when church discipline reaches the

public stages. He speaks of elder decisions being second-guessed—of being

misunderstood.

> Often I find in the history of the church that where somebody is finally excommunicated you have a bunch of people taking sides. And so often, it's "these stupid elders are the bad guys." And they are the ones that can't make privy all of the things that are going on. So people are on the side of this poor sinner. And he's been dumped on and mistreated and so and so and so and so. And that is tragic. So it is hard for elders to know, how much to say and how much not to say. What people don't realize is the things you don't say are to protect the sinner. And they take advantage of it.

Sam reports one person under discipline calling him every day to swear at him.

When asked what it is like when parents turn on the pastor after a child is disciplined,

Sam replied, "Tough, is what it's like! But you can't let up." Peter tells of a family,

whose son was excommunicated, who left the church to attend a sister congregation. The

reasons they gave for leaving seemed superficial. Peter chose not to pursue the question

further in order to avoid causing this grieving family further pain. Seth speaks of sadness

and tears he experienced when someone in whom he had invested significantly left the

church for Roman Catholicism. In another situation with a wayward child, Seth admits:

> So yeah, I felt hurt. . . I felt like I was losing a son. My heart was breaking
> because it's like I've known him since he was six or seven. . . . How many times
> has he been at my house? How many times have we spent time together, and how
> many sermons has he heard? And yet here he is running away, falling away,
> repudiating it.

Jonathan mentioned how hard it is for him to know that some of the wayward Christian

young people whom he is trying to reach are not redeemable. He says it is hard "to adjust

our hearts and I suppose the hearts of parents, that there are cases like that."

Beyond the emotional toll on pastors who minister to wayward emerging adults

and their parents, these participants mentioned the enormous personal investment of time,

thought, and prayer such ministry requires. Jonathan reports, "I dealt with this kid for

hours and hours and hours and hours, and day after day after day, and week after week."

Seth, Frank, Robert, and Peter all mention the intense efforts they had to make in visiting,

writing, calling, texting, and generally seeking to establish communication with the

wayward child. Meanwhile, the parents themselves also needed pastoral care. In addition

to the child's and parents' needs for personal care, as the situation itself becomes more

serious, it begins to absorb an increasing amount of the session's time as well.

Five of the eight pastors explicitly mentioned the difficulty posed when

addressing waywardness in the children of church officers. Three of these pastors had

difficulty with their own children. Two mentioned problems with the children of other

church officers. When ministering to an elder or deacon whose children are wayward, the

issues are magnified. Pastors are often closer, relationally, with other officers since they work together more closely. Moreover, because these are public people, the pastor also often has to help these parents navigate the question of how the information is shared publicly, and whether they should retain their offices. Robert reports that the waywardness of his elder's child was "the most heavy, the most grievous" he has encountered. In another pastoral situation, this time regarding homosexuality in the son of an officer, Robert reports a happier conclusion, as the child repented before being formally excommunicated. Nevertheless, the officer resigned, creating a leadership vacuum.

Another challenge faced by the respondents sharing the pain of the family whose child is falling away, is simply not knowing what to say. Three of the pastors interviewed (Peter, Frank, Jonathan) mentioned this. Peter comments:

> What will help their faith? What will comfort their souls? What will minister to them, that they are loved, they are cared for, that the fact that their son rejected the faith does not have a necessary reflection upon them . . . . There's [sic] a lot of strands that are there that you could potentially pull on and it be hooked to something. . . . So the difficulty is knowing what to say.

Jonathan experienced the pain of familial apostasy personally, with a wayward sibling, before he became a pastor. Still he does not know what to say.

> [God] is righteous. And he is true. And if I can't figure it out, I trust him. You are not going to avoid the 'tearingness' of the struggle—this long, passionate argument with God. Okay? You *can't*. I don't think you can. And you've just got to stand by them, and say, I don't have the answers either. Except God. He is the answer. And the cross, okay?

While some pastors mentioned the problem of *not* knowing what to say, Eric and Jim also mentioned the problem of knowing what to say to parents, but also knowing it

will cause them further pain. Jim said that for him, this was the most challenging aspect of ministering to parents whose kids are wayward.

> [The parents] are riddled with grief at this moment, and in order to help them . . . . It's like someone coming into the ER with a bone sticking out. They're having a bad day. And now I've got to make it worse. I've got to hurt him. And so that's the problem. You know, the family comes in with a bone sticking out, and you've got to set the bone. And there's no way to make the setting of the bone a fun time for everybody. There's just no way to do it. But to just wrap a bandage around it and send them home without setting the bone is pastoral negligence. It's criminal negligence.

COMMON THEMES REGARDING THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN FALL AWAY

The literature indicated that Christian parents whose children leave the faith experience a broad range of powerful emotions. Thus, the second research question was aimed at determining what emotional responses the participating pastors had encountered in such parents, and how they ministered to the parents facing these emotions. Presenting this data is somewhat difficult because emotions are not experienced in isolation from one another. Rather, they swirl together and overlap and influence one another. Moreover, each pastor emphasized different things and had his own vocabulary to describe what he experienced. For example, participants could describe grief and shock similarly, so that it was difficult to differentiate the one emotion from the other. One pastor, in seeking to describe the devastation one family experienced, said they were "flattened. . . glazed . . . it was like a truck hit them." Such a response could legitimately be describing either grief, or shock, or both, or something else, possibly confusion. When the contexts of the statements did clearly reveal which emotions were being referred to,

the interviewer coded the statements into the categories where they seemed to fit readily.[331]

While conducting the interviews, the interviewer tried to pose open-ended questions to see where the subjects' emphases lay; however, this approach seemed to produce some unexpected results. For example, when trying to discover what emotional range pastors might expect to encounter in parents enduring such trials, the interviewer expected pastors to say they had to deal with parental depression. Yet only one of the nine respondents mentioned depression, and then only in passing. Given the ebb and flow of all the interviews, these pastors were not asked explicitly if they encountered depression in parents of wayward children. However, it is very likely that if they had been asked, parental depression is something they would all have said they had encountered. Nevertheless, because the pastors interviewed did not explicitly focus on depression, it is not a category below. Therefore, this research may not represent all the emotions these pastors encountered in parents, but rather the ones seeming most prominent to them. The categories below proceed from the emotions most emphasized to the least emphasized by the study participants.

Grief

Eight of nine pastors I interviewed emphasized the need to encourage parents in their grief. They used a broad spectrum of words to describe the sorrow parents feel when their kids turn away from the Lord, including: "crushed," "brokenhearted," "heartbroken," "sad," "betrayed," "grieving," "very hard, very painful," "exquisitely painful," "flattened," "glazed," "hit by a truck," "bleeding," "broken," "riddled with grief."

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[331] In this instance, I coded the statement under both grief and shock.

It was clearly difficult for these ministers to see parishioners in such emotional distress. Ministers reported the need for great sensitivity to the possibility of making an already excruciating experience worse by saying or doing the wrong thing. Jim likened ministering to parents in this condition to a doctor setting a compound fracture—it was inevitably painful. Seth reports that this grief could tempt the parent to a sinful self-focus that would inhibit the parent from acting redemptively toward the child. He counsels grieving parents that they must act out of love for their child, and not their own pain, if they are to act redemptively.

The doctrine of sovereign election was offered as a means of comfort to parents whose children have fallen away. Andrew said, "A parent has to realize that it may not be the purpose of God that this child live in heaven with them." Later he emphasized that "when we get to glory, [if our child is not there with us] it will not bother us." Robert felt it important to increase his proximity to the grieving parents. He recounts:

> I never stopped visiting. So I stayed in their circle. I stayed in their life. It was easier not to. It's not what I wanted to do, because I felt like I was hurting them every time I went, but I thought it would be hurting them worse not going. If I had a chance, even with the look in my eyes, with my posture, whatever, I was communicating I loved them.

Shock

A second major emphasis, again with eight of nine pastors highlighting this in their experience, was shock. Parents were shocked and confused that their child was turning away from the faith. Jonathan mentioned that parents he has pastored are often "puzzled" when their children are wayward. "It's hard for them to figure it out, okay? What happened?" Peter mentions a family whose son apostatized. Neither he nor the

family saw it coming. Frank saw shock and confusion especially among homeschooling parents whose children had fallen away. He finds these parents saying:

> "I've done everything I thought I was supposed to do. Why did my kids turn out that way?" . . . If there's a myth, [it is that] somehow homeschooling protects; I don't believe in that myth. I've homeschooled myself, we've got kids at Christian school, homeschool and public school and sometimes I get more problems with homeschoolers. And we've got kids in public school [who] turn out just superb.

Jim's experience was similar. He likens parents who believe themselves to have 'done everything they were supposed to do' in parenting to be ticking off the boxes on a checklist:

> They've been through the parenting classes, they've done the drill, they know enough to say, "We did everything we were taught." Okay? Well no. You were taught to believe, you were taught to trust, you were taught not to work for it, you were taught not to do a perfunctory thing. And that's what it appears you've done, judging by the results.

Some pastors said they could see the spiritual trajectory of a young person many years before it eventuated in apostasy. Andrew mentioned that parents' seeing this helped to cushion them from the shock of their child's eventual apostasy.

Guilt

The third most prominent emotional response these pastors encountered in parents of wayward children was guilt. Seven of the nine participants mentioned that parents feel directly responsible for the waywardness of their children. According to Frank, many parents reason, "If my kid's a screw up, it's because I'm a major screw up somewhere. So what did I do wrong?" Indeed, this question is encountered again and again in the experience of the pastors I interviewed. Parents want to know what went wrong, and how much they contributed to it.

Two of the pastors who had been raised within Dutch Reformed traditions mentioned that a critical service the church performs for the parent whose child is wayward is to bear witness to them that they have been faithful to the covenantal vows they took at the child's baptism (if, indeed, they believe this to be the case). The pastor is able to bear witness to this parental faithfulness because he has faithfully visited the family year upon year and observed the parenting and the children.

Pastors disagreed about whether or not it was fitting or helpful to help parents analyze "what went wrong." Eric told me his reasoning for usually not analyzing the issue of how the child went astray. "If there is Christian blood in their veins, they are already brokenhearted, and my job isn't to make them feel worse about the situation that's already the most exquisitely painful one they've ever faced in life, and maybe ever will…. When a couple comes in and is brokenhearted about a child and wants to know what to do, I don't feel at that point, 'Oh, let's make sure that you first have a full, complete grasp of how much you have contributed to this catastrophe.'" Sam does not try to analyze "what went wrong," thinking, "it's impossible to really assess what happened." He reminds guilt-ridden parents that though at times there is some measure of parental culpability, the child himself chose to break the covenant.

Although some pastors do not make a point of analyzing culpability, they are ready to help parents who are analyzing themselves. Frank relayed that when a parent believes he or she is guilty, "It's a really easy answer. Search your heart. Ask God to search your heart and confess it." Seth's response was similar. "Christ died for your sins as a parent. . . .You are not a perfect parent, but Christ died for that sin too."

Jonathan will analyze, not for the parents' sake, but rather so he can better know

what danger signs to look for in pastoring other families. Jim also advocates analysis, but

in order to help parents know what sins to confess and repent of, so that other children are

not affected by the sins that alienated the apostate child: "It's not a blame-game thing. It's

a figure-it-out thing." Frank makes sure to emphasize to parents who feel crushing guilt

that though "we can be the *occasions* for other people's sin; we are never the *cause* of

other people's sin."

Anger, Bitterness and Frustration

Two-thirds of participants reported ministering to parents coping with anger,

bitterness, and frustration. Pastors reported parents being angry at their children, at the

church, and at God.

Frank and Seth both reported encountering parents who were angry at their

wayward children. Frank reports one instance:

> The mother wants the daughter dead, and she wants to die herself. And this is a
> girl who went off the deep end, and then she comes back, and then she goes off
> the deep end, and then she comes back, and then she goes off . . . She never really
> comes back. She comes home, but she never really comes home to Christ. So
> that's typical. You get anger.

Seth reports encountering parents who are personally affronted by their child's

departure from the faith, "How could you do this to me? How could you do this to the

family?" He tries to address parental anger toward the child early on, because the parents

cannot act redemptively out of anger, but only out of love.

Both Robert and Jonathan report bitterness and frustration of the parents toward

the church. Robert said that the bitterness came as a result of the parents taking their

child's grudge upon themselves, thinking the church was being too hard, and somewhat

inconsistent. Robert recalls, "She has taken up her children's hurts and doesn't want us or the church anymore to keep hitting them. . . . The tendency [with this family] was to cover up, protect, get on the kid's side because the spanking was coming, and they felt [it] personal[ly]." Jonathan reports frustration with apparent inactivity of the session, and growing bitterness in parents as they listen to their wayward child's criticism of church leadership. Sometimes, this anger, bitterness, and/or frustration manifests itself in parents adopting a protective posture toward their child, in reference to the session. Of the three pastors who mentioned this specific manifestation, two of them singled out mothers as especially prone to be protective of their wayward children in the face of church discipline.

