

The Role of the Father in the Handing Down of the Faith

In 1994, an extensive demographic survey was done of linguistic and religious groups in Switzerland. As part of this survey an extra one was conducted that attended to the question: **does a person's faith carry over to the next generation, and why or why not.** In other words, *how is the faith faithfully handed down from one generation to the next.* There were many interesting results, but one overwhelming factor stood out—it was the religious practice of the father that, above all else, determined the future attendance or absence from the church of their children.

Allow me to share some of the survey's results. If **both** mother and father attended **regularly**, 33% of their children ended up as regular churchgoers, and 41% attended irregularly.¹ Only 25% of the children did not practice at all. If the father was **irregular** and the mother **regular**, only 3% of their children were regular themselves, while 59% attended irregularly. 38% were lost to the church. If the father was **non-practicing** and the mother **regular**, only 2% became regular worshippers, and 37% attended irregularly. Over 60% of their children did not attend. But here was the surprise. What if the father was **regular**, and the mother **irregular or non-practicing**? Extraordinarily, the percentage of children regularly worshipping went up from 33% to 38% with the irregular mother and to 44% with the non-practicing, *as if loyalty to father's commitment grew in proportion to mother's laxity, indifference, or hostility.*²

Survey's Findings:

- Father and Mother Regular Attenders—33% Regular; 41% Irregular; 25% Non-practicing
- Father Irregular and Mother Regular—3% Regular; 59% Irregular; 38% Non-Practicing
- Father Non-practicing and Mother Regular—2% Regular; 37% Irregular; 60% Non-Practicing
- Father Regular and Mother Irregular—38% Regular
- Father Regular and Mother Non-practicing—44% Regular

To reiterate, the *best* outcome was with the father regularly attending and the mother not practicing! And the worst outcome was with the father *not practicing at all*. However you want to slice and dice these stats, the surprising point is that role of the father is the most determinate in the future worship practices of their children.³

You may read this, shrug your shoulders, stifle a yawn and say, “So what?” Statistics, smatistics. “They don't have anything to do with my life or experiences!” Maybe so. The reason I share this is to make the fundamental point—**the role of the father in worship is crucial for handing down the faith.**⁴ Indeed, the role of the father is crucial. Period. This may be no surprise to you.

¹ For the purpose of the discussion, it should be noted that “regular” is once a month and “irregular” is several times a year.

² What was even more interesting, was the percentage went even higher when the father *sang* in worship!

³ This does not mean that the mother does not matter! It means that mothers statistically had lesser impact.

⁴ Again, the argument I am making is not to devalue the role of the mother. Please do not hear that!

But as I write this, I realize that many, many of my readers have families in mind that do not have a father in the home or have broken families. I also realize there is an increasing “belief” among even church goers that attending church is not important for one’s faith. I want to address each of these issues.

First, the cultural idea that church going is not important. In American Christianity, the popular belief is *that my faith is between me and my God. I don’t need to go to church to believe in Jesus. My salvation does not depend on whether I worship. I just believe in Jesus and that’s good enough.* Have you ever heard these sentiments expressed? Have you ever thought them yourself? Closely related, or right behind it is the assertion that the church just wants your money. There is a general ambivalence to going to church and a skepticism about the church’s motives.⁵ The basic question, then, is, “What **is** the importance of worship?”

The answer is that corporate worship of our Triune God is **where and how we receive His gifts.** It may seem strange in a society of autonomous⁶ individuals, but God calls us together that He might be present among His people. It is in the congregation, that God gives His gift of forgiveness (spoken by the pastor and heard by the people), His gift of His Word (read and preached), His gift of His true body and blood for the forgiveness sins and nourishment of our bodies and souls. Worship done right gives these things *repeatedly*. Even if the pastor messes up the sermon(!), we still have absolution and the Supper. If the pastor flubs the words of absolution, we still have the readings and the sermon. But worship is *the delivery system for God’s gifts of grace and mercy*, and you are bombarded with it Sunday after Sunday.⁷ Lastly, corporate worship means you are with *other* brothers and sisters who support and encourage you with *their* presence. They need you and you need them. And God promises to be in the midst of it all. He locates Himself with His people, and gives them concrete, tangible gifts.

Because without worship, our faith grows cold. Satan, that prowling lion, does not want you in church. The world, full of ideas antithetical to God’s will, does not want you in church. Your own flesh does not want you in church. And when people stop going, they stop being fed, encouraged, and nourished. When a body is deprived of that which it needs, it begins to atrophy and die. The faith grows cold.

Second, the societal crisis of absent fathers and broken homes. The foundational building block of any society, throughout history, is the family. If you want to destroy a society, destroy and attack the family. This is happening intentionally as I write this. The State wants to replace the role of parents in raising your children, and the State wants to redefine the family to exclude mothers or fathers in the definition of a family. Are families broken? Yes. I come from a divorced household. I know all about it. But just because something is abused or broken does not

⁵ I believe this is tied into a general mistrust of all institutions including the church.

⁶ This literally means “self-ruling”.

⁷ Many of you have heard me quip, “We don’t have to go, or want to go, but NEED TO GO TO CHUCH.”

invalidate its use or function.⁸ In other words, *just because families are broken or a father is absent doesn't render the importance of a father irrelevant*. So, even though many, many families are greatly impacted by divorce, abuse, addiction, pornography, infidelity, poverty, etc., the role of a family, a mother and father is even more important than ever.

Back to the original premise—the importance of the role of the father in the handing down of the faith. Believe it or not, *I write this with the express intent to encourage fathers*. Your role in your children's life is crucial. Your role in their future faithfulness is crucial. You are really, really important. More than you know and believe. So, the choices you make and the examples you set are critical to your own children and to society. The Church needs fathers to step up. I can't put it any other way. The Church needs older men to encourage younger men in the faith. The Church needs wives to gently encourage their husbands in their faith. The Church needs you in worship. First and foremost, to receive the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ. Because you (we all) need to hear those life-saving words again and again and the comfort and assurance they give.

From there, our fathers can lead, and grow, and encourage others, and serve, and pave the way for the future generations. There are many specifics that I can give as pastor to help with certain situations. Please reach out to me. I would love to help you be a help. I would love you to be the strength and backbone of your family and their life of faith. Your pastor might have something to say to you. Take me up on my offer.

This all might seem like it is only through human endeavor and involvement that the Church of Christ will survive. Far from it! The Body of Christ is unassailable. But God gives all of us roles to play. *We live* life in the faith, in the Church. It is the creational, incarnational existence of the life of a Christian. We are put in places to serve and love our neighbor. It has been this way since the Garden. And in Christ Jesus, as called saints, fathers are given the calling to raise their families in the fear and knowledge of the Lord. It is your responsibility.

The chances fathers are reading this is slim. The chances of anyone reading this is slim! But if you have a father you want to encourage, maybe the best approach is to not cram an article in front of him and say, "Read this!" ...but use the facts and argumentation presented to bolster your approach and begin praying for him.

⁸ *Abusus non tollit usum* or "The abuse does not take away the use".