

Contents

Part I: What is Zeal and Why Does it Matter?	9
Part II: The 7 Commitments for the Discipleship of the Next Generations	21
1 ▾ Embrace a Biblical Vision for the Faith of the Next Generation	23
2 ▾ Foster a Robust Partnership Between Church and Home	35
3 ▾ Teach the Breadth and Depth of the Whole Counsel of God	45
4 ▾ Proclaim the Glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ	53
5 ▾ Disciple the Mind, Heart, and Will	61
6 ▾ Pray with Dependence on God's Sovereign Grace	73
7 ▾ Inspire Worship of God, for the Glory of God	83
Part III: Do Not Lose Heart	93

Acknowledgements	101
Appendix 1	105
<i>Resources Supporting Commitments</i>	
Appendix 2	109
<i>Vision for the Next Generations</i> <i>(Sample Vision Statement)</i>	
Appendix 3	119
<i>10 Essential Gospel Truths</i>	
Appendix 4	123
<i>One Generation Shall Praise</i> <i>Your Works to Another</i>	
About Truth78	131

ZEALOUS

*7 Commitments for the Discipleship
of the Next Generations*

What is Zeal and Why Does it Matter?

DEEP DOWN, we wonder. We give them a Bible, teach them the truth, ask penetrating questions, lead them in prayer, affirm the good, confront the sin, provide a good example to follow, help them find good friends—but deep down we wonder if what we are doing is working.

They read the Bible and even memorize parts of it. They claim to believe the truth, give good answers to our questions, pray *the prayer*, do good things, admit their sin, follow our example, have good friends—but deep down we wonder if the fruit we are seeing will last.

We watch devoted, yet weary, parents faithfully bringing their children to church after a full week of family life, school, chores, social engagements, and endless activity to provide the best opportunities for their children to flourish in the life that is before them—and deep down we wonder if the Word of God that makes its way into the cracks of their busy lives will be enough to sustain their confidence in God and His Word.

We see young people rushing into youth group, wearing attire to fit in or to stand out, gathering for worship, singing songs of praise, and listening to the eternal words of life, while monitoring social media, thinking covetous thoughts about their friends' possessions, fearing rejection by those who have captured their hearts, and ignoring the one thing that will matter most in the last moment of their fleeting lives. Deep down we wonder if the Word of God that they're hearing and singing will penetrate their distracted hearts and conform them to the image of Christ.

We witness the tears and groanings of a Christian parent whose heart is broken over a child who has exchanged the truth he grew up with for the lies of the world.

We hear another parent weeping for a child who has forsaken the way that leads to life for a wider and brighter way that leads to destruction.

We observe bewildered parents who can hardly believe the words coming from the mouths of their offspring and the hard-hearted, God-defying attitudes and convictions that define their empty lives.

We listen to a dad speaking about his child who has married well and is raising delightful children, actively participating in church, flourishing in his profession, and doing all the good and right things he was taught to do, yet wondering if there is any evidence of saving faith.

Deep down we wonder if the children growing up in our homes, actively participating in our churches, and sitting in our classrooms will grow up to join the number of those who embrace Christ as their greatest treasure and passionately follow Him. Or will they instead join with those seeking treasure where it cannot be found, rejecting their only hope for everlasting joy?

We wonder if our children will be thriving in the way of infinite wisdom, or walking in the counsel of the wicked. Will they be joining the congregation of the righteous, or sitting in the seat of scoffers? Will they be like mighty oaks of righteousness sinking their roots deep into the life-giving streams of God's Word, or will they be like chaff nourished from the empty cisterns of the world and driven away by the wind of judgment? Will they stand in the freedom of Christ, or sink under the weight and condemnation of their unforgiven sin? Will they delight in the presence of the LORD, or dwell in everlasting darkness? Will they be forever singing praises to their Savior and King, or will they be forever weeping and gnashing their teeth with the ancient enemy of their souls?

For decades I have interacted with hundreds of Christian parents, children's ministry volunteers, youth leaders, teachers, pastors, grandparents, and ministry colleagues. Almost every one of them cares about the souls of the children growing up in their homes and churches. They want their children to trust in Christ, follow Him as

Lord, and obey His teaching. They desire nothing less for their children than everlasting joy and the fulfillment of all God's promises in their lives.

I have sensed, however, that not all of them were feeling an appropriate weight of responsibility for the souls of the children entrusted to them. Not all of them were paying close attention to the spiritual development of their children. Not all of them were taking the time to number their days of influence in the fleeting lives of their children. Not all of them were sensing the urgency of addressing the issues of a hardening heart.