While Frank, Jonathan, and Jim all report pastoring parents who were angry at God, Eric and Seth explicitly mentioned not encountering such God-directed anger on a significant level. All pastors who encountered it, on whatever level, reported that the struggle was the basic struggle many people have with the sovereignty of God. Regarding how pastors should address parents who blame God for their child's waywardness, Jim explained that parents should be treated

> the same way you would if a child died and they blamed God, or if the dad has cancer and they're blaming God. What you have to do is go back to Calvinism 101. Our God is in the heavens. He does as he pleases. He does all things well. I would say that Calvinists are at their best in affliction.

Both PCA pastors volunteered that they minister to parents who are angry at God by instructing them on the perfections of God, particularly His mercy.

"The Pimple on the Face of This Church": Parental Shame

Over half of the participants mentioned that parents of wayward children experience a significant sense of shame or embarrassment. Peter mentioned that one

family in his church transferred membership after their son was excommunicated. "It was in their face every week. They were constantly reminded of it merely by virtue of attending the church where their son was disciplined." Jonathan described parents whose children rebel as feeling as if they are "the pimple on the face of this church, and everybody is looking at us." So it is critical for the church, according to Jonathan, to convey to the parents "a sense that the church is with them, they're not being isolated. They're not being looked at as this. . . strange, odd, aberration in the life of the church." Robert says he used simple physical presence to minister to an elder's family who felt ashamed that their children were wayward. "It's almost like a funeral. Don't say something, just stand there. I just didn't get out of their life. I just kept coming over to their house. I'd stop by on my way home from work. Just stayed close to them." He intentionally taught his congregation a similar approach when they celebrated the Lord's Supper. "We have to be postured to move in and be there with the parents without pointing the finger. You continually remind [the congregation] we're not in competition. We're *for* each other."

Jim believes parental shame is generally a good thing—so long as parents are ashamed for the right things. In response to the question of whether he would help parents understand the lengths to which they were culpable for their child's rebellion, Jim emphasized the value of feeling shame:

> What is a lazy son? He's a shame to his mother and father. So you go through all the things Proverbs says are a shame to parents. So it's not wrong for parents to be ashamed of that. Apparently this appears to be a design feature. This appears to be something that's built in. So if parents are ashamed of misbehavior by their children, that's what they ought to be. You know, they ought to be ashamed. They ought to be humiliated. That's a good thing, not a bad thing.

Frank reported that though families were ashamed of a child's sinful behavior, they were also thankful to the elders for their discipline of the wayward child. In one instance, a sibling of a wayward child stood up at his excommunication and publicly thanked the elders. "This is a good thing," he said, "because he was ruining the family."

Despair

Four of nine ministers mentioned parents who experienced despair, anxiety, and/or panic concerning their wayward child. Sometimes this anxiety was for their child's general welfare and physical safety, but mostly it concerned the child's eternal destiny.

Frank mentioned parents experiencing anxiety and panic for both physical and spiritual reasons. Regarding the former, he says, "They are doing bad things. They are doing things that could hurt them, that could hurt others." He ministers to these parents by reminding them of the circle of human responsibility and the bigger circle of God's concern. He will ask parents:

> What is God really calling you to do now? They are away. They are in a different city. You can't be watching them. You can't be calling them. They'll track them on their phones, and whatnot. Stop playing God. . . . Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God and he will exalt you in due time. . . . Of course you are anxious. Where might that anxiety take you in a wrong direction? Where is that anxiety no longer just a sensible concern, but sinful anxiety?

He further encourages them not to give up hope, and to keep praying because "God is a God of hard cases." Referring to the restoration of the covenant after the incident with the golden calf in Exodus 32-34, Frank points out there is an asymmetry to the way God emphasizes his mercy and justice. According to Frank, in the text, God emphasizes his mercy and compassion seven times, and his justice twice. "So, I am merciful and I am just. But there's an asymmetry to that, very clear, he *leads* with mercy

not with justice." Because of God's delight in mercy, Frank ministers to despairing parents by encouraging them that God loves "hard cases."

Jim also mentions he encourages parents not to give up hope and acquiesce to the "new normal" of the child's sin. He particularly singles out the importance of parents keeping a clear head and guiding children through "rapids" by looking upon them with faith in God's promises, instead of through the lens of worry:

> One of the things I do is tell parents who are navigating the rapids not to panic. Our tendency is to take everything we see, including our sin, and extrapolate out, and say at this rate we're all going to be in the penitentiary. But I have seen, if we're not dealing with the difficult cases, I have seen many kids go through rough patches in those years successfully navigate them, keep the faith, remain in the Church, marry in the church, and start bringing up their own kids in the Church. . . .Let's say a kid was caught lying and sneaking around in high school. If the parents panic and overreact, and think, "Oh no, this is insipient Atheism," one of the things [that can happen] is the kids believe them and get chased into atheism instead of the parents responding in faith.

A fifth minister (Andrew) mentioned parental anxiety, but only in order to say he had *not* experienced significant parental anxiety because God prepared parents for the apostasy of their children by showing them precursors of their rebellious nature when they were preteens. Because parents could see the rebellion coming from "a long way off," they were less impacted. Also, when in glory, he mentioned, parents will not be saddened that some of their children will not be there with them.

Doubting God

Four of the pastors I interviewed reported encountering parents struggling with doubt. Specifically, they doubted that God had kept His promises. Frank and Seth connected doubting God with presumption. Frank said, "Kind of like, God owes me. If I do my part, God's gotta do his part." Jonathan spoke of it as a "long, passionate argument with God" that cannot be avoided.

I don't have the answers either. Except God. He is the answer. And the cross, okay? You're going to doubt, and what else can He do? What more can He *say*? You can't say, "I will believe you if you bring my kid back." He's going to say, "You've got to believe me because I gave *my* son to you," right? I've gone through all that, and does that make sense? So for all these parents, their agony and God's providence intersect at the cross, doesn't it? It's got to end there, at the foolishness of the cross.

Seth explains how he helps doubting parents understand what God might be doing:

God will do whatever it takes to get us from his promise to Him, so we trust Him with everything and anything, so that if he takes my job, my house, my wife, my kids, He will drive us to the point where, in the end, He is all that matters. And He'll do that in different ways. . . . Our families in our churches go through very different things, but very often God shakes the foundations of these families.

Three of the four pastors encountering parents who were doubting God mentioned that some parents had misplaced their trust for their kids "turning out," trusting in the means (home education, or a parenting program, or even the promises of God themselves, etc.) instead of the God who established the means. Seth compared this to partaking of the Lord's Supper. "Don't put your faith in the cup. Don't put your faith in the loaf. Put your faith in Christ."

Weariness

Considering the intense and often conflicted emotions parents of wayward emerging adults face, and considering also that the period of waywardness often lasts years, it is perhaps not unexpected that a majority of pastors in this study report parents who are profoundly weary. At the church where Peter ministers, a couple transferred their membership, saying they simply could no longer bear being reminded of their son's apostasy by virtue of attending worship in the church in which he was excommunicated. Frank speaks of parents ready to give up hope—to actually stop praying. Robert reports a

conversation he had with the parent of an apostate child who found out that the researcher

for this study was coming to town to interview his pastor. The researcher was also

scheduled to preach that Sunday. This parent mistakenly thought the researcher was

going to preach on the subject of apostasy and covenant children. He told Robert, "I don't

even want to hear it," and left town for the weekend with his wife. This family had

become weary of the entire subject, and appeared to have a strong desire for closure.

"They were weary. They were weary that everything was correctional. They wanted to

get back to their normal life. They wanted to pretend like everything was okay."

Jim speaks of how quickly people adapt to crises. "Just like someone can't cry for

three days straight. You cry for awhile, and then you're over it—you can't cry anymore.

Families go through crises and then there's two weeks of crisis and then everybody finds

the new normal." He implies that we adapt to crises by accepting the "new normal"

because we cannot withstand extended emotional trauma. But his concern is that

weariness becomes hopelessness, and hopelessness leads to a failure to "leave the ninety-

nine and do what it takes to get the one."

Jonathan likens the sensitivity of the subject of the apostasy of someone's

children to speaking to someone suffering from cancer. People do not always want to talk

about it. "In dealing with someone who has cancer, you do not want to talk about it very

often, okay? It's an embarrassing subject, and their life is threatened. So it's easy just to

avoid . . ." He also applies this to the congregation's interaction with the wayward child

himself. When congregants encounter the wayward child, they need to be sensitive

regarding whether it is the right time to discuss reconciliation and repentance.

In summary, pastors reported observing a broad range of emotions among parents of apostate emerging adults. Some of these emotions were particularly intense. Pastors reported differing ways of ministering, depending on circumstances.

COMMON THEMES ON HOW PASTORS COUNSEL PARENTS TO ACT REDEMPTIVELY TOWARD THEIR WAYWARD CHILD

The third primary research objective of this study was to determine how pastors encouraged parents of wayward or apostate emerging adults to act redemptively toward their child. Seven major themes emerged from the interviews.

"Clean House": Modeling Repentance

Two-thirds of the pastors I interviewed emphasized the importance of parents modeling repentance to their wayward children. This was a theme with all three CREC pastors, one OPC, one PCA, and one independent pastor.

Some pastors encountered parents who had trouble changing the sinful habits that may have alienated their children in the first place. Seth mentions the difficulty he had with a certain dad who had the habit of intimidating his son.

> [This dad] was raised very gruffly—not by a believing father. Threats, physical intimidation, those were the kind of things he was raised with, and he has a hard time. . . . It's not that he physically threatens [his wayward son]—but he exudes that aura. So [I say to the dad], "When you see him, don't look down on him, don't intimidate him. Don't look like you're trying to threaten him."

Eric mentions another sin that often needs to be repented of in situations where children have rebelled against parents. "The more I live, the more convinced I am that when the apostle Paul told fathers not to exasperate their children, he was putting his finger on the *numero uno* problem. And I still think it's true of boys, but I think it is supremely true for girls."

The participants emphasized that repentance begins with confessing parental sins and failures to the wayward child. Again, Eric shares counsel he has given:

> I have told dads, you need to go and you need to tell your son that you have failed him. You realize that now in a way you never did before that you have failed him, and that much of what he is thinking and feeling and doing today, you realize is the result of failure on his part. Your son needs to hear this from you. He needs to realize that the sort of things that are churning inside of him shouldn't be there, but they are there, and the two of you need to repent before the Lord together, and you need to ask the Lord for his forgiveness.

Robert teaches parents that the reflexive response to their own sinfulness should be to reveal it, and not to cover it. Andrew, Jonathan, and Jim each emphasized the need for children to see their parents be vulnerable and admit to their sinfulness. Jonathan received this counsel from his father, who was also a minister, "When you are dealing with a sinner never ever give the impression that you can't tell what in the world he is talking about. As though, 'I am so surprised!' As though you do not know what he is talking about." He applies this to parenting, "If the child grows up with a sense that my dad never sins, the son won't want to talk to his dad because his dad is going to blow up. 'You are no son of mine!'" Jim speaks of identifying with wayward kids. He tells the story of a young man, still in high school, caught looking at pornography on his sister's computer.

> The first thing I told him was, "You're not in trouble with me, okay?" And it was like, "Whoa." And then one of the things I mentioned to him was, you go to church and everybody else there is squeaky clean, and nobody's sinned since the late eighties, and everybody's got their suit and tie, and you're the one solitary pervert there. And he said, "Yeah, that's just what it's like, I'm the only one who's ever done anything wrong."

Pastors reported that when the wayward child feels isolated, as if she is the only person alive who really wrestles with sin, she can become hopeless and give up on herself because of shame. Robert mentions a young woman

...sucked into the world and made dirty, so to speak, and she was destroyed by her own shame.

[Are your referring to sexual . . .?]

Sexual immorality. Yes, yes. Maybe even at a party where they drank too much, or made to drink and were abused. I really think that's some of the root of it. . . . There's the steamrolling of pride and shame. She shamed her father, who's a public [figure]. And once that happened there's almost a "Who gives a rip now? I'm ruined. I've ruined the community. I'm not worthy of anything now." And she just felt like she was worthless. She really does.

Jim speaks of dealing with the guilt and shame when a young person is entrapped in sin by giving them hope, and speaking faith to them. In the account mentioned above, with the young man caught viewing pornography, Jim continues:

The parents could panic and say our son is a serial murderer, he's a serial rapist, and stop believing because of the manifestation of sin, and create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, [they should] speak faith to the kid to give him something to hang onto. You just say, "We're not going to let you. I'm glad this came out. God is being good to you. God is being very kind to you. And you're not going down that road because we're not going to let you."

He acknowledges this might be met with some measure of hopeful skepticism in the wayward child. They want it to be true, but it does not comport with their experience.

Here Jim emphasizes the importance of parents modeling repentance.

