

# Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION  
Spring 2019 VOL. 39, NO. 2

## Post-Christian Parenting

**WHEN I WAS** a child growing up in the Rhodesias (now Zambia and Zimbabwe), I did many things that today would likely be considered dangerous. I played on the rocks at Matopo Mission. I rode my bicycle by myself around the mission stations, coming and going from our house pretty much at will. My brother and I played in the dirt, building roads and towns for his toy cars. We sat on the ground and moved the dirt with our hands—dirt where people walked in bare feet and who knows what animal or insect had been.

I also played in the river, which although it was sometimes little more than a trickle was some distance from our house. No one could watch out the window or from the back porch to make sure I was okay. I loved climbing trees, going as high as the branches would allow. We also had rope swings hung from high horizontal tree branches, and I would swing as high as I could. Most of this play was without parental supervision.

I was much more vigilant with my own kids, but I permitted things I'm not sure I would be comfortable with today. I did worry about abduction, so when they were playing outside or with friends, I always tried to make sure I knew where they were and who they were with at all times.

Now when we take care of our grandchildren, we are very careful—partly because we would feel absolutely horrible if anything happened to them while we're responsible for them, but also because we are so much more aware of all the potential dangers that we didn't think about when we

were growing up. Some of the dangers are sinister and horrific—like school shootings, drugs, sexual predators, child abductions, internet-based crimes, fears of being accused of child abuse or neglect, or freak accidents. Some parental (and grandparental) vigilance and attention also comes from the pressure to measure up to other people's expectations and to make sure we are actively and constantly giving our children opportunities to learn and experience new things. We don't want to be seen as lazy, neglectful, and unengaged; we want to give them as many advantages as the next kid and not be deprived or lag behind their peers.

Raising healthy children has always been a challenge, but I have often thought that I'm glad I'm not raising my children today because the challenges seem so much more complicated. This edition of *Shalom!* explores timeless principles for parenting relevant even in a post-Christian age, as well as how individual families are approaching impending parenthood, navigating parenting choices, and nurturing their children's spiritual lives. Over time, Christian parents have relied on the truth of Proverbs 22:6: "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (NRSV). While many have had reason to doubt that truth, as their children have in fact strayed far afield, parents and grandparents can trust that God still cares for our children in this present age and wants to accompany us in our parenting journeys.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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# Biblical Principles for Parenting

by Pat Oldham

**PEOPLE WHO HAVE** pledged their allegiance to the one true God and Father of us all have always had to raise their children in unfriendly environments. This circumstance came about by choices made at the very beginning and repeatedly made throughout the centuries. So I ask: What are the unchanging principles for raising children that love God and respect their parents? To answer this question, I have chosen to look to the designer and creator of mankind as well as the family institution itself.

First, the people of God recognize that "the Lord our God is One," and we are to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our

strength" (Deut. 6:4-5). Secondly, we are to impress this depth of love for God on our children. This love is to be evident in every aspect of our lives—in our speech, in our homes, in our travel, in our sleeping, and our waking hours (sDeut. 6: 9ff). In today's vernacular, we are to wear our heart for God on our sleeves. Our love and commitment should be a secret to no one, especially our children.

Abraham fits this description. God promised to make his family into a great nation that would outnumber the stars and Abraham trusted God's word. How difficult it must have been for Abraham to continue trusting God for something for which there was no obvious evidence that it would ever happen. As we know, God kept his word, but there is a twist in the story. This child that Abraham was promised and loved was now required by God to be sacrificed. I can almost hear Abraham's agonizing thoughts: "God, how can this be. How can a God whom I have loved and who has promised me this child now require me to destroy him?"

Somehow, Abraham found it within himself to set out to obey God. I suspect all the while he was hoping that the God he loved would provide another sacrifice instead of the son he had been promised. All aspects of our lives should reflect this depth of love and commitment to God. Sometimes God asks us to do what seems inconceivable to us, but like Abraham, we must trust that he will show us the way.

Speaking of doing something that seems inconceivable: a young girl, a virgin, is told that she is to become a mother without ever knowing a man intimately. The man she is betrothed to is informed that she is with child, and he is to marry her. From the start, their reputations are put in jeopardy as well as their lives. And as if that is not enough, they are expected to raise the Son of God. Talk about pressure to be a good parent. As it turns out, they were excellent parents. They followed the requirements of their faith, set an example for Jesus, and taught him a trade.

Ultimately, Jesus set aside the trade that his earthly parents taught him and took up the one that he and his heavenly father knew was his true calling. There is no mention that Jesus' change of career was a problem for Mary and Joseph, but we do know that great suffering came to his earthly family, friends, and followers due to that change. And then on Easter morning, all of that grief was relieved with the resurrection.

There are times when a parent must allow the child to be obedient to God. Our tendency is to protect our children. We want the best for them, but sometimes our idea of best is at odds with the call God lays on their hearts. Sometimes, parents must step back because their child has chosen a path away from God. Great grief follows this choosing, and we will suffer as Mary did at the cross. Like Abraham, however, we must trust God for the ultimate outcome and remain faithful.

As much as I do not like the thought, sometimes when there is rebellion in a family it is not entirely the fault of the child. "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children or they will become discouraged" (Col. 3:20-21). As a parent, I know that I truly love the first verse. After all, what parent doesn't like and isn't proud of an obedient child? The second verse is a bit more uncomfortable for both parents even though it specifies fathers. In a nuclear family, raising children is a cooperative effort on the part of both parents. Either parent is capable of encouraging or discouraging a child.

The most glaring examples of discouraged children in scripture are Tamar and Absalom. King David's oldest son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar. Absalom became aware of it when he found his sister in tears. David was told of the rape. Scripture says that he was very angry. Amnon continued his life as usual while Tamar went to live with Absalom and was desolate because her life was in ruins.

