

We want to hear from you. Please send your comments about this book to us in care of zreview@zondervan.com. Thank you.

ZONDERVAN

Sticky Faith

Copyright © 2011 by Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit www.zondervan.com/ebooks.

This title is also available in a Zondervan audio edition. Visit www.zondervan.fm.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Powell, Kara Eckmann, 1970–

Sticky faith / Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-32932-9 (softcover)

1. Christian teenagers—Religious life. 2. Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Child rearing—Religious aspects—Christianity. 4. Christian education—Home training. 5. Parent and teenager—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Clark, Chap, 1954– II. Title.

BV4531.3.P67 2011

248.8'45—dc22

2011008920

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, *NIV*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. Scripture quotations marked TNIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *Today's New International Version*™, *TNIV*®. Copyright © 2001, 2005 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Sticky Faith is a registered trademark of the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary.

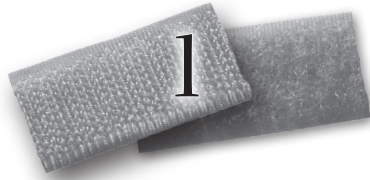
Cover design: *Extra Credit Projects*

Interior design: *Beth Shagene*

Printed in the United States of America

contents

<i>foreword by John Ortberg and Jim Candy</i>	9
<i>acknowledgments</i>	11
1. the not-so-sticky-faith reality	13
2. the sticky gospel	31
3. sticky identity	49
4. sticky faith conversations	69
5. a sticky web of relationships	93
6. sticky justice	123
7. a sticky bridge out of home	149
8. the ups and downs of the sticky faith journey	175
<i>appendix 1:</i>	
<i>The College Transition Project Research Overview</i>	193
<i>appendix 2: The Hurt Project Research Overview</i>	203
<i>notes</i>	213



the not-so-sticky-faith reality

*My parents are probably
the biggest influence out of anybody.*

—Robyn

*Both my mom and my dad have spent hours and hours
and hours through my life talking to me about what
it means to be a Christian, what it means to follow God,
and what that should entail and how to do it.*

—Billy

Tiffany had failed to turn out like Phil and Amy had hoped.

Like most parents, Phil and Amy had great visions of who their daughter would become as she entered high school and college.

Their expectations were high in part because Tiffany's first steps down the yellow brick road of adolescence showed great promise. As a ninth grader, Tiffany was deeply committed to knowing Jesus and making Jesus known. While friends shared horror stories about their kids' sullen attitudes, moodiness, and flagrant disregard for family rules,

sticky faith

Tiffany was generally pleasant and obedient. Tiffany had lots of friends, but she also enjoyed being with her parents. And Phil and Amy enjoyed being with her.

From the first Sunday that she walked into the high school ministry at the church where I (Kara) served as one of the youth pastors, Tiffany plunged into every church activity possible. Any event that was offered—youth choir, beach days, weekend service trips to Tijuana—Tiffany was there. Not only was she there, but she usually showed up to church at least thirty minutes early to see if she could help.

And help she did. Tiffany was especially good at making posters. She would spread paper across the youth room floor and try to come up with creative images to promote upcoming events or reinforce the teaching topic for the next week. When we made posters together, we talked about our mutual desire to know Jesus and help others know him too.

Sure, Tiffany wasn't perfect, but the other youth group parents envied how easy Phil and Amy seemed to have it with their daughter.

Around eleventh grade Tiffany started to change. She began to wear dark, heavy makeup.

Her skirts grew shorter. A lot shorter.

Phil and Amy found themselves locking horns with Tiffany over her wardrobe.

Soon they found themselves locking horns with Tiffany over just about everything. Grades, curfew, friends—everything was a battle.

Tiffany no longer came early to church. When I asked her if she wanted to help with posters, she said she was too busy. Throughout Tiffany's senior year, her involvement at church grew more and more sporadic.

the not-so-sticky-faith reality

Six months after Tiffany graduated from high school, she became pregnant. Confused and ashamed, she wanted nothing to do with our church. Or me.

Phil called me from the hospital the day Tiffany gave birth to her son. Although Tiffany had avoided me during her pregnancy, I asked her dad if she would be okay with my visiting her that day and meeting her son. She said yes.

Phil, Tiffany, and the new baby were together in the hospital room. After we chatted for a few minutes, Tiffany offered to let me hold her son. It was the first time I had ever held a baby who was only a few hours old. I told her so, and she grinned.