So what I tell parents is that you can't reach into Billy's insides and switch a few switches and make him change, because he believes people don't change. "Nobody changes. I've never seen anybody change. Dad won't change. Dad won't *ever* change. Mom won't ever change. Why should I change? I've wanted to from time to time, but it's not possible. People don't change." What's the best way to refute that? Change right in front of them. . . . This is how people come to the Lord, they see somebody converted in their office or in their military unit or whatever and somebody changes, and people think, "I didn't know that was legal, I didn't know that could be done. . ." So the best thing to do is have the parents cleaning house. You want your kid to confess sins? Show him how. You confess sin. You want your kid to make things right? You make things right. You want your kid to lay down his pride? You lay down your pride.

In summary, six of the pastors I interviewed emphasized the importance of modeling repentance. They emphasized that confession and repentance closes distance between parents and child, begins to eliminate sinful parental behaviors that may have provoked the child's rebellion, and sets an example that God does indeed change lives—thus giving hope.

"No Plan B," So Lean on God

Pastor Sam, by far the pastor serving the longest in the ministry among the nine participants, sounded a somewhat skeptical note when asked how he counsels parents to act redemptively toward their wayward children. "Well, it's been my experience that in most cases you can't do much about bringing them back." Sam and Andrew both emphasized that parents of apostate emerging adults especially need to trust God to act because the situation is so difficult. Seven of the nine pastors, including Sam, mentioned the need for parents to lean on God in order for the prodigal child to return. For instance, Eric reminds parents:

> The Bible doesn't have a Plan B. It never tells us, "Well, if these things don't work, the things I have been recommending throughout the whole Bible, then try *this*." It's, "You have to do the same things. You have to exemplify the faith before your children. You have to love them through all of this in the love of Christ. You have to teach them, and then of course you're probably past the point of any effective discipline—very often you are—and you just have to pray that the Lord will restore the years the locusts have eaten."

Essentially, according to Eric, parents with wayward children need to return to what they should have been doing all along. Again, just because a child is born into a covenant family, salvation for him is fundamentally no different than for others. It is a matter of God's sovereign grace. Accordingly, Eric says in some instances his conversations with parents of wayward children need to emphasize this: "You've driven

your daughter away from the Lord, and now here you are with a tremendous problem on your hands, and there's nothing, absolutely nothing, that anyone can do. The Lord has to do this. . ." Andrew at times must remind parents, "It's nothing that they do that ever brings salvation to the child. They're only a means of grace." Because of this, parents must "rest their case in God." Often the interviewed pastors mentioned a trust in some method or in some other means of protection—several singling out the conviction in some parents that home school will protect their children from waywardness. They emphasized the folly of trusting anything other than the Lord. Jim intimates the first thing parents need to do when their children are wayward—take "trusting God" off of the checklist of things to do. His point seemed to be that trusting God is the only thing to do, and all other redemptive actions flowed from that trust, as works flow from saving faith.

Because salvation is by God's sovereign grace, participants indicated that they instruct parents to plead for mercy through prayer. "Salvation is fundamentally the same for everybody. It's the decisive intervention into the life of an individual by the Lord and by his grace and by His Spirit on behalf of Christ. And that's what we have to plead for." Peter, Andrew, and Jonathan all joined Eric in emphasizing the need for prayer. Jonathan called for the entire congregation to join the parents in regularly pleading for God to intervene in the life of the wayward child. In our interview, Frank gave several examples of God working in the lives of apostate emerging adults completely apart from parental or church efforts. In one example, he recounts how one young man grew up in the church, but began living with a woman out of wedlock and fell away:

> He was into drugs big time. And then, very providentially, both of them woke up, you know, living together, fornicating, doing drugs, and they woke up and they realized, for whatever reason, they realize that they're dying. . . And they went to a little ol' Baptist church, and there was a great minister there. And they came to

Christ. And then the pastor there said, "You need to go back to that church where you came from and kind of apologize for how you acted." That's rare, that's so rare. And he did.

Each of the CREC pastors, as well as Pastor Eric, of the PCA, emphasized that parents need to model this trust in God in the way they speak with and about their wayward children, because, Robert says, "they will believe what you say." Jonathan recounts how his own father lived out the balance between having a realistic view of his son's struggles with sin, and an optimistic view of where he would one day be:

> He never expressed any confidence in me at all, or in himself. But he was always and forever happy, and cheerful, because he believed in the promises, he believed in the covenant. And for me, as his son that was growing up and struggling with my own sins. He knew I was sometimes lousy and rotten. And [here was] my father looking at me with optimism, and dealing with me as someone to whom he expected God to be faithful. And that was an enormous thing for me.

> [Let me clarify. A moment ago you said that your father had no confidence in you or in himself. And now you're telling me that he was optimistic when he looked at you. Can you bring those two things together?]

> Sure, because I belong to the Lord. Because I was one of his.

In summary, many of the participants emphasized that parents who long for their wayward children to return to the Lord must lean on God through believing prayer, that he will graciously, sovereignly, and decisively intervene to convert their children.

Kindness and Confrontation

All parties interested in the redemption of the wayward child must perform a balancing act between kindness and confrontation. Two-thirds of the participants mentioned maintaining this balance in one way or another. Peter referred to maintaining balance by using the "good cop, bad cop" metaphor. "In attempting to recover him, I played good cop and Tom played bad cop. I had a softer approach, Tom had a very in-your-face, drawing-the-line-in-the-sand and letting him know the consequences of his

apostasy. I tried to more gently reel him in." Jonathan likened this balance between a

tender, soft approach and a firmer approach with a mother-father metaphor.

> The pastor is, in a sense, like a mother. I was the one who dealt with this kid for hours and hours and hours and hours, and day after day after day, and week after week, and drugs, and impregnating other women. I mean, hey! And so when it comes time for excommunication, my elders stand up and read this whole business, because I'm like the mother, crying my eyes out. . . . That's why I've got elders. They are the dads. If he needs to take him behind the woodshed, Dad, okay, *you* do that. (Laughter). There is that wonderful balance within the church. You have got elders, who are kings, who are dads. You've got preachers to do all the talking. They are moms, and they are a lot closer.

Jonathan presents Yahweh's dealings with Israel as an example of the way God

parents his wayward children. "So you do both things right. You follow the Old

Testament. God is hitting them on one side and next he is pleading with them. My own

mother was really tough and my father was very soft." Sam talks about the importance of

parents and the church showing "strong love." "You got to love them but it's tough love.

It's love with discipline." Seth admits, "That's a very difficult line, right?—To accept

somebody and to know that they're in sin, to not back down." While this balance must

be struck in individual conversation, Robert also said it should be true of the church.

Though his congregation may be the only one in his community that practices formal

church discipline or confrontation, Robert aims for a warmly welcoming church culture

characterized by grace or kindness.

> It means that as a pastor you have to nurture those things in a way where you are proud of the fat couple who are losing weight. And the whole church is, because they're not pretty people. They were crack addicts, and now they're converted, you know. Is there a place at the table for them? You bet there is. But you make sure that the glamour couple realizes that. Make them sit together. . . . That's proactive for apostate children, so the church is ready to take them on.

Frank describes a similar ethos in the way his church reached out to a young

woman in their congregation who went astray for awhile, and returned pregnant:

We surrounded her and her family. She was willing to listen. When she got pregnant . . . the guy that got her pregnant was not a believer. He did not have a job. So she's going, "I'm pregnant." So we said, "We can work with you here." We had a woman in the church who was really good, who knew her and the family. And she just counseled her. And we pursued the boy, who is now a man, and her husband. And he got converted.

In summary, pastors interviewed indicated that biblical love is not unwilling to confront wayward children with frankness and take hard measures. At the same time, it is deeply welcoming, tenderhearted, always ready to add another seat at the Lord's Table, or to welcome someone back.

"Circle the Wagons": Engage the Entire Community

One redemptive strategy that seemed a special emphasis among the participants was how they and the parents relied upon the entire community. The more unified the involvement of people was across the spectrum of the wayward child's social network, the greater seemed the chances for full repentance and restoration. The pastors I interviewed mentioned involving family and friends, church officers, the larger congregation, and other churches to help pursue restoration. In community, categories overlap. A person can simultaneously be someone's family member, friend, fellow congregant, and church officer. Most relationships having multiple layers, the following data are arranged in categories, from smaller to larger concentric social circles.

Involvement of parents was largely taken for granted by the respondents, though Jonathan mentions an abdicating father who refused to confront his daughter when he caught a boy in her bedroom in the early morning, or to go to her when she ran away and her location became known. Other than this example, the pastors reported parents who were deeply interested, sometimes obsessed, with restoring their wayward children. There were a few accounts of sibling interaction from the pastors themselves. For

instance, Jonathan mentions his attempts to restore his wayward sisters after his father

died, including housing them, confronting them, and seeking action from the session.

Frank had the opposite experience, recounting how his own siblings confronted him

when he was himself a young, wayward emerging adult:

> I was the bad kid in my family. I remember three of my siblings shoving me
> against the wall and going, "You are the center of this home. You are taking all of
> mom and dad's time. Mom could die of a heart attack because of you. You are a
> selfish SOB." And they were right.

Robert tells of how the united front one family presented to a son struggling with

homosexuality was helpful in bringing him to repentance. When asked what was most

helpful in calling him back to repentance, he replied, "It was the family strength in

saying, 'You will no longer be Uncle So-and-So to my kids. You're not going to come

back at Thanksgiving and pretend it's all okay.'"

Eric, Frank, Robert, and Jonathan all mentioned the strategic place friends have in

calling wayward emerging adults to repentance. At times, friends are heard when parents

are ignored. Robert mentions, however, how the sin of the wayward child begins to erode

the common bonds of friendship from both ends. As the two parties have increasingly

less in common, they grow weary of one another and the friendship is strained. As it is

strained, influence diminishes.

Another significant part of the community that needs to be engaged in bringing

the wayward child to repentance is church officers. Participants reported a high degree of

involvement by church officers, including personal visits (both scheduled and

spontaneous), phone calls, emails, letters (regular and registered), and even evangelizing

the non-professing boyfriend of a wayward daughter who was an obstacle to her

repentance. Personal, face-to-face contact seemed the preferred method of contact by the

respondents. Because the wayward emerging adults were often seeking to avoid this personal contact, church officers often had to show up spontaneously. Seth reports waiting for a young man at his home about the time he was scheduled to return from work. Robert reports spontaneously "dropping in" on wayward children at times when he expected to catch them at home. As efforts to restore prove unsuccessful, pastors report an increasing use of letters and documents that could be traced and ultimately produced as evidence in an ecclesiastical trial.

Seth describes his philosophy of ministry as "very elder-centered." He goes on to explain what this means: "I do not, and I refuse to make my ministry a one-man show. If there are pastoral issues, I will never do anything without the elders, even counseling issues." Because many counseling issues are potentially discipline issues, he said, "I want my elders to know exactly what is going on." Sam, another OPC pastor, asserted that the genius of Presbyterianism was that the pastor never has to act alone, but acts in concert with his session.

Besides church officers, the congregation itself has a vital role in reaching out to the wayward emerging adult. Two-thirds of participants explicitly mentioned this. Sam argued that where church community is strong, church discipline is less frequent:

> We have such an interaction among families that the families do the discipline. We have very little discipline. You won't have many discipline [cases] if you preach properly and if you have a good fellowship group which interacts. And so it's done right there, you see. The other people are straight with them, you know. Pray with them and pray for them and talk to them. That's where the discipline happens, where it's effective. When it gets way up the line where they're absolutely obstinate . . . by then you have an adversarial relationship. And as such it's very difficult to work with that.

Jonathan explicitly asserted that the entire church, and not merely the elders, must be active in discipline in order for it to be effective. Because of this, the congregation

needs "to be aware that this is what they are doing, and they need to have had some kind of participation in the process, so that they can recognize that everything we could have done we have done." Each household in Robert's congregation was encouraged to write letters to one wayward child, and the child's father regularly gave status reports to the heads of household. Robert mentioned that these reports were very effective in drawing the families into even closer communion. Seth told of the role that ladies in his church had in encouraging and counseling a woman whose son was apostate. Frank repeatedly mentioned a network of relationships in his church that was activated to draw wayward children back to Christ. In one case, he was told just before church one Sunday that his own daughter was planning, while he was preaching, to go home, pack her things, and run off with her boyfriend.

> So my deacon, who had real rapport with her (that's the blessedness of a good church), left the church and just waited for her. And sure enough, around eleven o'clock she shows up, and he just said, "You don't want to do this. At least wait until your parents get home. You don't want to be sneaking behind their back." And that was actually the turning point. . .

Eric's church also hosts a Christian school on its property that he says has been helpful in getting yet another angle on the spiritual health of young people in the church. It serves a preventative function before they enter the emerging adult years.

> We know what's going on with almost all of our kids. So whatever had been the case in the past, you've got elders sitting down with a boy and saying, you know, this is not acceptable behavior, we've got to see some changes here, and that's been very good. I think it's sort of served to circle the wagons around a child and leave fewer and fewer parts of his life that are not subject to some oversight.

Three pastors mentioned the need to work in cooperation with other evangelical churches. When considering church discipline, Jonathan's church always consults with another church session to make sure that they are proceeding pastorally and judiciously.