Two years later, Absalom had his half-brother Amnon murdered and fled to



*Shalom!* A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation is a quarterly publication of the Brethren in Christ Church U.S. Its mission is to educate and stimulate Christ-like responses to the needs of society by providing biblical, theological, sociological, denominational and personal perspectives on a variety of contemporary issues.

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Website: [bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom](http://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom)

Geshur for three years while David mourned the death of his firstborn. At the request of Absalom, through Joab and the wise woman of Tekoa, Absalom was invited back to Jerusalem, but it took two years before he was permitted to see the face of his father.

It isn't very hard to see that both Tamar and Absalom were embittered and discouraged. David obviously treasured his firstborn son more than he did them. By the time David was willing to see Absalom, it was too late. Parents are capable of doing great harm in various ways and not just through favoritism. We can do harm by lazy parenting, failing to discipline, disciplining too harshly,

failing to teach and live our faith in a way that shows love, and the list could go on.

For me, the first unchanging principle for life, as well as raising children, is for parents to love God with all their heart, soul and strength. The second is to recognize the stages of life their children are going through and parent accordingly, but then to recognize when they have transitioned from being your baby into the beginnings of adulthood and allow them make the hard choices. The third principle is that we must not do the kinds of things that would embitter our children, including favoring one child over another, abusive behavior or words, and not

living our faith but expecting them to do so.

As a parent, I would say that all you can do beyond the above is to pray and entrust your children to God. Have the faith of Abraham and the obedience and trust of Mary and Joseph, who cared only about God's call on them and not their own reputations or their lives

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## Nourishing Faith Through Celebrating the Church Year at Home

By Gretta Owen

**ON A WARM,** breezy day last May, I pulled my minivan into the small parking lot at the base of Cemetery Hill in Grantham, Pennsylvania. My friend Lindsey and her daughter pulled in beside me as my husband arrived on his bicycle to join us over lunch break. We were about to have our first ever Ascension Day picnic. After our initial greetings and conversation, we began making plans for how we would get our lunch and our children up the hill. This was no small undertaking to be initiating this year. With three home-schooling children and my youngest a baby just seven weeks old, it seemed a little crazy to be planning a picnic at all—let alone one that included hill climbing, kite flying, candle lighting, and a bowl of Angel Pudding.

I didn't grow up even knowing what the church year was, let alone celebrating Ascension Day. Jesus' Ascension was a Bible story I learned about at some point in my Sunday school years. And it remained that for many years—a historical fact of sorts, filed away as a "Bible story," but not really something that I did anything about, thought about or wondered about much, not really something that would shape my life in any way. In fact, probably most of the stories from the Bible were like that.

But when children entered our lives

about 11 years ago, and we began stumbling our way through parenthood, I began searching for how I would pass on the stories of the Bible to my children. I was grateful for my upbringing in a Christian family and church, yet I knew there were some things I wanted to approach differently. Something about traditional Bible story books and approaches to children's Christian education left me feeling unsatisfied.

In our early years with our firstborn son, our church was, from my perspective, very into the church year. They observed Advent and Lent with fervor, and bulletins from those years even numbered the weeks after Easter up until Ascension Sunday and Pentecost. As these rhythms and the larger story began to seep into my life, I began to look for ways to bring it into our home. And right about that time, everything shifted. Our church went through a period of several leadership transitions. Everything seemed to be in flux—and in question—including, temporarily, the church year!

While this may seem ludicrous to someone from a traditional liturgical background (how can you just throw out the "church year"? Isn't that like saying we just don't feel like doing February anymore?), to someone from a free church or Anabaptist tradition, it wasn't so unusual. There is

more flexibility for the congregation and church experience to be shaped by the current leadership.

And so I began, more intentionally, to order my life by the seasons of the church, and to bring those seasons and traditions into our home. Even as my current local church seemed to be disconnecting or in some way forgetting this, it made me feel connected to the wider body of Christ—throughout time and space. And not just on a horizontal level, but connected to God and God's story of redemption on a personal level as well. During the years when the church had wholeheartedly embraced the church year, the story of God had captivated my imagination and permeated my life in a more vital and real way than the categorical, factual Bible stories of my childhood.

So we started small—an Advent wreath and weekly carols one year, then the Jesse Tree the next. A Pentecost pie another year (strawberry pie aflame with candles), and then an annual Epiphany Feast, celebrating the 12th night of Christmas and the arrival of the Magi. We began celebrating some saints' days as well—including Saint Martin of Tours, who really ought to be the Patron Saint of Anabaptists, if ever there was one! Born in the 300s and conscripted into of-

fice in the Roman Army, he was one of the first conscientious objectors, offering to lead his troops into battle unarmed after he became convinced that following Christ left him no room to continue in his military career. He became known for his commitment to nonviolence and seeing Christ in the face of the poor. As we shared these stories of God and the saints in playful, imaginative ways that often involved food, friends, and celebration, we began to create an alternative rhythm to the rhythms of our culture. So many of our holidays, even the traditional Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, seem to be hijacked by the pressure to constantly consume.

I wanted to foster an attitude and atmosphere that centered celebrations around creative and relational activity that connected us to God and our faith in ways that traditional “learning” or popular cultural traditions of holidays did not. James K.A. Smith writes in his books, *Desiring the Kingdom* and *You Are What You Love*, about how liturgies shape us. Liturgies are not just “words we say during church,” but

habits and patterns that carry us through our days, sometimes even without thinking.

We are always being shaped by something—whether the liturgies popular in our culture, or the liturgies of Christ’s coming kingdom. And these shaping liturgies form our desires in somewhat of a mirror effect; we look at and long for what we love and desire, and what we love in turn forms us to look like itself. The liturgies that are the most formative are the ones that have captured our imagination, usually through our senses. My daughter memorized a poem in her preschool class this year about her five senses. We drill this fact into our children—yet we often forget in the church that just as children encounter the world with their senses, so God, our Creator, encounters us through our senses as well.