Too many were lacking any plan for instructing their children in the truth. Too many were thinking that Sunday school was enough. Too many were believing that a Christian home was sufficient. Too many were assuming Christian friends offered adequate influence. Too many were consumed with other priorities at home and in the church. Too many were paralyzed by fear and overwhelmed by their parental circumstances without consistent support, wisdom, instruction, or encouragement. Too many seemed unconcerned about the absence of any appetite for the Word of God. Too many dismissed spiritually dangerous attitudes and behavior as "just a stage." Too many assumed it would all work out, and in the end their children would be fine. Too many were helping their children gain the world, while ignoring the threats against their soul.

Too many were lacking in zeal for the discipleship of the next generation. And zeal can make a significant difference.



REASON FOR CONCERN

For more than 20 years, we've been hearing statistics and seeing disturbing trends indicating that between 50 and 90 percent of children growing up in the church no longer attend church after they leave home.¹ In 2003, George Barna not only provided data documenting the Church's decline

¹ For an overview of studies on young people leaving Christianity, including the range of estimates, see <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/are-young-people-really-leaving-christianity/>

of spiritual impact on the next generation, but also offered principles and proactive strategies for responding to the concerns.

Some of what Barna recommended sounded promising. He said that millions of parents want a positive experience for their children in a nearby church with “a consistently high-quality ministry.”² The potential of millions of members was enough to motivate many churches to increase their investment in children’s and youth ministries. Bigger budgets and more staff held the promise of more children staying in church into adulthood. Quality programming does attract families to church. And many of those churches were motivated by the evangelistic potential to reach unbelieving families with the gospel. Unfortunately, the downward trends have continued because the emphasis was too often on quality programming, rather than on discipleship.

No amount of new programs could undo the pervasive spirit of indifference and “lackadaisical”³ attitude in the church and among parents toward the spiritual development of children:

American parents—even those who are born-again churchgoers described by their church as “pillars”—are generally doing what their parents did with them: dropping off the kiddies at church and allowing the religious professionals to mastermind the spiritual development of the young people...adults tend to revert to what was modeled for them, noting that carting the kids to church and occasional religious events is sufficient. “After all” explained one mother, echoing a sentiment that has become a very common reply emerging from our research, “that’s what my parents did with me and I turned out pretty good.”⁴

Facts documenting the problem and proposed solutions have not improved the situation. If anything, the situation has gotten worse since Barna published his findings. One headline reporting on a recent Pew Research Study starkly stated: “In U.S., Decline of Christianity

² George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church’s #1 Priority* (Ventura, Calif: Regal Books, 2003), 40-41.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

Continues at Rapid Pace.”⁵ Commenting on the study, Albert Mohler said, “Looking at the generation known as the Millennials, only 49% even described themselves as Christians. That’s astoundingly low as compared to other recent American generations.”⁶

The problem, it turns out, isn’t lack of funds, but lack of biblical motivation. What the Church needs, and what parents need, is what the Bible commands—zeal.

ZEAL MATTERS TO GOD

From Genesis to Revelation, everything we are called to do in the service of our King, including the discipleship of the next generation, requires zeal. In Deuteronomy 6, Israel was given responsibility for the instruction (discipleship) of its children. The context for that instruction was zeal for God—“love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (6:5); zeal for His Word—“these words that I command you today shall be on your heart” (6:6); and zeal for discipleship—“teach them diligently to your children” (6:7).

In the New Testament, Paul appealed to his brothers and sisters in Rome to “present [their] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). He then filled the next three chapters with exhortations that describe a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable. That includes Romans 12:11 where Paul exhorts the Roman church, writing, “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.” Zeal and fervency in serving the Lord matter because such is the service that is holy and acceptable to the Lord.

Zeal in Scripture is not simply enthusiasm. It is fervor and diligence born out of a passion for God and His glory. It is the result of a heart on fire for the glory of God that is uncontainable and spills out in zealous evangelism, discipleship, service, and good works.

The Lord hates the absence of zeal. We see that in His words to the church in Laodicea, “I know your works: you are neither cold

⁵ “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

⁶ Albert Mohler notes that among Millennials, “The big factor...is the increase in those who do not attend [church] and the decrease in those who do.” <https://albertmohler.com/2019/10/22/briefing-10-22-19>

nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16).

Throughout Scripture, God Himself is zealous to pass His truth on to the next generations. Our zeal is not only in keeping with God’s will but, as we’ll see in the chapters ahead, it is also following God’s example.