This is a constitutional requirement for them. Robert interfaces regularly with other pastors in his city, and seeks their cooperation. He tells the story of a conversation one young lady, who had been disciplined, had with a friend:

> She's going, "I want to get back to church, but I don't want to go where I'm going to get condemned. I'm going to go down to the First Christian Church here." And Mary says, "Well, Gina, Robert's just going to call the pastor there." [Laughter]. Yes! [Lifts up both arms in victory gesture] And I would. That's what I'll do. Now, this is helpful for me, since it's a small community, so not much gets out of my radar. I meet with the pastors, most of them, every Monday morning. We discuss issues. We pray. So if she shows up at a church somewhere, I've got it covered.

In summary, pastors rely upon the entire Christian community to respond redemptively and draw the wayward emerging adult back to repentance and restoration.

Rules of Engagement

All nine participants reported that parents of wayward emerging adults were very interested in how they ought to interact socially with their children. How would pastors counsel parents whose children were wayward, and had perhaps even been disciplined, regarding their social interaction? Particularly at issue are the implications of 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, which is often referred to when church discipline is in process. This verse is particularly relevant when discipline has reached the public stage of suspension from participation in the Lord's Supper, but before the member is "put out of the church":

> And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

How does this text apply to parents of wayward or apostate emerging adults? Should wayward children be expulsed from the home? Should they be included in family celebrations such as Christmas and Easter, or excluded? What about financial subsidy for

college and living expenses? Given that complexity was one of the pastoral challenges

mentioned previously, some respondents were reluctant to answer my questions about

rules of social engagement for parents of wayward children. "I would have to think

through everything. . . For me there's a lot of things that would come under my

consideration," replied Peter. Jonathan gave a similar response, "I have no formula, and I

have no particular answer." As a whole, participants often couched their responses with

qualifications and disclaimers.

Regarding the application of 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, the pastors had differing

opinions about how it should be applied. What they had in common, however, was that

application required great wisdom. Peter spoke to me about the implications of the

passage:

> Second Thessaolonians 3. Guys aren't working. Paul says stand aloof, but still
> call them brothers. That's one of the most curveball . . . How does this translate
> now? In what situation? That is rough. But I think at the very least, there are
> wisdom questions that a session has to wrestle with . . .

Frank also expressed some befuddlement:

> When Paul talks about treat them as a brother. . . . I don't know myself exactly
> what Paul is. . . I would love to know the dynamic of actually what has gone on.
> Whatever it was, it was enough to indicate to the person that their relationship
> with the church was at least greatly strained. So I think those are the kind of
> signals we need to send.

Sam engaged in a lengthy interaction on the passage during his interview, he and

the interviewer eventually pulling out Bibles and looking at the context together. Sam

summarized in this way:

> Second Thessalonians 3:15, the passage where it says that you don't treat him as
> an enemy but you treat him as a brother. In other words, you have to talk with
> them. You interact with them. You don't treat them as a fellow Christian.
> Obviously there is a separation, but nevertheless you do not just remove them
> from contact.

But even here, Sam admits to complexity, "There's no one solution for every problem, and there are degrees. I mean if he's just said, 'I don't believe in Christ anymore,' that's one thing, but if he is actually being an adulterer, you treat him differently."

Pastors differed on the amount of interaction parents should have with their wayward children. Even those advocating as much contact as possible did not dispense with boundaries. Pastors used different phrases to convey similar ideas. Wayward children who were still at home were called to "toe the line"; parents were exhorted not to "coddle them" or "indulge" them; "house rules" were constantly being emphasized, especially when other siblings were still living in the family home. Ultimately, if these boundaries were breached, all nine pastors mentioned expulsion—when parents ask a wayward child to move out—as an option parents should consider. Though all nine pastors mentioned expulsion as an option, they differed in the threshold of misbehavior they thought merited expulsion. Frank described one family's decision:

> In one family the parents just sat down and very calmly said, "You know, Darren, there are just basic civil rules of the house. You have to come in at a certain time. We want to have dinner together, you need to be there with us. We want the best for you. We want the best for you, not only civilly, we want the best for you in Christ. And right now, you're just giving us every signal, and you have been for some time, that you do not want to live under these rules. We can't endure that for the sake of the other kids. So the question is, are you either going to submit, or leave?" And . . . the kid said, "Yeah, I'm leaving."

Peter described the circumstances under which he would advocate expulsion, "They're totally out of control. Using drugs, dealing drugs, not coming home when they're supposed to. Just being autonomous and rejecting for all practical purposes parental authority and disrupting the otherwise stability of the home." Eric, who seemed

slower to consider expulsion than the other pastors interviewed, stated his position: "My

general view is we do absolutely everything we can to not only love our son or daughter,

but to demonstrate that love and to communicate it in practical ways. And that being the

case, we keep them with us as long as we possibly can."

What about other interaction with wayward children who may have moved out on

their own accord? What if, for example, a daughter was marrying an unbeliever against

her parents' wishes? Eric continues:

> Do I go to the wedding? Yes, you go to the wedding. She's still your daughter,
> and you still have hopes for her life and her happiness in the years to come, and
> you cannot fail to be there at a moment so significant to her life. Natural duties do
> not cease to apply, and continue, because of spiritual differences.

In his view, circumstances would have to be "pretty draconian" and "very severe"

in order for him to counsel parents to exclude children from family celebrations like

Christmas, or the occasional family dinner. Still, when wayward children are in the

family home, they should be expected to abide by the house rules.

Robert was even more aggressive in advocating parental interaction, holding that

parents should have "as much interaction as they can get" with their wayward child,

including occasions like Thanksgiving and Christmas, "especially if they're

excommunicated":

> [Especially if they're excommunicated?]
>
> Yes, because you should treat them as an unbeliever. Bring it on, bring it on. It's
> like a gay kid who's going to just take that lifestyle. Is he going to bring his lover?
> If he wants to come that way, bring it on.
>
> [So you would bring the lover over as well?]
>
> Yeah. That stated clearly.
>
> [Okay, what about with other children in the home?]

Well, even if he did do that, the house rules are the house rules. So they wouldn't be in the same bedroom. He would have to know that. Just like if an unbelieving [heterosexual] couple came. My house rules.

Jim used almost an identical illustration, concerning a homosexual child wanting to return home with his lover for Thanksgiving, but came to a different conclusion.

What I tell families to do is, let's say Thanksgiving is coming up, the kid is apostate, fallen away, can we have them to Thanksgiving Dinner? I say, absolutely! Don't ask them to say grace. Don't receive them as a Christian. Your bond of fellowship is not in Christ in this moment, you can't act like it is. And if they are playing brinksmanship. . . let's say they're homo and they're going to the Metropolitan Church, and they want to bring their partner to your Thanksgiving dinner. You don't subsidize it, you don't carry it. You say, "No, you can't use our Thanksgiving dinner to preach, and you can't use it to make your point which is that you are too a Christian. You can't do that. But as our son, you are welcome."

The boundaries Jim advocates, then, are stricter than Robert's. More respondents seemed more in agreement with Jim's boundaries than Robert's, though all mentioned boundaries. Andrew was perhaps the minister who advocated the most rigid rules of engagement, for instance, he would not encourage parents to entertain wayward children socially in their homes if they still have other children living there. Seth echoed this position. Even with Andrew, however, he advocated maintaining the relationship as long as possible:

Discipline is always asking a child to toe the line. Okay? Accommodation works the very opposite, it weakens your case. Okay, so when you have a child that's walking wayward, you have to say, "Hey, in that waywardness you are going to find trouble and distress and you know that's the way to your own demise. You understand that." Okay, the relationship between the parent and child is not broken, I don't think, until the child says, "Hey, Dad, you're a nutcase. I'm out of here." So while there is communication, you keep it up. You keep it up.

Several pastors mentioned that parental relations with wayward children—especially with those who have been disciplined by the church—should be civil, but not normal. Parents need to "send the right signals" to their children, and this is, admittedly,

sometimes very difficult to do. Regarding having apostate children over at Christmas,

Jonathan maintained that there is a difficult balance that needs to be communicated by the

parents:

> I think every family has to struggle through that. To have them over, and to have them go through the whole season without addressing what it's all about [is wrong]. Because the child needs to sense that . . . my sin is what is cutting me off. The church is not doing it. My family is not doing it. *My* sin is doing it. *I* am doing this thing. It is the family's duty, not necessarily to stick them in a corner and say nobody talks to you . . . but somehow in this whole joy of Christmas time [the wayward child needs to realize] I am cutting myself off from all of this, right? That is what I am doing. Now, how do they do it, I don't know. But it is their duty to [convey this].

Frank is largely in agreement. Parents need to communicate to wayward children

visiting the family home that everything is not "hunky dory, everything is not wonderful,

you are not in communion with the church." Even so, wayward children should be treated

with civility, but never indulgence. What does this look like?

> Well, it's so specific, it's hard to answer. What do we do if she calls? Well, you talk to her. But if I mention the "J" word, "Jesus," they hang up. Well, let them hang up. You can't stop being a Christian. At the same time, you don't have to give them the four spiritual laws every time they call. He's an unbeliever, so you treat him as an unbeliever. You don't hate them. You treat them with common grace, common civility, courtesy. He's part of the family, he comes over at Christmas with his wife.

As an example of parental indulgence, Robert mentioned a situation where a

wayward daughter manipulated her parents to get money, gifts, and clothes.

> Bridgette was like the prodigal child who, when she ran out of money, texted home and said "I need more."

> [And would she get it?]

> She would get it. Yeah, she just continued to be made happy in her rebellion. It was very frustrating. And the parents felt like if they didn't step in and do that, the other side, Jim's family, was going to come in and do it. They were going to take over the wedding. . . She called and demanded a wedding dress from her parents. It was bizarre. It was all based on this paternal sense of "If you don't do this..." It

was like *she* was going to excommunicate *them*. She had turned the tables so much. She was going to make it ugly for them. She was going to cut off seeing their granddaughter, the whole thing. . . Dad, either come through, or I'm going to look ugly for you.

The situation described above was made possible partly because the mom and dad had differing convictions on where the lines ought to be in regard to their child's behavior, and their own response. In prescribing rules of engagement to parents of wayward children, two of the nine pastors emphasized the need for unity between parents, or else children would exploit the differing parental approaches to their advantage.

In summary, pastors shared similar principles regarding the rules of engagement parents should use in interacting socially with their wayward children, but differed in application and emphasis. Pastors agreed about the need for expulsion in certain situations, but the situations differed. Again, pastors largely agreed that wayward children should be included in family functions under most circumstances, but their tolerance of misbehavior varied. All pastors advocated boundaries, but they differed somewhat on what these boundaries would look like. For many, there were just too many variables for them to feel comfortable making generalizations regarding rules of engagement.

Perseverance

Though the theme of perseverance was implied by most pastors (with the exception, perhaps, of Andrew and Sam), two CREC and one PCA pastor explicitly mentioned the need for parents to not give up on their wayward child prematurely. Jim spoke of his concern about parents "acquiescing to the new normal" and thus no longer engaging their wayward child redemptively. Besides parents and pastors persevering, Robert emphasized the need of the wayward children *themselves* not giving up hope and

not thinking of themselves as a lost cause. When I asked Frank if he had any final words

to add in our interview, he said:

> No, other than that our God is a faithful God. At the end of the day you try to parse who's guilty. You try to parse, "Why did this happen to us?" You wonder when is our child going to return to the Lord, and I don't know all those [answers]. But I know our God is a faithful God. Some are still out there, and we keep saying, "Pray and keep praying." It may be ten, twenty, thirty years. Never give up. Our God is a God of hard cases.

Prevention

The three CREC pastors, one PCA and one independent pastor spoke significantly

about what they consider to be the most important redemptive strategies parents can

adopt: namely, those enacted in a preventative fashion, while children are still young.

After children are grown and have gone apostate, it is very difficult to restore them.

When I probed Andrew for redemptive solutions, he kept reemphasizing the need for

parental faithfulness when the kids are young and tender.

> [How much interaction should parents have with their children who have been put under church censure?]

> You see, the question that needs to be asked there is, "How much interaction should parents have with their children in their upbringing?" Because by the time you get to censure, okay, you're breaking the bond. That child, and that parent, already knows that we don't have the Lord in common. We really have nothing in common. . . . The parents already realize this child is not a child of God. It's evident. It was evident from the time he was four, five, six. I saw the rebellion in junior high. I saw the rebellion in high school. I saw his obstinate character. It didn't match mine. It doesn't come as a big surprise.

Again, Andrew emphasizes that character is formed early, "Well, at fourteen and

fifteen the dice have already been cast. What are you going to do that's different from

what you've already done?" And so parents must have correct priorities. Andrew

mentions the importance of Christian education for children, and that parents must be

held to their baptismal vows.