And so as we spent the afternoon on the hill, reading gravestones of the faithful who have gone before us and pondering the angel’s promise that Christ would return in the same way he departed, we let the story of the Ascension capture our imagination, through our senses. We sent a kite soaring,

and pondered a Risen Lord who rises, like the kite, into a brilliant blue sky. We ate our Angel Pudding—fluffy white sandwiched between layers of graham cracker crumbs—and wondered about heavenly beings who touch the ordinary soil of the earth to assure us of Christ’s returning presence. We lit the candle, and recited the Easter liturgy: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ is coming again. And we allowed our imaginations to stretch at the thought of the bodies buried on this hill rising in this same way, along with our own.

*Gretta Owen lives with her family in Mechanicsburg, PA and is a member of the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church where she is active in children’s and worship ministries. She is especially delighted to be part of a church that, once again, is “into” the church year. She is a trained Godly Play storyteller and enjoys reading and reflecting on spiritual formation, theology of childhood, and education.*

## Parenting Forward

### *What my parents taught me about parenting and what kind of parent that inspires me to be*

*By Maddy Engle Hibbard*

**MANY OF MY** most vivid memories from growing up have to do with the strangers who wandered into our lives, and who also became friends of the family. By friends of the family, I mean that they were given nicknames like the “Cat Lady,” the “La-La’s,” and the “Bride of Christ.” The meaning behind these nicknames is insignificant. What should be highlighted here is that these nicknames were a result of how I saw my parents interact with the outside world: Everyone was a brother or sister.

One of my most distinct memories as a child was going to get donuts every Friday morning. We grew up in Pomona, a Southern California suburb. Always standing outside of our go-to donut shop was a woman

who called herself, as previously mentioned, the “Bride of Christ.” We always giggled about it as kids, and still to this day we don’t really understand what the title she had given herself meant. Every time we saw her she wore a full head-to-toe gown and head covering, made of pure white fabric. My Dad always engaged her. One of those mornings, he said something along the lines of, “Have a blessed day, sister.” He wasn’t being facetious. He truly saw her as “sister.” In response to his passing kindness she replied, “Sista?! I ain’t yo sista!!!” He quickly apologized. These types of interactions were quintessential markings of my childhood.

I am not a parent yet, but God-willing, I hope to be one within the next few years.

Truthfully, I don’t have the slightest clue what it’s like to be a parent. However, parenting seems to me to be the combination of responding to a new culture in a new generation while also incorporating the influence that your own parents had in your life.

With this in mind, there were more things than not from my upbringing that uniquely and positively shaped me and that I would like to carry over into my own future parenting. Here are a few of the values I learned from my own parents that I would see as important to “parent forward” in the midst of the ever-changing culture in which I find myself today.

**Others-focused:** My parents didn’t ignore the changing culture around them.

They dove into it, not always knowing how or what to do, but they did it to help us do the same and learn to be adaptable to an always-changing world and culture. They were others-focused. If you know my dad at all, you know that he persistently interacts with the people and the culture around him. It would've been much easier for him to ignore the "Bride of Christ," but instead he chose to engage.

**Simplicity:** My parents took very seriously the discipline of "give us this day our daily bread." They instilled in us the value of simplicity and the equation of simplicity equaling generosity. We had everything we needed as children. It's a trendy concept now, but they were the original minimalists. I saw in them that being generous and having less cut down the "fluff" and gave them less distraction in nurturing their relationship with the Lord and his call on their lives.

**Service:** From a very young age, as young as my early elementary school years, I experienced the joy of service. My dad used to take me to a homeless shelter down the street, where we served food and organized donations. He never asked me if this was something I wanted to do. Instead, this was simply a rhythmic practice in our lives.

**Exposure:** My mom, in particular, always helped me to feel safe and secure. There

seems to be a fine line between safety and exposure, or security and truth. However, neither of my parents sugar-coated anything. Sure, there were questions I had that required a response that could be easily digested by a child. But in their openness to give me exposure to uncomfortable situations, I became adaptable and confident in discomfort. We talked openly and frankly about the people we encountered who were different than us, and what God says about them and their value.

**Boldness:** Needed more than ever before is a boldness for Christ and his calling on our lives. I hope to carry on this boldness with my own children someday. Being a Christian was more widely accepted while I was growing up, so the need to be bold in my faith was important, but it was also probably much easier. I saw my parents be bold in their faith, as they encouraged me to do the same. Raising my own children will require a whole new level of this. I want this to look like having a constant awareness of the presence of God with my children, and I want them to see me have a tangible reliance on him in all situations.

**Kind but strong:** We joke in our family that we all carry the same hard-headedness, that none of us can be told what to do. My parents taught us that kindness and strength

of conviction can co-exist. It's not one or the other. My mother has an unnaturally kind strength about her. I saw her express many firm opinions without always feeling like she needed to be agreeable, but always done with gentleness and kindness. My parents taught us that we have a voice—we can ask questions and have opinions—but we need to be kind and respectful in tone and with our words.

The reality is that culture is ever-changing. Just when you think there is no more ground to cover in terms of what's "new" or what is "acceptable," culture changes. But one thing I am sure of is that I had a pair of wonderful parents who did their very best in raising their three daughters. "Did their best" doesn't mean they approached parenting half-heartedly; rather, they gave it everything they could, while relying on the Lord for strength.

I hope that someday I can "parent forward" some of the values they taught me and be the kind of the parents that they were to me.

*Maddy Hibbard is a graduate of Messiah College and lives with her husband and dog in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia, PA. She is the daughter of Bishop Perry and Marta Engle of California.*

## The Future Is a Gift

By Zach Spidel

**SEVERAL SATURDAYS AGO**, after a particularly long and exhausting week, I was hauling hunks of a hand-me-down piece of furniture out of the back seat of my car and into my house for assemblage there. Being tired and a little bit grumpy about the cumbersome armload of material with which I was wrestling, I hurried myself along, eager to get this task done. But with my hands full, I was stopped halfway between the car and the front door by a sudden realization of a rather obvious fact. I recognized the significance of what I was doing and my heart filled up with wonder and gratitude. I was carrying into my home the crib in which I will lay my firstborn child to sleep.