7 COMMITMENTS FOR THE DISCIPLESHIP OF THE NEXT GENERATIONS

From what God has revealed in His Word and from what I’ve seen bear fruit in 40 years of ministry, I believe there are at least seven commitments that are essential for zealous discipleship of the next generation. The next seven chapters are dedicated to the fundamentals of those commitments.

I believe these seven commitments are critical, but they will be fruitless without zeal. For nearly three decades, I have been casting a vision for the discipleship of the next generations. Over the years, I have been part of a growing network of like-minded parents and church leaders across the country that I would describe as “having a vision for the next generation.” I still believe vision is essential. It is one of the reasons we placed “Embrace a Biblical Vision” first in the list of seven commitments. It is often the place I start when coaching parents and church leaders. Certainly, the absence of vision in the church and home is a problem. However, I am now convinced that it is insufficient to have a vision—even a biblical vision—if it lacks zeal. A vision without zeal won’t reverse the trends in the Church, and a vision without zeal rarely becomes reality.

ZEAL AND THE 7 COMMITMENTS

And yet, as much as zeal matters, as eager as I am to see the Church become more zealous for the discipleship of the next generation, and as concerned as I am by the pervasive neglect of this God-given responsibility, we can’t *make* ourselves or anyone else zealous. Does this mean then that there is nothing we can do until we are zapped with zeal for the next generation? No. Even though zeal is ultimately a work of God in the heart, I believe there are things we can do that God will use to awaken zeal in us and in others.

In Colossians 1:28, Paul helps us understand our responsibility and our goal in discipleship: “Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone [including our children] and teaching everyone [including our children] with all wisdom, that we may present everyone [including our children] mature in Christ.”

In verse 29, we see the spirit in which we do that job and pursue that goal: “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” Paul labored to present everyone mature in Christ with energy that came from God. To the church in Corinth, Paul said that he “worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Paul’s zeal for serving the faith of others was the fruit of the zeal of the Lord at work in him.

This is not unlike our experience with faith. Faith is not the result of works; it is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9), and yet we are called to “Fight the good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12). Faith without works is dead, and we are to strive “for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Philippians 2:12-13 provides the key to understanding the relationship between that which only God can do and that which we must do—“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

GROWING IN ZEAL

If you are persuaded by the importance of having zeal for the discipleship of the next generation but you’re not yet sensing much zeal for this cause, then “work out” your zeal for the discipleship of the next generation, for God is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure. And if His pleasure is for you to have this zeal—and I believe it is, given His own zeal for the discipleship of the next generation—then the zeal will come. This is why I commend embracing seven essential commitments and acting on them, trusting God not only for the grace to be able to act upon and to fulfill them, but also for the zeal without which your efforts will be unsustainable.

Let me illustrate how this works. Anyone leading a ministry for children and youth knows that recruiting volunteers to serve

is a significant and challenging part of the job. By God's grace, I've recruited hundreds of volunteers over the years, many of whom were not particularly zealous about the discipleship of the next generations when they began their ministry (since people serve in next-generation ministry for many different reasons). As these men and women began the work of discipleship, however, I watched God ignite this zeal again and again in their hearts. It has been even more exciting to see what God does with that zeal: fresh ideas, new strategies, ministry expansion, energy, passion, prayerfulness, digging into the Word—all diligently aiming at true discipleship. Many are accomplishing more than I ever imagined and far surpassing me in zeal and commitment to the cause.

Like those first-time volunteers, I was not always zealous for this vision. Looking back, I can point to two things God used to ignite my zeal. First, in 1974, I was falling in love with a Christian Education major who was, and is to this day, more zealous for the discipleship of the next generation than anyone I have ever known. God has given Sally an unquenchable and very contagious zeal that He has used to ignite and sustain a zeal in me for more than four decades.

Second, in 1980, I was a 26-year-old follower of Christ who had the benefit of godly parents and other faithful servants of God who invested in my faith from Sunday school to seminary. Through those years, I grew in knowledge of God, love for Jesus, desire to spread the gospel, and passion to give my life in service to Christ. But in the middle of that year, God took me to the church of a new young pastor, John Piper. Thus began what would be more than 33 years under the consistent influence of his faithful expository preaching and biblical teaching.

God used John Piper's preaching to open my eyes to dimensions of God that I had never seen before. The roots of my faith grew deeper into truths I had not grasped before. I was being shaped by a growing knowledge of God's Word and God's glory by God's grace through a man who still has a zeal for the truth and for the glory of God and for spreading that zeal for the joy of others. His zeal was contagious. Over the next decade, Sally and I experienced a rising, irresistible, and persistent zeal to spread the knowledge of this glorious God and the life-giving truth from His Word to the next generation.