For example, in this area what's big, and surprisingly even in the United Reformed Church, is a lack of Christian education. What kind of reaping are we going to have when we sow that? I mean, are we really serious? We stand in church and say, "to the best of my ability"—then my car, my home, my everything is more important than my Christian school education? So you're not disciplining parents for that? So the parents need to be disciplined if they're not faithful in that calling. Don't blame the kid, who finally at fifteen or sixteen says goodbye. And that's why I said initially, parents better be very sure that they can say, it was not my neglect, I'm sinful but it was not my neglect.

Finally, when the interview closed I asked Andrew what practices of parents with apostate children he most wanted to see corrected. "What I want to see corrected is . . . let's start early so a parent does not have to fill himself with remorse about his own laxity with that child."

Robert speaks of the dangers of passive parenting when the children are young. "The kids, when they didn't bear the fruit that you might expect of twelve, thirteen or fourteen, it was glossed over. That's easier to do at fourteen than it is at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty." Jim emphasized analysis of "what went wrong" in order that parents could make corrections in their Christian nurture of the children still remaining in their home. Finally, Eric emphasized faithful Christian nurture as the best strategy to prevent defection from the faith when children are older. Particularly important to Eric was example.

> If a Christian dad loves and adores his children and is proud of his boys and is constantly affirming his girls, and all of that in the context of the instruction in the Christian faith and the exemplary living of that faith in front of them. I mean, nurture is, in my judgment, three things: it's instruction, it's discipline, and it's example. In some respects, I think the third is the most important, because it does all three things. It does the other two sort of with it. But you know, so much of life, it seems to me, whether you're talking about a marriage or a family, is the sort of total atmosphere that is created by the family culture, the parental culture, the marriage itself. I mean, it's a huge part of the exemplary part of Christian nurture if a husband, if the mom and dad are obviously in love and are happy in love and are laughing in love and they make the family circle a happy place to be and so on. Then you can spank a child, and three minutes later, everything is right

as rain. And the instruction that comes into that, a child's mind comes in the form of advice from a much beloved father who obviously knows how to live his life, because this is a really good life that's being lived before their eyes. So I think there's an awful lot about the positive investment of a dad in the life of his children, lovingly, affirmatively.

In summary, some pastors held that prevention was the most sure redemptive strategy for parents, because after the child has turned away, it is very difficult to draw them back.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The chapter examined how nine Reformed pastors ministered to the parents of wayward or apostate emerging adults. A compare and contrast method was used to analyze the interview data with the three research-question topics in view. The next chapter is devoted to consolidating the research from the literary research in chapter two and the pastor interviews that were compared and contrasted in chapter four to reveal common themes, after which the researcher will make concluding recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study is to explore how Reformed pastors minister to the

parents of wayward or apostate emerging adults. Three research questions guided the

study:

1. What challenges do Reformed pastors face in ministering to parents with apostate, emerging-adult children?

2. How do Reformed pastors address the emotional life of the parents of apostate, emerging-adult children?

3. In what ways do Reformed pastors help parents to act redemptively toward their apostate, emerging-adult children?

A literature survey was conducted in chapter two, focusing on three major areas

of study: literature pertaining to the religious lives of emerging adults, biblical and

theological literature pertaining to the transmission of faith and values from parents to

children, and the policies and procedures of the church toward the wayward adult

children of members. In chapter three, research methodology was identified, describing

how participants were selected, data gathered, interviews conducted and the data

analyzed. Chapter four presented the findings from the interviews, and this chapter brings

the data from the literature review together with the findings of the last chapter in order to

draw conclusions and make recommendations.

CHALLENGES OF MINISTERING TO PARENTS OF WAYWARD CHILDREN

Research indicated pastors are challenged by complexity, personal pastoral pain,

and uncooperative people.

The Challenge of Complexity

Both the literature and the findings from this research indicate that ministering to the parents of apostate or wayward emerging adults is often intensely challenging, partly because it is considerably complex. Complexities include the nature of emerging adulthood itself, theological ambiguity, tensions arising from different church policies regarding wayward children, and the given complexities of each individual situation.

Emerging adulthood

Arnett mentions emerging adulthood as a time of identity exploration, a self-focused age of exploration.[332] Smith reported that a common place for emerging adults to establish identity and differentiate from their parents was religion.[333] Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler argue, however, that the major shift does not occur in the emerging adults' religion itself, but rather in their religious practices, like attending services, reading their Bibles, and prayer.[334] They report that religious service attendance wanes for seventy percent of young adults. A decline in attendance among college students has been a concern going back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century, when McIlvaine complained that even "pious students" would not transfer membership to a congregation in their college town because everyone there was a stranger to them.[335] What level of concern should pastors and parents have when emerging adults stop attending regularly? Is this the beginnings of apostasy? Or is it merely exploration? Pastor Jim (CREC) regularly warns parents not to panic when their children "hit the rapids," but to view it as

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[332] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 8.
[333] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 78.
[334] Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler.
[335] McIlvaine: 255.

a discipleship opportunity. An overreaction from parents and pastors could serve to turn

the emerging adult child away.[336]

Baptism, profession of faith, church membership, and discipline

Theological complexity regarding the nature of baptism makes it difficult to see

the issues of apostasy clearly. How are the children of believers to be viewed as they

relate to the church? Lewis Bevins Schenck masterfully narrates how Reformed thinking

changed regarding the meaning and import of paedobaptism. Once viewed by the

Reformed church as full Christians who need to persevere in their faith, as a result of the

Great Awakening children of believers began to be seen as "quasi-members" who, in the

words of James Henley Thornwell, were "slaves" of the Devil and "enemies of God."[337]

These two perspectives are starkly different. Which is true? Or is neither? These

questions are significant, according to Schenck, affecting both whether the children

follow in their parents' faith, and what the church may do to reclaim them in the event

that they do not. On the question of how parental perspective affects whether children

follow their parents' faith, Lyman Atwater writes:

> Does not the attitude in which one is placed, have much to do in deciding what
> can be made of him? And in all its bearings upon the kind of training which will
> be given to a child, and the effect which that training will have upon him, is there
> not a heaven-wide difference between the question, whether he shall apostatize
> from the Church, in which he was born and reared, to the world from which he
> was taken, by the mercy of God, while yet a babe; or whether he shall renounce
> the world, and all its associations, to which he has been wedded by a life-long
> habit and association, to take his place in the Church? These and similar questions
> speak their own answer in the light of reason, experience, and the word of God.[338]

The perspective of the church toward its children also impacts how it responds if

they do happen to turn away. For example, if baptized non-communicants are not full

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[336] Lucas, 49-76.
[337] Schenck; Thornwell, "A Few More Words," 6.
[338] Atwater: 32-33.

members of the church, then the church has no business putting them out, because they were never fully "in." The theological questions debated centuries ago still linger. The reality is that there is not a settled consensus on the matter even today, a century and a half after the Presbyterian church debated the issue in the context of the revision of the Book of Discipline in 1857.

The pastors I interviewed feel these theological tensions in their ministries. Furthermore, rather than providing clarity, denominational procedures regarding wayward children were often viewed as confused and inadequate. Pastors from the PCA and OPC who were interviewed reported broad divergence within their own denominations as to how such procedures were interpreted. Pastor Eric (PCA) expressed frustration toward the "baptized non-communicant" category within his denomination as a "loophole" the church can use to avoid enacting discipline. He felt this allowed the church to abdicate responsibility to work through an unpleasant task. Andrew, an independent Reformed minister, complained, "I think the demarcation that the Reformed heritage has between confessing members and baptized members . . . is a false disjunction." He argued that all baptized members are subject to excommunication. One PCA and three OPC pastors interviewed preferred erasure as an alternative to excommunication, but here again, one wonders how often erasure is a means through which churches avoid the distasteful process of more public procedure.

Covenant succession

Another theological complexity pastors had to navigate was the question of whether God promises to save the children of believers if they raise them faithfully. On this question both the literature and the participants gave a spectrum of responses. Seth

described the theological continuum in Reformed churches as "everything from presumptive regeneration to Baptists," and noted that "the Reformed have a terrible time agreeing" on the subject. Even those advocating the strongest adherence to covenant succession allowed for mystery and dialectical tension in understanding the Scripture. But how pastors settle the question is likely to be quite influential on how they minister to grieving, doubting, heart-struck parents. Pastors embracing covenant succession are more likely to attribute a larger portion of responsibility for the child's waywardness to the parents.

Inter-church cooperation in restoring wayward emerging adults

One area that came to the surface in the interviews, but which did not factor prominently in the literature is the issue of inter-church relations as they pertain to wayward emerging adults. When a wayward adult child is being called to repentance by their church, some of these young people simply choose to switch churches. Given the multiplicity of churches in America, and the differing values represented, as well as broadly diverging policies and procedures, it is not difficult for them to find a church where their behavior will not be censured. Being able to leave the church that is holding one accountable and move instead to another, more lenient church, militates against the success of church discipline. But it makes perfect sense considering the desire people have to minimize cognitive dissonance. It allows wayward emerging adults to maintain the fiction that they are faithful Christians, their behavior is acceptable, and it is not them but their former church who has the problem (usually with "legalistic" standards). Robert (CREC) reported that when they excommunicated a young woman for unrepentant fornication, other churches were willing to receive her, and he had to go and speak with

the pastors. Because the Christian community does not speak with one voice on these issues, the redemptive power of discipline in diminished. In the words of Peter (OPC), ecclesiastical authority is "trivialized," and the church has "no big clubs."

Considering the issues mentioned above and the circumstances pertaining to each individual pastoral situation, the pastors interviewed repeatedly resorted to the language of qualification, often using the phrase "wisdom call" or the equivalent. These pastors clearly found ministering in these situations very difficult, because each was so unique. Besides those complexities listed above, complicating factors included alcohol abuse, drug addiction, mental illness, dysfunctional families, sexual abuse in childhood, the parents themselves, adoption, and the question of whether a child's waywardness undermines a father's qualification to serve as an elder or deacon. Pastor Sam—the oldest and longest serving of the participants—asserted, "[Pastors] can't begin to prepare" for these situations, outside of studying their Bibles.

The Challenge of Personal Pastoral Pain

When speaking about pain, the literature usually emphasized the emotional toll a child's waywardness had on the parents. Because this is a major focus of the second research question, parental pain will be addressed separately. What was missing from the literature I surveyed, but present in my interviews, was reference to the pain pastors experience in seeking to act redemptively toward wayward children. The pastors interviewed reported investing significant time, effort, prayer, and emotional energy in trying to restore the wayward emerging adults to repentance. But these same pastors reported being demonized, misunderstood, cussed out, threatened, and second-guessed by congregants who did not have access to all the facts. Occasionally, parents whom they

sought to help were turned against them. Because these pastors were the faces of authority, they were also often the focus of personal attacks and efforts by the wayward children to sow division between their parents and the church. Sometimes, the family of a wayward child, isolated and ashamed, would leave the church. This too was a grief.

Perhaps most painful for the pastors was watching people they love being heartbroken, and others they love making choices that may well bring dire consequences. Often accustomed to having ready answers, in the face of the complexities mentioned above the pastor may be left without much to say. Pastor Jonathan explained that pastors cannot protect these parents from pain, but can be present with them in the midst of it:

> You are not going to avoid the 'tearingness' of the struggle—this long, passionate argument with God. Okay? You *can't.* I don't think you can. And you've just got to stand by them, and say, I don't have the answers either. Except God. He is the answer. And the cross, okay?

Pastors struggle with the balance of maintaining proximity and distance—proximity in order to minister, distance in order to maintain the objectivity in order to minister effectively.

The Challenge of Uncooperative People

The very terms "wayward" and "apostate" imply people who do not value continued interaction with the church on its terms. Add to this that even pious emerging adults are less faithful with church involvement during this life-phase, and pastors discover that tracking down wayward emerging adults can be very absorbing, and sometimes exhausting. Seth (OPC) tells of employing every means available to establish communications with one young man who was avoiding contact, including phone calls, text messages, social media, home visits, and registered letters. Peter recalled one young man who was "dodging, drifting, and keeping his distance." Besides the effort pastors

exert to shepherd these young people personally, these emerging adults often dominate session meetings.

Meanwhile, the emerging adult may resort to spreading slander about church leaders to parents, friends, and church members in order to muster support for themselves and divide those whom they might view as "opposition." Church leaders who could release information that might exonerate themselves from blame may be reluctant to do so because they are seeking to do "damage control" on the reputation of the wayward emerging adult—in hopes that one day they will repent and be restored. Jonathan (CREC) reports, "It is hard for elders to know how much to say and how much not to say. What people don't realize is the things you don't say are to protect the sinner. And [the sinner] takes advantage of it. [Here he sighs with resignation.]" Manipulation and lying are two practices of wayward emerging adults which pastors and parents should expect and for which they should prepare.