I stood a moment on the stone walkway that runs between the sidewalk and our front porch and looked at the little house my wife and I call home. It is a hundred-year-old bungalow currently in that stage of dilapidation that serves mostly to make it feel friendly and unassuming rather than in danger of collapse. Our front steps are cracked, the siding is faded, the yard perpetually about two days' growth too long. It sits about one hundred yards off Third Street in Dayton and has seen a lot of change in the seven years I've lived here. My church—the Shepherd's Table—was born in its living room. Prayer meetings, board meetings, Bible studies, fellowship dinners, and more



have taken place under its roof. I've sat down on those cracked steps to talk with homeless friends, and sat up at night on the front porch with addicts in withdrawal. A little over three years ago, my new bride moved in and set about transforming the interior of the house both by the warmth of her personal presence and the tact of her decorating decisions.

In that moment, a few weeks ago, halfway to my front porch, I contemplated

the fact that this little house I've come to love would be welcoming a new resident and that the roof under which I've lived for more than seven years would become my little girl's first home. Her oldest memories would come from this place. Thinking of this brought me back to another moment from my past.

When I was 18 years old, and a newly arrived freshman at Messiah College, I sat down to write out my thoughts in the loose form of spiritual journaling which was then my practice. At the start of a new phase in my life, I was taken into a kind of reverie as I contemplated the future that stretched out before me. I praised God that night for knowing and preparing that future. I marveled, then, at all the things I did not know. I did not know if I would marry, though I hoped I would. I did not know who would be my wife if I did marry. I did not know the names of the children I might have, or the kind of place I might provide them as a home. I did not know what I would be doing to provide for them or where I would be living. I did not know who might, then, be my closest friends, nor to what tasks God might call me with those companions. I thought, at 18 years old, about how much of the story of my life was still to come, and praised God for

the mystery of my own future and the knowledge that it was in his hands. I told God I was looking forward to seeing what he would bring me—most of all to seeing who he would bring me. I told him I couldn't wait to meet the other main characters in the story of my life.

Sixteen years later I stood frozen in a similar reverie staring with joy at the future-become-present. Here is my little house, and there ahead of me, my wife of three wonderful years. In my arms are the slats of the crib in which I'll lay my little girl, and in my heart is a familiar wonder: I do not know what's coming next, praise God!

I know there will be heartache. I know I'll make some bad calls as a parent and that our little girl will make some bad calls of her own as she grows up. I know that there'll be times when money is tight, or our bodies grow sick and frail. I know there also will be times of joy—when, as full as my heart already is, it breaks open at the generosity of my heavenly Father and I can only weep in thanks at his gifts. What I don't know are the particulars. I don't know yet what my daughter's face will look like or her voice will sound like. I don't know what sort of personality she will have when she finally arrives in the world out here.

I don't know what specific pains or what particular joys we will have to face.

But I know one more thing that makes all the difference. I know now something I knew back when I was 18, but I know it, after another decade and a half, in a deeper way. I know it from longer experience; I know it in my heart and in my soul and down deep in my gut. I know that Jesus will be with me, and my wife, and my daughter in every joy to fill it and in every pain to redeem it. I don't know the future, I don't really know how to be a father; no role, no task, no new phase of my life has ever humbled me as this one has. But I know that Jesus will help me, and so, like I did 16 years ago, I do praise God for all the stuff I don't know. By his grace even the pain will be put to good use, and the future, whatever it might hold for me, my wife, and my little girl will be a gift. I can't wait to unwrap it.

*Zach Spidel is pastor of the Shepherd's Table, Dayton, OH.*

## Engaging Our Children in the World

*By Justin Weber*

**AS THE PARENTS** of four children, ages 11 through 16, we, like most parents, hope that our children will grow up to be productive, contributing members of society who will have an impact on their community (hopefully for the better!) We hope they will be empathetic, self-aware, and motivated to action rather than self-centered individuals consumed with their own entertainment. But how does this happen? How do we create children who are engaged with the world and who look outside themselves? There are a few small things that we have done to help engage our children in the world.

First, we've tried to help our children understand that the world is bigger than themselves, their family, or their corner of the globe. Not every child has the same re-

sources, support, or opportunities. On the simplest level, other children in the world, and in our community, may have very different lives. Some children go to bed hungry. Some do not have a safe place to sleep. Some do not have a family to love, care, or support them.

We have attempted to cultivate this awareness by having them read a national newspaper. Even when they were too young to digest the articles, they could look at the pictures and read the captions. Often the pictures, which can be disturbing, have a strong impact. When they are confronted with pictures of national and international crises, it becomes evident that the world is much larger than what they have personally experienced. Were they willing newspaper read-

ers? No, not at first. Sometimes when it appeared on the "to do" list, it caused weeping and gnashing of teeth. After a period of time, we would come downstairs to find a child or two voluntarily reading the paper, eagerly consuming current events and willing to discuss what is happening in our community, country and the world. Recently, when our daily delivery of the national newspaper was interrupted, one of our children texted us a picture of his pancake breakfast and asked if we knew what was missing. After several incorrect guesses (bacon? eggs?) he responded: the newspaper.

Second, from an early age, when we are engaged in service, we have required them to "tag along." It wasn't an intentional way of showing them service, or at least it didn't

start that way, but living busy lives, it was one way that we could spend time together. If we were engaging in it, our kids were too. Yes, sometimes they would have rather stayed at home, slept, played video games, built with Legos, etc. But, that is part of learning what is at the heart of serving others—it's not always simply about doing what they want to do. In fact, sometimes we don't feel like serving others, but we do it anyway.