ZEAL ACCORDING TO KNOWLEDGE

If we are not shaped by a true knowledge of God, we may be zealous, but not for what will save the next generation. In Romans 10:1-2, Paul writes, “my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”

In preaching on this text, John Piper said:

There’s a zeal that is not a saving zeal and there’s a zeal that is part of being saved...one is not according to knowledge and the other is according to knowledge...if [Paul’s] beloved kinsmen that [he] wants so badly to be saved, are not saved because their zeal doesn’t accord with knowledge, then knowledge is massively important.⁷

Piper then applies it to the next generation:

This is really, really important. If you care about raising kids, you’re going to bring your kids up to have that knowledge or not. If you’re a pastor, it matters. If you’re a Sunday school teacher, it matters. If you’re a small group leader, it matters. If you’re a seminary teacher, it matters. There is a zeal that doesn’t accord with knowledge. Oh, they get all kinds of knowledge, and it’s leading them straight to hell.⁸

ZEAL FOR OUR CHILDREN’S CHILDREN’S CHILDREN

Our labors have a far-reaching effect on generations that we will never know. When Psalm 78:5 speaks of declaring the “testimony” to the “next generation,” at least three generations are specified, two of which did not yet exist. In this psalm, we read that the fathers were commanded to teach their children so “that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn [the unborn grandchildren of these *fathers*], and arise and tell them to their children [the unborn

⁷ John Piper, “Zeal for God: Deadly or Indispensable?” a sermon delivered at Kenwood Baptist Church, Cincinnati, Ohio. October 10, 2013. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/zeal-for-god-deadly-or-indispensable>

⁸ Ibid.

great grandchildren of these *fathers*], so that [those unborn children will] set their hope in God and not forget the works of God” (verses 5- 7).

One generation declaring the truth about God to the next is a pattern established by God. God makes Himself known in other ways, but He has ordained this as one of His primary means for making His glory known to all generations. Knowing that your influence will reach far beyond the children born in your lifetime is a powerful motivator for zeal.

ZEAL FOR STRONG FAITH IN A WORLD OF HOSTILITY

Zeal for the discipleship of the next generation is also intensified by the desire to prepare children for a world that is increasingly hostile to the truth of God’s Word. This should not surprise us. Jesus warned His disciples in Luke 21:17, “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake,” and in verse 16 He promises, “some of you they will put to death.” In John 15:19, Jesus explains why: “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

Almost to His last breath, Jesus was thoughtfully and purposefully preparing His disciples for a world that would hate them. If we are His disciples, those words are for us, too. The urgent, earnest desire to prepare just as thoughtfully and purposefully the children who are facing, or will face, these challenges fuels our zeal.

ZEAL FOR DUTY AND DELIGHT

As followers of Christ, we have a duty to pass on to our children the truth that has been entrusted to us. But duty alone can be drudgery, and it rarely helps us persevere when we are discouraged, overwhelmed, and frustrated in our efforts. Discipleship of the next generation is *more* than duty. Investing our time, talents, and resources in the faith of our children and grandchildren is investing in their joy, and not only their joy but ours as well. Since Christ endured the cross by keeping His eyes on the joy that was before Him (Hebrews 12:2), keeping our

eyes on the joy that is before us and our children will enable us to endure the ups and downs of our discipleship efforts.

The Apostle John declared that he had “no greater joy than to hear that [his] children are walking in the truth” (3 John 1:4). What news of your children or grandchildren would be your *greatest* joy? That they made the soccer team? That they graduated with honors? That they got accepted to Yale? Our world presses us to prioritize anything and everything but that which will truly satisfy. There is no greater joy in this life, or the next, than being reconciled through Christ to God:

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).

As we experience this joy in God, our joy will overflow into the discipleship of the children in our homes and churches. The next generation will be best served by parents and teachers who have a joy-fueled, contagious vision for their lives.

WE WONDER

It’s good to wonder about the next generation—to think soberly about what’s ahead for the children in our homes, our churches, and our communities.

But we don’t have to wonder in fear.

We don’t have to wonder if our efforts will be in vain. We can set our hope in God, trusting in the goodness of His sovereign will. If we’re zealous and resolved to do what God has instructed, if we’re hoping in a glorious God, then we can wonder what work of discipleship God might be pleased to do in our hearts, our homes, our churches, our communities, and beyond.

If we pray earnestly for zeal for the discipleship of the next generation, we can wonder in hope.