One group of people pastors may not expect to be uncooperative is the parents of wayward children. After all, the pastor is often extending himself considerably on their behalf and on behalf of their troubled children. Some pastors might expect gratitude and cooperation from such parents. Indeed, gratitude and cooperation seem to be the norm. Yet they are not the uniform experience of pastors. The sociological literature surveyed in chapter two suggests that many wayward children have parents who, compared with parents of children who have not apostacized, reported lower religious service attendance and lower importance placed on faith.[339] Sociologists also suggest that such factors as parental warmth, communication, and intentionality in the religious socialization of their children affect whether their children embrace their faith and values. The same factors

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[339] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 230.

that made these parents ineffective in passing on their faith, may also make them difficult

to lead, counsel, and pastor. Jonathan told of pastoring a father who "knew the solution to

every problem . . . except his own." He was unteachable and defensive. Andrew

complained of the awkwardness of addressing the sinful tendencies of "touchy parents."

Robert reported dealing with parents who took sides with their children against the

session, and who enabled their children's waywardness out of fear of "losing them."

Other pastors reported this behavior as "coddling" or "indulgence."

Sinful parental habits are a difficulty, but also an opportunity if the pastor acts

with courage and sensitivity. C. John Miller—a PCA pastor—reports his daughter's

apostasy as an opportunity God used to get his own attention, as well as his daughter's,

about sinful patterns in their lives.[340] Both the literature and the interview data suggest

pastors should expect many, and sometimes significant opportunities to encourage

parents to greater spiritual growth and maturity through the circumstances of their child's

rebellion.

MINISTERING TO THE EMOTIONAL LIVES OF THE PARENTS OF WAYWARD CHILDREN

The second research question sought to discover how pastors ministered to the

emotional lives of the parents of apostate or wayward children. The literature and

interview data largely agreed regarding the types of emotions such parents encounter,

though the interview data gave a broader spectrum. Literature and interview data suggest

that parents of apostate adults are likely to experience a diverse range of emotions

including grief, shock, guilt, anger, bitterness, frustration, shame, stressed relationships

with other family members, despair, and weariness.

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[340] Miller and Juliani, *Come Back, Barbara.*

Perhaps the most significant way pastors can be of comfort to emotionally distressed parents is simply to stay engaged in acting redemptively toward their wayward children. The vast majority of parents of apostate children long for their children to repent and be restored. In my research, only Jonathan mentioned a situation where a father seemed indifferent to his child's spiritual state. However, while parents wait on God's timing for the restoration of their children, the data indicate that pastors can be somewhat helpful in assisting them to process their emotions, and govern them biblically.[341]

Ministering to Parents Experiencing Grief and Shock

Because Reformed parents generally have high expectations that their children will follow them in the faith, when they do not, the realization can be particularly devastating. The pastors I interviewed used a diverse vocabulary to describe parental pain, including, "crushed," "brokenhearted," "heartbroken," "sad," "betrayed," "grieving," "very hard," "very painful," "exquisitely painful," "flattened," "glazed," "hit by a truck," "bleeding," "broken," and "riddled with grief." Different reasons for the sorrow are given. Frequently it is grief flowing from concern about their child's spiritual state. The apostle Paul voiced this type of grief in his epistle to the Romans, where he testifies, "I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren."[342] Jane Adams also mentions parents' grief of unfulfilled expectations concerning their child.[343]

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[341] Though in the following discussion I have treated the emotional responses separately, parents rarely feel emotions in isolation of one another.
[342] Romans 9:2-3.
[343] Adams, 15ff.

Depending on the focus of the grief, pastors respond differently. Several pastors mentioned the sovereignty of God in salvation as a comfort to grieving parents. Robert emphasized the importance of staying near to grieving parents. When parents experience shock because the expected outcome regarding their children's faith did not eventuate, pastors emphasized that often such parents had adopted a formulaic, works-based approach to imparting their faith. Jim likened this formulaic approach to "ticking off boxes on a checklist." In response to parents who assert that they did everything they were taught, Jim replies, "Well no. You were taught to believe, you were taught to trust, you were taught not to work for it." Pastors reported using such circumstances as an opportunity to instruct regarding the place of faith and works as they related to childrearing and the promises of God.

Ministering to Parents Experiencing Guilt

Parental guilt was a common theme in both the literature and among interview participants. Frank encountered parents who reason, "If my kid's a screw up, it's because I'm a major screw up somewhere. So what did I do wrong?" Authors such as Lucas, Parsons, and Lawrence sought to give comfort by reassuring parents that a child's apostasy is not uncommon, and not necessarily a reflection on the parents or the quality of their childrearing.[344] White has a more nuanced approach, saying the issue of fault is complex, including factors such as nurture, genetic predisposition, and the personal choices of the wayward child himself.[345] Gross, Rayburn, Wikner, and advocates of covenant succession in general seem more comfortable indicating a parental source of responsibility for a child's prodigality, while not denying the free agency of the child.

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[344] See, for example, Lawrence.
[345] White, *Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children*, 25-37.

Pastors can be helpful to parents by assisting them in identifying false guilt from true guilt. This is important because wayward children are adept at making their parents feel guilty. Frank voiced the approach of many pastors when he said parents who feel guilty should confess their sin and receive God's mercy. Seth encourages parents struggling with guilt that "Christ died for your sins as a parent. . .and you need to look to him for forgiveness and you need to humble yourself and repent."

A deeper question is under what circumstances it is wise for ministers to try to help parents analyze what went wrong. Jonathan sees the value of analysis to be personal and pastoral. He does not do it with parents, but does consider the question himself so he can be more effective as a pastor. Jim advocates analysis with the parents so any sinful habits can be corrected for the sake of other children still in the home. Andrew and Sam both hold that there is little parents can do when their children go astray, so such analysis would be largely unfruitful. Eric rarely analyzes because it only makes worse what is one of the most "exquisitely painful" experiences parents have ever faced. Most literature seems to reflect Eric's approach by not focusing on past parental failures. Whether pastors choose to help parents analyze "what went wrong" seems to depend on circumstances, and is a wisdom call.

Ministering to Parents Experiencing Anger, Bitterness, and Frustration

While the literature alluded in passing to parents' anger with their children, it did not substantively address two foci of anger that surfaced in the interviews, namely, anger with the church and anger at God. Regarding child-directed anger, Jane Adams writes,

> If our overriding feelings are resentment, anger, and frustration rather than fear, worry, and alarm, chances are we're reacting to what we see as their immaturity,

poor judgment, or failure to act responsibly, the result of which infringes on our rights, resources, and privacy.[346]

Seth has experienced this child-directed anger in his ministry. He addresses it by encouraging parents that they must not take their child's rebelliousness personally and that they cannot act redemptively if they are not motivated by love. He calls parents to follow God's example, who "serves us even when we are rebellious." He warns, "Anytime you ask somebody to lay down their own rights, you're gonna get slapped in the face. Because what you are saying is 'You're not the center of the universe.'"

Two areas the literature did not focus on substantively were parents' anger at the church, and their anger at God. Though this was mentioned occasionally by the pastors I interviewed, it was not a major theme. Parental anger at the church largely had to do with the parents feeling protective toward their wayward child when that child is under church discipline. Anger or frustration was also reported at the apparent inactivity of the session toward the wayward child. Both causes of parental anger at the church seem that they can be alleviated through communication. In the former case, the church needs to emphasize the fact that it is *for* the wayward child, always seeking their best. Their actions in this regard will be more effective than verbal assurances, but even these are welcome. In the latter case, where parents are frustrated by what they see as inactivity on the session, this is sometimes an optical illusion. At times much is happening in session meetings, but these deliberations and decisions are not communicated to parents regularly. Frequent, open communication is an excellent preventative against anger, frustration, and bitterness. It also seems to contribute to promoting a unified front, which will be discussed below.

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[346] Adams, 153.

The final focus of anger, bitterness, and frustration was God. Doubting God could also be included in this cluster. Only a few pastors mentioned experiencing this in parents. Pastors reported that parents were angry at God largely for the same reasons people become upset when confronted with the exhaustive sovereignty of God. Jim speaks for many pastors in saying that he addressed this by "going back to Calvinism 101. Our God is in the heavens, he does as he pleases." Other pastors emphasized the attributes of God, particularly his mercy.

Ministering to Parents Experiencing Shame

Both the literature and the research of chapter four spoke of parents who felt significant shame at the waywardness of their children. White speaks of the need for parents to relinquish the right to be proud of their children.[347] Lawrence warns readers of envying others' godly children. But the interview data indicate a much more pronounced sense of shame among parents of wayward emerging adults. Jonathan said such parents feel that they are the "pimple on the face of this church" and that everyone in church is looking at them disapprovingly. Some parents transfer membership to a new church in order to start fresh. Parents feel isolated and estranged, particularly when they most need other members of the body of Christ to encourage them.

Pastors spoke of the need to educate the congregation that child-rearing is not a competition. This should be especially true in congregations where covenantal theology is taught. God's people belong to him, and to one another. They are members of the same body, and equally dependent upon divine grace. Therefore we are to share one another's joys and sorrows.

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[347] White, *Parents in Pain: Overcoming the Hurt and Frustration of Problem Children*, 165-7.

Robert emphasized teaching his church to be "for" one another, a truth he particularly emphasized in preparing the congregation to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Jonathan said the congregation needs to be with the grieving parents without pointing the finger. He also spoke of the need to instruct the congregation in how, when, and how often to speak with parents about their wayward children. Compassion, humility, and sensitivity seem to be critical in ministering to the parents of wayward emerging adults. They need to be embraced, and not ostracized. For Robert, embracing hurting parents meant seeing much of them, whether their children were a topic of conversation or not.

Unique among both the literature and the interview data was Jim, who said that when one reads Proverbs it is clear that shame is an appropriate response for parents whose children are wayward. This is true. And yet, because Christ took our shame, parents should move through shame to peace. Christians should remind one another that they are not naked, but clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Ministering to Families Under Stress

A wayward child can often dominate the ethos of the home. Parents' attention is focused very specifically on the rebellious child, and spouses and other children can be neglected. Disagreements between husband and wife can become more frequent and more severe, as parents navigate issues of blame, differences in preferred child rearing, and what the family's rules of engagement will be with the wayward child. This occurs in the context of the broad range of other emotions the family experiences, as well as in the context of other children who, quite rightly, want their parents' attention.

Frank told of his own siblings confronting him when he was acting rebelliously. He now encourages parents to set boundaries, and to remember to invest in the other

family members. Adams, White, and Lawrence, among others, speak of the strain that wayward children can place on the marriage. In White's opinion, this circumstance can either "strengthen a marriage or wreck it."[348] He stresses the importance of the parents maintaining harmony and a united front: "The welfare of children rests more on parental unity than on any child-rearing expertise the parents may have. Parents can get away with many mistakes if their children see them as a solid, loving alliance."[349] Communication skills are obviously important in order to cultivate unity.

Several of the pastors mentioned the wayward child's potentially corrupting influence on the other children. In light of this possibility some pastors counseled parents to allow wayward children little or no contact with siblings still living at home. Others counseled interaction on a more liberal basis, but always with a view to protecting the siblings. The amount of interaction the wayward child is allowed to have is largely dependent upon circumstances. Eric's principle, however, seems wise. Parents should want to have their wayward children around as much as possible—circumstances dictating.

Ministering to Despairing and Weary Parents

Considering the intensity and breadth of emotions these parents experience, ministers are likely to encounter parents who are despairing and weary. One of Pastor Jim's greatest concerns was that parents give up too soon and "acquiesce to the new normal." Frank emphasizes relentless, enduring prayer, and gave a number of examples where prayers sustained over decades eventually were answered with returning prodigals.

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[348] Ibid., 105.
[349] Ibid., 106.

Both the literature and the interview data stressed that the way to minister to despairing parents is simply to keep encouraging them not to give up hope because our God is a God who delights in mercy, a God, as Frank puts it, "of hard cases." Even when wayward children extract themselves from their parents' circle of influences, even when they cut off communication, God is working. Sometimes he works entirely apart from the home church, pastor, parents, and friends that saw the prodigal leave for the far country. Sometimes his work is invisible to the parents and they may be tempted to think their child a lost cause. But parents and those supporting them must continue to persevere in prayer, planning the homecoming party for when the wayward child returns.

Summary

Having one's child apostatize is perhaps one of the most excruciating experiences a parent can experience. The pain comes in the form of grief, anger, shame, familial stress and other emotions. Great wisdom and emotional intelligence is necessary for pastors to minister effectively. However, with the challenge of ministering to Christians who are suffering so intensely also comes tremendous opportunity. Through the tragedy of a child's rebellion, God is transforming the lives of a whole host of people: parents, siblings, church members, and the minister himself. Ministering to the emotional lives of the parents of wayward children promises to be intense. Pastors, however, should liken these seasons to the intensity of harvest—hard labor is rewarded with good gospel fruit.

REDEMPTIVE COUNSEL FOR THE PARENTS OF WAYWARD CHILDREN

Every individual is unique, as well as the families and churches of which they are members. Therefore the counsel that is appropriate for parents when their emerging adult children are wayward will vary depending on the circumstances. Nevertheless, certain

principles and themes emerged from the research that should be applicable to a variety of

situations. Three major themes were prevalent: the need for thoughtful, biblical rules of

engagement; the need for there to be a united front among parents, family, and church;

and the need for the gospel to saturate not merely the wayward child, but the parents and

family as well.