Most of the activities we engaged them in were not for kids. Helping people in our community move, hosting exchange students, making meals for others, assisting as a greeter and offering collector at the Pennsylvania Relief Sale, or picking up trash along the road we live on aren't activities designed for 10-year-olds, but that is OK. They don't need to be; a child who is 10, or even younger, is fully capable of contributing. Did they always like it? No. But, we would explain why we do it. The Relief Sale raises money that helps children around the world (remember those pictures you saw in the newspaper?) Would you like someone to

help you if you were in need of food or a friend? Our family has moved several times and many people helped us; what if there was no one to help?

A few months ago, I agreed to take a dryer to a family who had fled Somalia and emigrated to the United States. I could have done it by myself with the help of another adult, but I decided to take two of my boys, ages 12 and 14, to help. They assisted with getting the dryer and installing it. When we finished, we had tea with the family. In the car on the way home, we talked about what it must have been like to flee the place where you were born, where you knew the language, and had family. How much courage would it take to leave your native country and move to a place where you did not speak the language? How would you want to be treated? This led us to discuss how Christ wants us to live and how he calls us to answer those questions through service to others.

Third, as our children have gotten older, we've attempted to help them focus on ways of service that interest them. One of our sons

enjoys running. In talking about ways he could serve, he decided to reach out to the person leading the elementary school running program to see if he could volunteer by being involved in a program for younger students as a mentor. It's small, but it's a start, and he is enthusiastic about serving in this way.

The verdict is out on whether these practices items will have made an impact. We likely won't know for awhile. We don't have the answers, but we are always looking for new and meaningful ways to expand our children's horizons. We didn't start out with an intentional, systematic approach to service, but hopefully, in a small way, we will have helped to engage our children in ways that bring about more of heaven on earth.

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## Impressions from God

*By Angela Davis*

**MOST OF US** probably grew up attending the public school with our friends from the neighborhood. That was often the only educational option available. Some friends may have attended a private school but that wasn't the norm. Cyberschool and homeschool were not even options to consider a few decades ago.

Today parents have a myriad of educational choices for their children. Parents should decide which option is best for each child. Some people feel that the educational choice their family has made is the best option, and they want to encourage all families to choose as they have, as if there is only one correct choice. This can lead to the belief that there are wrong choices.

Four educational options are readily available to most families: a brick and mortar public school or private school, a cyber school (public or private) or homeschool. There are also various combinations. What-

ever the educational option, it must meet government requirements: the number of days, compulsory ages, and certain subjects such as English and algebra, to name a few.

There are advantages and disadvantages with any educational choice. The Bible does not give instructions on how to fulfill government education requirements but how to fulfill God's requirements.

Any educational choice a parent makes does not exempt them from meeting God's direction to impress his commandments on their children: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." God even instructs parents when to do this talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (see Deut. 6).

Public school may provide opportunities for children in subjects and sports to which

they would not otherwise have access. On the other hand, public school may expose children to subjects you do not want them to learn. Does attending public school mean the child won't learn to love the Lord? No, he or she might even become a spiritual light and example to others.

Private school may offer smaller classrooms and have required Bible study during school hours. Small private schools may not have all the options you want for your child and school may cost more than you are willing to pay. Does sending children to a private Christian school mean the parent doesn't have to teach them to love the Lord? No, it is the parents' responsibility to model love of the Lord, even if they have provided their children with others who help reinforce this principle.

Cyber school allows a student to participate in classes online via computer, whether public school classes or a private school that

the parent pays for. Cyber school may provide a desired curriculum structure and have fewer negative social distractions often found in a traditional classroom. Cyber schools require parental involvement. Do children automatically learn to love the Lord if they're at home? No, time with children is not the same as the commandment from God to instruct them while you sit, walk, lie down, and get up.

Homeschool traditionally means that the parent carefully selects the curriculum and does the teaching, or they may choose who will teach their children. This educational method provides a parent and child the most one-on-one time together. Does that mean that all homeschool families teach their children to love the Lord? No, a parent can teach all subjects from a biblical worldview but still not teach a child to love the Lord with all their heart, soul and strength.

## A Family Mission

By Chantel Runnels

*“The question is not ‘how much does the youth know when he has finished his education,’ but how much does he care? And about how many orders of things does he care? In fact, how large is the room in which he finds his feet set? And, therefore, how full is the life he has before him?” — Charlotte Mason*

**GOD HAS A** funny way of taking you down the least expected path. You know, the one you would have never chosen for yourself. Our family's story treks down the road less traveled.

I don't think we are your typical “homeschooling family” . . . whoever “they” are. Still, we get a lot of questions and commentary about the schooling atmosphere we've currently chosen for our kids.

“Why do you homeschool?” “Why don't you send your kids to public school or private school?” “Do your kids get to play with other kids their age?” “How will they socialize?” “Will you homeschool through high school?” So on and so forth.

I have to confess, the little I knew about homeschooling was jaded with the worst stereotypes. So I understand why we hear

Thank God for how he has designed your family. Choose to obey him first and impress him on your children. Prayerfully consider whether or not you are meeting God's expectations through the educational choice you have selected. Do the hours your child spends away from home keep you from talking about loving the Lord your God or encourage more discussions? Do you take time at night and in the morning to talk about God in your home, or do you forget because you have all day together? Whatever the educational choice you have made for your children, if you are not intentionally impressing God upon their hearts and minds, then you may not be fulfilling God's requirements of you as a parent.

The question should not be whether I am making the right educational choice but whether I am fulfilling God's commandment to me as a parent.

some of these questions. From my limited experience, “homeschool” was a world full of jeans outfits, socially awkward but brilliant kids, religious parents, vegans, and tree-huggers. Sadly, an occasional newspaper would report stories of children who were illiterate, neglected or even abused who were homeschooled, leading some states to create laws making it illegal to homeschool your children. Why would I homeschool?

Then, I fell into homeschooling. Not in the crash-and-burn sort of way, or stumble-through-the-woods-and-land-in-a-pit kind of way. What I mean is, it's not exactly what I had planned to do, yet left me pleasantly surprised. It simply wasn't an option we'd ever considered.