Rules of Engagement

As pastors are counseling parents on how to act redemptively toward their

wayward emerging adult children, one set of questions they are likely to field will have to

do with the rules of engagement.

Much of the literature pertaining to winning back wayward children is not written

from a Reformed perspective. Moreover, much of it is not even written from a

perspective that would look at formal church discipline as a serious option. Therefore the

literature reviewed did not seriously consider the ramifications of public discipline upon

the family. John Owen and Francis Turretin, both seventeenth-century theologians,

mention that excommunication does not sever familial bonds. The pastors I interviewed

were in harmony with this historic position as far as it went, but it did not seem to go

nearly far enough to answer questions parents had regarding how they should engage

their wayward child socially. The participants did not believe their denominations to have

spoken decisively on the matter, and so each session acted as it saw fit, within the broad

guidelines given by their respective denominations. Most pastors mentioned that though

social relations with wayward children should continue, it was important for the children

to know that things were "not normal."

Both the literature and the interviewees held that parents should seek to maintain regular, civil interaction with their wayward child. Parents should do so with a sensitive eye on the rest of the family. Interaction should be marked by both kindness and confrontation. At times, this was acknowledged as a difficult balance to strike. Jonathan used God's own tender and then firm parenting behavior in the Old Testament as an example he commended to the parents he pastored. Both literature and the participants stressed the importance of parents establishing and maintaining firm boundaries upon which both spouses agreed. Especially important was that they were not to subsidize, coddle, or enable the rebellion of their adult children, nor capitulate to their manipulation in an effort not to "lose" them. This meant that parents must steel themselves to allow their children to experience the consequences of their choices—however painful that might be. White and Adams both mentioned this as the manner most calculated to establish dignity and self-respect in the child.

The Importance of a United Front

Community is vital to emerging adults, but they do not often see the church as providing it for them.[350] This seems a profound weakness for the church. As Sam emphasized, when there is healthy church community, formal discipline becomes less and less necessary. His argument was that by the time formal discipline was enacted, there was already an adversarial relationship between the wayward person and the session. It was far more effective, in his opinion, for friends and family to interact informally with the wayward person, and call them back to faithfulness. The point of relevance here is that if there is little community to draw the wayward child back to, then

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[350] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 152.

both informal appeals and judicial process will be almost meaningless to the child as a motivator for repentance.

If the behavior of an emerging adult has excited parental or pastoral concern, it is critical for parents, families, and the church to all be of one mind, and speak with one voice. The pastors I interviewed indicated that a wayward child will often be able to detect and exploit differences between parents. If the parents are united, the child is likely to seek an ally among the siblings. If the family is united, the child may try to drive a wedge between the family and the church. But when all parties are in agreement, it sends a powerful message, and accentuates cognitive dissonance—the child cannot maintain the fiction that he or she can act scandalously and still be a good Christian. Robert stressed that the repentance of one emerging adult who had embraced homosexuality was largely because his parents, family, and church all were of one mind and one voice.

Related to this is the need for the entire church community to seek the repentance of the wayward child together—as a body. Jonathan mentioned regular corporate prayer for the child. Pastors repeatedly brought up the way various members of their congregation would be instrumental in drawing the sinning member back to faithfulness and fellowship within the community. Rob Parsons writes, "If we are wise, we will allow other adults—friends of ours, youth leaders, sports leaders—to play a part in molding our children's lives."[351] Maintaining contact with wayward members may be difficult and sometimes awkward, but apparently it is quite meaningful to them. In order to realize this goal of the entire church acting as one man in seeking to restore the wayward child, pastors mentioned the need for clear teaching, regular updates, and plenty of communication.

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[351] Parsons, 35.

Transformed by Grace

A third theme which arose from the data was the importance of parents allowing God's grace to saturate and transform them and their families. In the midst of the tragedy of a child's apostasy, parents are often focused—and with good reason—on the need for God's transforming grace for their wayward child. But while maintaining this focus, parents should also look for God's grace to transform themselves as well.

Booth and Gross each write of the need for parents to allow the pain of the crisis to motivate them to self-examination and confession. C. John Miller writes of how his own daughter's rebellion exposed areas of sin in his life that needed to be transformed by grace. As terrible as it is for a child to fall away from the faith, God often uses it to transform parents. Pastor Jim stressed that it is this very transformation, transformation of the parent, that gives hope to the wayward child. According to Jim, when someone we know changes radically, it is often used as a catalyst for change in our lives. So he counsels parents who want their children to change to show them how to do so through their own example. He counsels them to consider any way they have sinned against their child, to confess those sins to the child, and to allow God's grace to transform their character. Jonathan spoke of the need for vulnerability in both parents and pastors. A child should not feel like he or she is the only person who struggles with temptation and sin. When parents are vulnerable with their children, they are more accessible, and more likely to be consulted by their children when they need help or encouragement. As parents model repentance to their children, and speak of how grace is transforming them, their children are given hope.

Another emphasis is the importance for parents to remember that children are raised by grace through faith, and not by works. Many parents who have appropriated God's grace for their own salvation still have difficulty applying it to the question of how their children will turn out. This is a critical area of misunderstanding, as many parents look to programs or techniques to ensure that their children embrace their faith. But as Rayburn, Parsons, and others emphasize, no child is saved without divine intervention. Grace is necessary. God must act and intervene. Parents who have adopted a formulaic child-rearing method, but who have not been looking to God in faith to fulfill his promises now have the opportunity to make foundational changes.

As parents are being transformed by grace, and awaiting the transformation of their wayward children, both the literature and the participants agree on the need for perseverance over the long haul. Sociological data indicate that many children who leave the faith eventually return, though for some parents whose children are especially estranged from God it may be difficult to imagine the returning prodigal. But the Bible assures us that with God all things are possible. In light of this, Edward Gross emphasizes the need for prayer: "Like Paul, pray with the intensity of a woman giving birth until your children are saved (Gal. 4:19). Like Jacob, wrestle with God and do not let go until he answers (Gen. 32:24-30)."[352] In like manner, Frank emphasized the need to pray steadfastly for transformative grace, "But I know our God is a faithful God. Some are still out there, and we keep saying, 'Pray and keep praying. It may be 10, 20, 30 years. Never give up. Our God is a God of hard cases.'"

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[352] Gross, 129-130.

Summary

Redemptive action will differ from case to case, though some principles remain constant across all situations. In the literature and interviews considered in this study, two of these principles were, first, that parents should work together to establish and maintain specific rules of engagement. Because of the importance of community, the parents, family, and church should maintain a united front. And lastly, through the tragedy of apostasy God can and does work his good, holy, and sovereign will. The faith crisis of wayward children is an opportunity for parents themselves to have longstanding sinful habits and attitudes transformed by grace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pastors ministering to the parents of wayward or apostate emerging adults are likely to be vexed and stretched by the complexities and challenges they face. Sometimes, being a faithful minister in these circumstances will simply mean more personal sacrifice and pain. But as we lay our lives down in a thousand little deaths, God resurrects us to die again. And so with a little perspective, ministers can see the crisis as an opportunity for grace to sweep through their congregations, and even their communities. With this in mind, and in light of the research, I make the following recommendations.

Prevention

It was uncanny how often the pastors I interviewed returned to the subject of prevention. Indeed, much of the literature focused on which factors were likely to contribute to emerging adults retaining or rejecting their parents' faith. It stressed the importance of early training—the earlier the better. It emphasized the need for warm

parent-child relationships, where the parents embrace the significance of their parental role. Parental example is of staggering significance. Parents who are practitioners of what Christian Smith identifies as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism are likely to find that their grown children have embraced their religion.[353] Church community also seems to be of vital importance. Children need a host of other adults who are accessible and safe with whom they can talk about life, their faith, and their problems. A church community with strong relational ties, one where families work, serve, play, hang out, pray, celebrate, grieve, learn and worship together is the kind of community which will make church discipline, as Sam said, less necessary, less frequent.

I recommend that pastors teach more regularly on childrearing and work preventatively to address issues while children are young. Two of the pastors I interviewed had a very conscientious commitment to family visitation. This afforded them the opportunity to gently address problems with parent-child dynamics while the children were small. Since they practiced annual visitation, each family received many small course-corrections over the years, rather than having to make one large course-correction when crisis was upon them. As Andrew suggests, by then it is too late. Whether visitation is the appropriate fit for each particular congregation will vary. The principle of pastoral attentiveness and input while the children are young is a non-negotiable.

Reinforcing Covenantal Indicatives

As a result of this research, I believe that the church's failure to embrace and reinforce the covenantal indicatives contributes to the apostasy of our young people. In

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[353] The curious thing is that these parents might be alarmed at their children's spiritual drift. Perhaps this is because their self-perception of their own religiosity is higher than reality.

the Bible, God is constantly reminding his people of their identity through indicatives.

Our society seems to be less certain than ever regarding the matter of identity. Familial

identity, sexual identity, vocational identity, religious and covenantal identity—all seem

in flux today. One of Arnett's five distinguishing marks of emerging adulthood is the

search for identity. Emerging adults seem to meander between adolescence and full

adulthood for such a lengthy period because they are trying to discover who they are.

Some of this discovery is healthy and inevitable. For instance, emerging adults

need to discover their vocation, and this often takes time. Selecting a spouse is also a

lengthy endeavor. But other areas of identity do not need to be discovered because they

are revealed by God. As such, they simply need to be believed. For instance, if Christians

really internalized the indicatives regarding the immortality and dignity of human beings,

it could transform how they sanctify the parental task. This in turn could effect

consistency of parenting, and, if the research is not mistaken, with salutary results.

Indicatives inform and empower imperatives.

God reinforces the identity of his covenant people through Word and sacrament.

This research has particularly focused on what God says about his people's identity

through baptism. The research revealed that the Reformed church has historically

believed that baptism tells us we belong to God and are full heirs of the blessings of

redemption. With the Great Awakening and the adoption of what Rayburn identifies as a

"revivalist and voluntarist view of salvation,"[354] the Reformed church has begun to send

mixed messages to children about their covenantal status. We do this in three ways.

First, we send mixed messages to our baptized children when we require of them

a conversion experience or, at the minimum, a profession of faith similar to professions

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[354] Rayburn, "To You and Your Children," 16.

given by newly evangelized converts, before allowing them the full privileges of church

membership. Evangelizing baptized children assumes they are outside and not inside the

company of God's people. Covenant nurture, and not evangelism, is consistent with the

indicatives of baptism. Rather than calling covenant children to come to Christ in faith

(as if for the first time), covenant nurture calls them—like it does all believers—to *keep*

coming to him in faith. When parents have a deeper understanding of baptism, they will

be better able to reinforce the glorious indicatives of baptism to their children. This will

reinforce their covenantal identity.

Second, we send mixed messages to our baptized children by unduly delaying

their admittance to the Lord's Supper—often into their teens. God speaks indicatives

through baptism, but he also does so through the Lord's Supper. Baptism says, "You

belong to God. You are a son or daughter of the Most High." But as long as we bar our

children from the Lord's Table, we risk sending a message that exactly *conflicts with the*

indicatives of baptism. Vern Poythress points out the inconsistencies of Baptists who

might acknowledge that a two- or three-year-old has genuine faith, but are still reluctant

to baptize them.

> To this position the reply must be, "Why do you not baptize them?" The delay of
> baptism is hypocritical. You say that you see these people as fellow Christians,
> and that they are in the family of God. Your words say it, but your action denies
> it. Withholding baptism says *in action* that they are not in the family of God.[355]

Could not the exact same argument apply to paedobaptists who are reluctant to

bring their children to the Lord's Supper? Through baptism, God says to our children that

they belong to him, are members of the church, and are Christians. By denying these

same children access to the Lord's Table, we negate the indicatives of baptism.

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[355] Vern S. Poythress, "Indifferentism and Rigorism in the Church: With Implications for Baptizing Small Children," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 1 (1997): 23.

Third, we send our baptized children a mixed message by refusing them the church's discipline, should they prove wayward as emerging adults. By doing so, we effectively negate the indicatives of baptism. If it is hypocritical for Baptists to refuse baptism to children whom they reckon as brothers, is it not hypocritical for paedobaptists to deny the sonship of baptized children by exempting them from discipline? In Hebrews 12:7 the author asks, "For what son is there whom a father does not chasten?" To this, some Reformed churches must answer, "Baptized non-communicants." The indicative of baptism is that those who receive it are true sons. The indicative of exemption from discipline is that they are illegitimate. Which indicative are our children to believe? Church leaders should not be surprised when their young people are uncertain of their covenantal identity. The church has cultivated this uncertainty by not consistently reinforcing the indicatives of baptism.