You see, Chantel B. C. (before children) had few ideas about what schooling would look like for her future kids. They weren't completely planned out, but I had assumed they would follow a certain academic trajectory my husband and I would lay out for them.

The general scenario was as follows: I'd work a certain job, assuring a certain salary, in turn paying for top-tier education at an

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (Deut. 6:4-7).*

**Angela Davis** is a member of Speedwell Heights Brethren in Christ Church, Lititz, PA. She and her husband have three children. Two were homeschooled with some high school classes taken at public school, co-ops, and college. Their adopted son has been educated using homeschool, private school, public school, and cyber school. Angela currently works for the Christian Homeschool Association of Pennsylvania.

elite private school. Then, I'd drop them off at the earliest age possible, ensuring their academic success. I'd pick them up 18 years later, once they'd been trained in multiple disciplines, endured rigorous advanced placement classes, and landed a full-ride to an ivy-covered school. Four years later, I'd have well-educated offspring set up for success in their chosen career path. This was my limited vision for their educational path, but it didn't include a larger narrative.

Then we had our firstborn—an actual real person. It was time for the rubber to meet the road. Soon my six-month “work-from-home” stint morphed into a full-time job as what I learned was dubbed a SAHM (stay-at-home mom). As our son's third birthday approached, we received lots of inquiries about what preschool he would attend. I learned there were wait lists to be on and deposits to be made. Oh, and we had another baby. Suddenly, it seemed there were many time-sensitive decisions to be made all at once.

I was conflicted. I had spent almost three years with our son teaching him numbers, colors, manners, reading aloud, adventuring



in our neighborhood, traveling on planes, city buses, and through the pages of books. It was a lot more fun than I expected. Now I was at a crossroads—the place where I was supposed to follow the “Chantel B. C.” plan of education: paying big bucks to place him in a school that would hopefully put him on the vague, American-dream “path to success.” Yet something didn’t sit right with us.

“The plan” didn’t seem much like a plan. It was more like, “this is what we are doing because this is what you’re supposed to do.” There was a disruption in our regularly scheduled programming with a public service announcement from above.

We needed to figure out why. Soon it all began to come together. We watched a 2006 Ted Talk by Sir Ken Robinson asking us to think differently about the current educational model. We listened to Stephen Covey’s book, *Developing a Family Mission Statement*, and thought through what our family would stand for. Then, we were introduced to a home-schooling family who worked at the same university as my husband. I dove head first into different educational philosophies. Very quickly we found ourselves down a path of intentionality, truly evaluating our core beliefs and values, discovering who God was calling us to be as a family, and how he was challenging us to parent differently.

This process sparked conversations where we asked ourselves deeper and wider ques-

tions. What was our family’s mission? What is education? Who do we want our children to be when they’re 18? How do we want our children to think about the world? What is God saying? All the assumptions I had made about our children’s education, and education in general, were being challenged.

Ultimately, we were being led to a place to think differently about our life together. What started as simply sorting through educational options led to creating mission and vision statements—articulating values that would guide some of the most difficult decisions we’ve made as a unit. We started to see our kids as God’s kids first, whole persons with their own unique callings, gifts, and purpose in this life. We found what we truly wanted—to live an integrated life.

We resolved it was important for the early, formative years to be a time we would invest in cultivating the most important tools we could give our kids: teaching them to hear the voice of God and that the world is their classroom and, as Sir Ken Robinson says, “creativity is as important as literacy.” Unlike a single-grade classroom they may enter one day, they must learn to navigate their world with people of different demographics, abilities, and beliefs. We want them to see early on that it’s not just how much they know, but Who they know.

For us, homeschool is a vehicle we can use to facilitate the educational experience we want our kids to have and live out our fam-

ily’s mission. One day that vehicle may change. It may be public school, or private school, or another combination. The vehicle isn’t the destination. While we didn’t know it back then, God was preparing us to live out being a family on mission.

Now, that mission looks like living in community, running a family business, traveling throughout the year, participating in city events, going to museums, and exploring nature. Choosing to homeschool is a sacrifice and investment that allows us the freedom and flexibility to live an integrated life.

Many people ask, “Will you homeschool all the way through high school?” We say, “one year at a time.” Every year we step back, ask ourselves and the kids if it’s still working for everyone. Here we are, six years later.

Every family is different: the mission, purpose, and design, and the school(s) of choice for their family or each individual child varies. I hope that this window into our story inspires you to ask deeper questions about education, family, and mission. In the end, I hope it encourages you to live boldly and courageously into your unique call and purpose.

*Chantel Runnels lives in Riverside, CA with her husband Chris and three children. Together, they homeschool their children, run a family business, and strive to serve the community. Chantel moonlights as a doula and consultant.*

## Baskets of Hope

by Karey Knauss

**WE ALL HAVE** dreams, big and small. Some we expect to come true; others we think never will. I think adoption was one of those dreams for me. Of course, in that dream there was a basket that appeared at my front door with a note that said, “I cannot take care of my baby, please raise her as your own,” signed by a loving mother. That was a romantic dream that grew out of too much television and a healthy dose of missionary stories.

When my husband and I were settled in our ways and getting close to the end of our parenting journey, we heard about a

family who had adopted out of foster care. This was a completely new thought for us. I had always thought of adoption involving a baby (preferably in a basket). So after a lot of prayer, we decided to look into it. Surely we could bless a child with a good Christian home, fun siblings, and loving parents. We took classes to qualify for foster care and requested a foster-to-adopt situation, meaning the child placed in our home would already have had parental rights severed and would be available for adoption.

After two years of waiting and some situations that fell through, we received an

email about a sibling group of two little girls. We felt this was the placement God had in mind for our family. The girls, two perfect little strangers, came and stayed for a weekend. The girls promptly wanted to know if we were going to adopt them. How do you respond to a question like that? In the course of a day, we went from a family of four to a family of six. We now had four kids, ages 17, 13, 6, and 2. We had one weekend visit with our girls, and the next weekend they came for a visit and stayed forever!

No one can prepare you for the

change adoption will make in your life. There is often a “honeymoon” period where everything is wonderful and you are sure you have been blessed with little angels. This is the period of time that God uses to knit your hearts together. You find yourself falling in love with these perfect little strangers he has placed in your life. Then the new wears off and you see that these kids are not perfect after all, but are just like the rest of us who need God’s work of grace in our lives. Now the real work begins. Thankfully, we serve a loving God who never leaves us or forsakes us, who saw this trial coming long before we did and told us to “count it all joy” (James 1:2).

I truly thought that if I loved my daughters and gave them structure and discipline, everything would be fine. I was naïve. I didn’t take into account how much children learn the first years of their lives. Neglect, even mild neglect, at that early stage leaves scars that my love cannot heal. Children need structure, discipline, and our love, but I can’t heal the hurt of abandonment; only Christ can. The feeling of not being wanted and the fear of rejection dominate every behavior, good or bad. I was not prepared for the hurt that can be left in a child’s heart and how that hurt plays out in everyday life. Children don’t understand why they can’t be with their parents; they love their parents, and that’s

all they know. I realized my girls didn’t ask to be adopted; they didn’t have a say or a choice. We were overjoyed that we gained our two girls, but our gain was their loss. The girls have adjusted, and you would never know they were adopted, but that underlying hurt never goes away. And while our experience has generally worked out well, we also know that foster care and adoption don’t always go as parents had hoped or planned.

An adoptive mom once asked me when her life would return to normal; I truthfully said, “Never.” We reach a new normal, but life is altered forever. Our family had to work through a myriad of emotions. My older kids had to learn to share their home and parents with two little girls who were not always so appreciative. They also learned what it means to truly give of yourself, your time and energy, even when it is the last thing you want to do. My little girls had to learn what a family is, and how to work and play together with a positive attitude. My husband learned to listen as I shared with him the struggles I had with the kids during the day. I learned how to think outside the box when parenting. Most of all, we all learned how to lean into Jesus, that serving him is our top priority, and through him we learn to serve others, not ourselves. We were thankful during this time that we had the support of our family

and our church. We know we had several people praying for us regularly; we needed every one of those prayers.

My dream had become a reality, and God had doubled that dream with two girls. What I thought was my dream for these girls turned into God’s plan for who he wanted me to become. My strengths became my weaknesses as I started the process of learning to “let go” and “let God.” We serve an amazing God who redeems even the most broken of situations. God started showing me how to love as he loved, and to sacrifice my wants for the sake of healing those who cannot heal themselves.

I am a slow learner, and God is still showing me daily how to love my girls. It’s not instantaneous and easy, but if I were given a choice, I would adopt them all over again. Although they did not come in a basket on my doorstep, they are still a gift from God. I feel honored that God chose me to be their mother, and I have the privilege to teach them about the never-ending love of their heavenly Father.

*Karey Knauss has been happily married to her husband Donnie for 27 years and is the home-schooling mom to four children, two of whom are grown and two still at home. She attends Zion Brethren in Christ Church, Abilene, KS.*

## Who Is Responsible for Children’s Faith Formation?

**Children’s spiritual formation:** “. . . when it comes to where the responsibility lies for a child’s spiritual formation and development [church leaders] universally agree it should start with parents followed by the Church. Seven in 10 Protestant pastors ranked the Christian community third, and a similar proportion ranks school fourth in the chain of responsibility.”

**Schools as negative influences on faith formation:** “Clergy view parents, churches, and Christian communities as positive influences on a child’s spiritual formation

and development. However, children are spending most of their daytime weekday hours at school, [and] . . . schools are ranked alongside a child’s friends and peers as primarily negative influences. In some cases, the perceived negative influence of a child’s school or friend group outweighs a perceived positive influence by double.”

**Equipping parents:** “Despite the fact that church leaders overwhelmingly agree that parents are most responsible for a child’s spiritual formation and development, the data demonstrate that churches place little emphasis on training and equipping said parents.”

“Challenges for Christian leaders include placing a greater emphasis on church-based training for parents as well as addressing

the perceived negative influence of schools. Yet, despite these needs, many church leaders are reluctant to broach the topic of education, even when the church has a school on campus.”

**Church, parents, schools:** “Alignment between or relationships among church, parents and schools could be powerful in shaping faith formation in our modern, post-Christian age.”

*The above quotes are from a Barna Group report released March 19, 2019, titled “Who is Responsible for Children’s Faith Formation?” Statistics have been removed from the quotes for easier reading. The full report is available at [barna.com/research/children-faith-formation/](http://barna.com/research/children-faith-formation/).*

# A Father's Model of Forgiveness and Confession

By E. Morris Sider

**OF ALL THE** people I have known over many decades, few have had a greater spirit of forgiving than my father, Earl Sider. As pastor of our Cheapside congregation in Canada, he could forgive members who criticized him both in public and in private. Certainly he had many opportunities to forgive me during my childhood and youth. His response to a car accident may serve as an illustration.

He had a painting business (as well as a farm) in which I began to work in my early teenage years. Like all boys, I was eager to learn to drive a car. At the end of one day of painting, I obtained my father's consent for me to drive home.

All went well until I turned into the lane of our yard. I intended to put my foot on the brake; instead it hit the accelerator. The car shot forward and crashed into a post. My father's face hit and cracked the windshield. His face was bloody, but he was not otherwise seriously injured.

I jumped out of the car, ran to the barn, climbed up into the haymow, and cried long and hard. I vowed never to drive a car again.

There I remained until my father came to the barn and called up to me, "Morris, come down. It's time for supper." He said nothing about the incident, then or later—no scolding for damaging the car, no blaming me for causing him physical injury, no declaring that it would be a long time before he allowed me to drive again. His last words on the incident were, "It's time for supper."

My father not only beautifully displayed how to forgive; he also understood when he himself needed to ask for forgiveness.