This system of having both full members and baptized non-communicant members in the church[356] has caused confusion among Reformed churches in every century since at least the Great Awakening and the "half-way covenant."[357] This confusion is particularly on display in the nineteenth century. Here, overtures were made to presbytery early in the century on how to deal with baptized non-communicant adult children who are "contumacious." In order to answer the question of how to govern and possibly discipline these young adults, the theological indicatives of baptism had to be settled first. Exactly what does baptism say about a child? These questions began to be debated with relation to church discipline in the revision of the Book of Discipline in 1857. At this time, some of best minds in the Presbyterian church were focused on a

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[356] A system identified as "the two-tiered system" by Pastor Eric.
[357] Schenck, 54ff.

solution to this question. Unfortunately the Civil War cut the discussion off prematurely. The branch of the Presbyterian church that would eventually become the PCA ultimately adopted the position of the Southern Presbyterians (represented most notably by Thornwell) without much further debate. The lack of closure has only brought confusion, so I recommend that scholars and pastors return to and seek closure on the unfinished debate surrounding the proposed revision of the Book of Discipline in 1857.

As theologians and pastors again debate these matters, it seems that in the interval the awkwardness of the two-tiered system may be at least partially mitigated without violating anyone's conscience. I recommend that paedobaptistic churches apply Poythress' counsel to Baptists on how to evaluate professions of faith from very young children.[358] This could drastically shorten the interval between a child's baptism and his or her admittance to the Lord's Supper. If the only baptized non-communicants in the church are very small children, the question of discipline will not be ecclesiastical, but familial.

Prepare Parents for What May Lie Ahead

So far, recommendations have been focused on how the church can diminish apostasy among emerging adults. Rather than engage the full breadth of that question, recommendations focused on a few specific areas related to imparting covenantal identity, since identity exploration is such a critical matter to emerging adults. But the bulk of this research was focused on why emerging adults fall away from the faith, and how pastors can effectively minister to their parents. Research indicated that parents primarily wanted assistance in restoring their wayward child to faithfulness. But while this was occurring, the parents and families themselves had significant needs.

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[358] Poythress: 17-21.

Research indicated that sometimes the early signs of apostasy can be seen quite early, but other times a child's departure from the faith takes everyone completely by surprise. In the former case, the early warning seems to cushion the blow for everyone. But it would be a mistake to think the parents would not still be wrestling with powerful emotions. Regardless of the circumstances, the pastor should seek a meeting with the parents soon after news reaches him of the child's apostasy or scandalous behavior. Robert's counsel of seeking just to "be present" with parents seems wise. There will be much to say, but first the minister should listen carefully, grieve with the parents, pray, and answer any questions that might come to their minds. Eventually, the pastor should request a time to meet, to talk about what to expect, and what to do.

Judging by both common sense and the unwillingness of the seasoned participants to give formulaic answers, what parents can expect will vary from case to case. That disclaimer aside, there are certain temptations, challenges, and opportunities which commonly present themselves when a covenant child heads for the far country. As the pastor walks with the family through the tragedy, he should take opportunity to address issues with sensitivity as to how much and what type of information is suitable, and how best to communicate it.

An initial goal for the pastor should be to impart hope. There is much reason for hope. Biblically, we are reminded of the many promises of Scripture that God will be a God to us and our children.[359] Sociologically, we see that many children who leave the faith will return as they marry, have children, and embrace full adulthood. Like the father of the prodigal son, parents should always be looking for, praying for, their child's return. Pastors do no injustice to parents by imparting hope, indeed, in calling parents to faith.

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[359] Gen. 17:7.

Not knowing God's time frame, pastors would do a kindness to parents by preparing them for a long time-horizon.

Without being alarmist, it seems wise to alert parents to some of the challenges and temptations that may present themselves. Parents should be encouraged to be aware of the potential impact a child's rebellion can have on the family. For one, it can place great strain on a marriage. It can also be the occasion for greater union and intimacy. Which way it goes will largely depend on how the parents respond. They may be tempted, for instance, to blame one another or to withdraw from one another. Instead, they need to commit themselves to support one another, to be "for" one another.

Another challenge parents may face is the effort of the wayward child to "divide and conquer" within the family unit, specifically by seeking allies among siblings or extended family. Oftentimes this is done by demonizing those in authority. The family should be encouraged to talk about these possibilities. Now is a prime opportunity for parents to repair any relationships with their other children that may also be strained. They should take responsibility for and confess parental negligence, inconsistency, exasperating actions, and other sins. This confession and repentance needs to occur with all the children—particularly the wayward child.

Here parents can also be encouraged regarding the importance of a united front. Parents themselves must agree on their course of action with the wayward child, and their specific rules of engagement. This includes, among others, the questions of financial subsidy, the child's social interaction with siblings, how often and under what conditions the child is in the family home, and the general message that parents speak to the children. The other siblings also need to understand and embrace these rules of

engagement. They also need to understand what it means to treat their sibling with kindness and civility, while never giving the impression that everything is just as it used to be. In all of this, the family must act as one. The same can be said of the need for the family and the session to be of one mind, and for there to be unity of mind among the congregation.[360] A united front is a compelling witness to wayward children.

While many of the things parents should be prepared to expect generally have a negative feel, it is not universally so. Even in the midst of their despair, parents should be encouraged to expect God's grace. Is this, to use Randy Booth's metaphor, a "bad chapter in a good book?"[361] Is it always glib or cliché to suggest that it *is*? While pastors should not minimize the painful nature of the trial, and to genuinely enter into the parents' grief, they have a duty to remind parents of God's covenant keeping love. What good thing might God be doing in the parents? In the siblings? In the congregation? Because God is acting graciously, we should cooperate with his gracious intent and seek to respond to adversity with humility and thankfulness. As parents are themselves transformed by grace, some of the internal objections wayward children may harbor toward the faith may become invalidated.

Should pastors prepare parents for the emotions they might experience? This seems to depend largely on circumstances. It seems that in many cases it might be wise simply to be aware of how the family is doing emotionally and spiritually, and prepare to address emotional issues as they surface.

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[360] This will require the session to communicate clearly with the congregation, for which, see below.
[361] Booth, 171.

The Wayward Child and the Local Church

The local church has a critical, redemptive role when one of its covenant children is wayward or apostate. Covenant community is perhaps one of the most effective means of retaining our children, and drawing them back when they are wayward. If friends, church members, and family members are all encouraging one another in their common faith, crises can be diffused while they are still small.

The reality is that covenant community is something many churches pursue, but few really feel they have attained. So what does the local church do when one of its sons or daughters wanders? This will largely depend on how well they are led. And here the pastor's role is especially important. I recommend that pastors gather heads of households and their spouses to instruct them on what the church's response ought to be. This is often an area of great confusion, particularly if the situation has reached the level where the child is suspended from the Lord's Table. When this occurs, normal relations between congregants and the wayward child are to be suspended—but the wayward child is still to be treated as a brother.[362] Exactly what does that mean? Church members need to understand the principles so that they can apply them. It is an opportunity for them to grow in wisdom and maturity.

As the heads of households gather to discuss redemptive strategies and to pray, the session should also warn them of temptations they might face. Anger, pride, and self-righteousness are common temptations in these situations. But so are apathy, indolence, and abdication. As Jonathan emphasized, church discipline and restoration is not something the session does in isolation, but something for which the whole body of Christ is responsible.

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[362] 2 Thess. 3:14-15.

A particular temptation the church should especially be warned against is the temptation to withdraw from, judge, or isolate the parents whose child has rebelled. This is a painful time for them. The pain is multiplied when their covenant community treats them as "the pimple on the face of the church." But often the community withdraws simply because they do not know what to say. Perhaps that is exactly what to say—"I am so sorry to hear of Frank. I don't know what to say." An embrace, a note, a phone call—all of these are powerful ways for the community to draw together around the grieving family. And often, these very responses are exactly the responses needed toward the wayward child.

Another way for the community to draw around the grieving family is through prayer. In one church, a group spontaneously formed which calls itself, "Parents of prodigals."[363] Led by a former church officer, parents of prodigal children gather to share what is happening in the lives of their wayward children, and then they drop to their knees to pray. A box of tissues sits prominently in the center, within reach. After the parents pray, they share fellowship around a meal. Parents have reported great encouragement through these meetings, and answered prayer. I recommend that pastors consider whether such a group would be of benefit in their congregations.

John Owen particularly emphasizes fasting and prayer whenever discipline is enacted. Besides praying for the children and families in worship, I recommend that congregations set aside regular days of fasting and prayer, specifically for the return of wayward children. This helps to ensure that the prodigal is not forgotten, and that the congregation stays engaged.

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[363] In this particular church of roughly forty-five families, five couples actively participate in this group. At least one couple who might participate have proven reluctant to do so. Embarrassment seems to be a significant factor. The leader of the group refers to it as "the group that no one wants to be a part of."

The church also acts when the session acts. As pastors and elders seek to navigate the complex issues surrounding restoring wayward children, a high degree of trust from the congregation is necessary. Trust is sometimes strained because the session is not sharing all it could with the congregation because they want to do all they can to protect the reputation of the child, in view of his or her anticipated homecoming. It might help significantly simply to articulate this reality. It is important for leaders to have good will toward those under discipline, and it is vital to the trust of the church for this good will to be visible.[364] Perhaps this good will is best displayed in the informal attempts to win the wayward child back to the faith. A. W. Miller's counsel, which has been quoted twice already in this dissertation, seems to strike the right tone. It majors on informal procedures, and only in the face of the failure of these procedures, reluctantly but resolutely embraces formal procedures.[365] Proceeding at a measured pace with discipline also shows that the session is interested in redemption and restoration, and not merely with getting a troublesome person off of the session's agenda.

Just as parents need to be prepared to expect God's transforming grace, so should the congregation. One important way this can be done is by preparing the congregation to receive the prodigal back. Will they be ready to receive the returning son back if he is sporting tattoos on his face? Will they receive a returning daughter if she no longer meets the unstated dress code? Jeff Lucas writes of the turmoil repentant sinners cause in what he calls "happy family" churches. In his view, most churches are not "prodigal

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[364] This good will is difficult to fake. There is a difficult balance pastors must strike between leading the congregation by example, and not staging opportunities to "show how much one cares."
[365] If initial stages of church discipline fail with baptized non-communicants, I recommend they be subject to judicial procedure also. Nothing less than this is consistent with the indicatives of baptism.

friendly."[366] A significant contributing factor in this transformation seems to be a self-conscious desire for God to change congregational values. Here again, grace is active. As horrible as the defection of a covenant child, it can be the leverage God employs to transform the congregation to a place where grace flows freely.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This research sought to explore ways that Reformed pastors ministered to the parents of apostate or wayward emerging adults. Several areas for further study are recommended.

An obvious area for further study has already been addressed, but deserves repeating here. The church needs to return to the unfinished debate surrounding the revision of the Book of Discipline in 1857. The OPC and URC both reflect the Northern position, held by Hodge and the Princetonians, which subject baptized non-communicants to judicial procedure. The PCA seems to reflect the Southern position. The Reformed church needs to speak with a unified voice on the subject, and this requires deeper study and consensus on the indicatives of baptism toward covenant children.

As it addresses the indicatives of baptism and how that relates to church discipline, another needed area of research is exactly which procedures the church should adopt regarding apostate young adults. Data indicate that churches can expect an increasing number of its children to drop out of the church. Exactly what should churches do? Pastors seem to desire greater direction on the denominational level. Policies and procedures need to be sufficiently pointed in order to be of help, while still allowing flexibility for sessions to adapt to the unique issues of each case.

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[366] Jeff Lucas, *Creating a Prodigal-Friendly Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

Another area of needed research is to compare the retention and apostasy rates of congregations that practice paedocommunion against those who delay bringing baptized children to the Lord's Supper until their teens.

Finally, though much fine research has been done on 2 Thessalonians 3:15, pastors expressed a desire for more answers on how it applies to inter-familial social interaction in the context of church discipline.

FINAL WORDS

The apostasy and spiritual drift of covenant children is a great sorrow to parents, churches, and their pastors. However, by the grace of God many children who turn away from the Lord eventually turn back to him. In the process, God is not only transforming the wayward children, but many of their siblings, parents, friends, and other members of the covenant community. The pastor's role in leading parents and people to impart grace and be transformed by it is vital. It is my desire that the conclusions and recommendations of this research will help pastors do so more faithfully and effectively. Soli Deo Gloria.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What common misunderstandings of covenant succession do you address with parents?

2. Tell me of a time when you ministered to parents whose emerging adult children turned away from Christ. What did that look like?

3. What Scriptures do you turn to in ministering to these parents? Which Scriptures, in ministering to these parents, do you find most perplexing?

4. What are the most common emotional responses you encounter from parents of apostate emerging adult children? How do you address these pastorally?

5. What types of advice do you give parents about what they should do and how they should treat the wayward child?

6. What do you say and do with parents to address these different emotional responses while they are in the midst of the crisis?

7. Can you describe a situation where an emerging adult child who left the faith returned? What had your counsel to the parents been?

8. How much social contact should parents have with their wayward emerging adult children? Under what auspices?

9. What practices of parents with apostate children do you think most need to be corrected?

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