I was about six years of age when he took me to the proverbial woodhouse and spanked me. But I was not guilty of the act for which he had punished me (the guilt should have rested with one of my siblings).

Eventually he discovered that he had spanked the wrong child. What would he do now? He could have said that I was so young I would soon forget the spanking, or that I

was so mischievous an extra spanking, although unearned, would do me good.

Instead, he found me in the yard and led me to the woodhouse where he had spanked me. There he knelt to reach my boyhood level and asked me to forgive him. I consider this act by my father to be probably the major reason for my becoming a Christian early in life.

I too have had occasions to ask for forgiveness. As a young teenager, I offended a woman in our Cheapside congregation by writing a critical and anonymous note. Understandably, she attempted to discover its author. In doing so, the congregation became involved in the matter.

My father told me that because the problem had become a public issue, I needed to make a public confession. On a Sunday morning after his sermon, he told the audience that I had something to say. I went to the front of the chapel, turned to face the congregation, and asked for their forgiveness.

This was one of the most difficult moments of my life. It helped a little that after my confession, an elderly member also made a confession—that he had been going to the local hotel to drink alcoholic beverages. Still the sting of embarrassment was sharp.

The end of the story came a few days later. A quiet, underestimated member came to me and said, "Morris, I want you to know that I am proud of you for making that confession." Given the circumstances, I consider his was one of the greatest acts of brotherhood I have experienced.

*E. Morris Sider grew up in the Brethren in Christ Church in Canada (now Be in Christ Church of Canada), taught history for many years at Messiah College, and has written numerous books about the history of the Brethren in Christ Church and its people. This story from his own childhood appears in his recent book, Stories and Scenes from a Brethren in Christ Heritage, published in 2018 by the Brethren in Christ Historical Society. Contact the editor if you'd like to buy a copy.*

## Editor's Notes

**2019 subscription renewals:** Thank you to all who have responded generously to the 2019 subscription letter with your renewal and additional contributions. If you haven't responded yet, please do so as soon as possible. Send your check, payable to Brethren in Christ Church U. S., to the editor (address on page 2). You can also renew or contribute online at [bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom](http://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom).

**Topics for 2019:** Topics under consideration for the remainder of the year include end-of-life and aging issues, using electronic communication (social media, blogging, etc.) effectively, economic justice, living peacefully in an age of outrage, and creation care. The editor always welcomes your ideas and offers to write.

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roundings. Language, customs, culture, poverty, and lack of family support all prove to be challenging differences to navigate while past difficulties, such as drunkenness and mental illness, remain the same in a new country and, in Niamh's case, follow her family to final disaster. One is left to ponder what gets left behind and what gets carried forward? What is good to leave and good to keep? What is loss and what is gain?

As we look at parenting today from a biblical, Christian, and Anabaptist worldview, we too can reflect on what healthy or unhealthy practices the past brings to us, and what helpful or harmful current parenting practices are now in play. We can choose to make loving and healthy choices, knowing that children are not a commodity to be used or discarded for our convenience.

*Lois Saylor attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and serves on the Shalom! editorial committee.*

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## BOOK REVIEW: Orphan Train

By Lois Saylor

**IN AMERICA, BETWEEN** 1854 and 1929, it is estimated that over 250,000 orphaned or abandoned children were sent from east coast cities to the Midwest for adoption. It is thought that at any one time over 10,000 children were living on the streets in New York City alone. Charles Loring Brace, considered the founder of the modern foster care movement, believed resettling the children from the hazards of the cities to the farmlands of the Midwest would save the children from the dangerous streets and lives of depravity. Unfortunately, adoption placement homes were not scrutinized and too frequently adoption turned into or was expected to be a form of indentured servitude where boys were put to work on farms and girls were used for domestic work, childcare, or production work such as sewing. Many of the relocated children were first-generation immigrants from Ireland, Italy, or Poland.

*Orphan Train*, by Christina Baker Kline, is a fictionalized history of one train full of children focusing primarily on one young girl whose Irish birth name is Niamh. As we learn of Niamh's history, Kline also weaves in a modern story of another abandoned girl whose misadventures also unfold. The two

stories run on parallel tracks but also intersect, and readers are invited to observe the similarities and differences of the two experiences.

One noticeable and critical difference between modern foster care or adoption placement and the ways the orphan train facilitators found families is the intent. Today the focus is finding a family to help the child. Back then a child was often sought to help the family. Niamh, now renamed Dorothy, is told about one possible home. Her well-intentioned benefactress says, "I said that you are a sober-minded and mature almost-eleven-year-old girl, that you have impressed me with your ability to sew and clean, and that I have no doubt you could be of use to her" (p. 183). The focus is unapologetically on the young girl's ability to help her new mistress. This is not Dorothy's first placement. The others were difficult experiences and she thinks, "I don't want to go into another home where I'm treated like a servant, tolerated only for the labor I can provide" (p. 184). Kline is showing the reader that both the adults and children understand that the children are placed to benefit the family. Even if the placement is better than being in an orphanage or on the streets, some

children found their new lives to be cruel.

The modern day foster placement teen, Molly, also falters in several of her placement, but at least the goal is to help her, and a social worker keeps weekly appointments with her. Still, both Niamh/Dorothy and modern day Molly learn a lot about the unkindness of strangers and self-reliance.

The book's story line is a bit predictable, but it allows the reader a view into one of the lesser-known chapters of American history in the late 1800s and early 1900s. We can also realize that during this time period slavery was just ending, which gives some perspective on the cultural mores of the time. Even though listed as adult fiction, the writing seems to be geared for young adult readers in style and subject matter. Yet, no matter who is reading the book, teen or adult, we are given a glimpse into the hardships of immigrants, orphaned children, and life in general in the 1800s and early 1900s. As the book explores the differences in the treatment of orphaned children of the past with the present, it also causes the reader to think about the treatment and welcome or lack of welcome, and the hardships faced by those who emigrate to start new lives in foreign sur-

*continued on page 11*