Phil tried to grin, but I could see the deep sadness in his eyes. He looked at me and I knew what he was thinking, because I was thinking it too.

Why did Tiffany's faith—a faith that seemed so vibrant at first—fail to stick?

Kids' Faith Isn't Sticking

Parents and churches are waking up to the harsh reality that there are more Tiffanys than we had previously realized. The board of the National Association of Evangelicals, an umbrella group representing sixty denominations and dozens of ministries, has passed a resolution deploring "the epidemic of young people leaving the evangelical church."¹

But is it really an epidemic? Does the data suggest that kids' exit from the faith is more like a trickle, or a flood?

As we have examined other research, our conclusion is that 40 to 50 percent of kids who graduate from a church or youth group will fail to stick with their faith in college.²

sticky faith

Let's translate that statistic to the kids you know. Imagine your child and his or her friends standing in a line and facing you. (I'm sure they are smiling adoringly at you.) Just like you used to do on the playground to divide into teams, number off these kids, "one, two, one, two, one, two . . ." The ones will stick with their faith; the twos will shelve it.

And they'll be making the decision about whether to shelve their faith after your most intensive season of parenting is over.

I'm not satisfied with a 50 percent rate of Sticky Faith.³

Are you?

I doubt it.

Here's another alarming statistic: only 20 percent of college students who leave the faith planned to do so during high school. The remaining 80 percent intended to stick with their faith but didn't.⁴

As has been rightly pointed out, young adulthood is often a season of inevitable experimentation for teenagers who were raised in the church and are learning to make the faith their own. That hunch is supported by the encouraging statistic that somewhere between 30 and 60 percent of youth group graduates who abandon their faith and the church return to both in their late twenties.⁵ Yet those young adults have already faced significant forks in the road regarding friendship, marriage, vocation, worldview, and lifestyle, all while their faith has been pushed to the back seat. They will have to live with the consequences of those decisions for the rest of their lives. Plus, while we can celebrate those who eventually place their faith back in the driver's seat, we still grieve over the 40 to 70 percent who won't.

College Students Gone Wild

From the movie *Animal House* to the Asher Roth song “I Love College,” college life has been depicted as a nonstop merry-go-round of sex, drugs, and alcohol, with a few hours of study thrown in here and there. Granted, sex, drugs, and alcohol are not the ultimate litmus test of a college student’s spirituality. (We’ll say more about that later.) And of course, media portrayals of college kids are certainly exaggerated. Nonetheless, since more students are partying than we might realize and since students’ partying often affects their relationship with God, it’s a factor of Sticky Faith we have to discuss.

Each month, just less than 50 percent of full-time college students binge drink, abuse prescription drugs, and/or abuse illegal drugs.⁶ According to one analysis conducted by a professor of public health at Harvard University, the number of fraternity and sorority members who binge drink has climbed to 80 percent.⁷

This heavy alcohol consumption is costing students—a lot. According to one estimate, college students spend \$5.5 billion each year on alcohol—more than they spend on soft drinks, tea, milk, juice, coffee, and schoolbooks combined.⁸

This widespread use of alcohol opens the door to the bedroom. Dr. Michael Kimmel, professor of sociology at State University of New York, has researched college behaviors extensively and has concluded that “virtually all hooking up is lubricated with copious amounts of alcohol.”⁹

You’ve almost certainly heard the term *hooking up*, a phrase that refers to a multitude of sexual behaviors ranging from kissing to oral sex to intercourse, without any expectation of emotional commitment. College seniors have an

average of nearly seven hookups during their collegiate careers, with 28 percent of them hooking up ten times or more.¹⁰

Kimmel vividly captures the wild tone of college campuses by explaining the effects on local health care: “Every single emergency room in every single hospital adjoining or near a college campus stocks extra supplies on Thursday nights — rape kits for the sexual assault victims, IV fluids for those who are dehydrated from alcohol-induced vomiting, and blood for drunk driving accidents.”¹¹

Christian Kids Gone Wild?

What about kids who come from Christian families? Are they as wild as the rest of college students?

The good news is that multiple studies indicate that students who are more religious and/or more likely to attend church or religious gatherings are less likely to consume alcohol or hook up.¹² Yet just because religious kids are less likely to party doesn’t mean that they aren’t partying at all. In a pilot study we conducted early in our research, 100 percent of the sixty-nine youth group graduates we surveyed drank alcohol during their first few years of college.

One member of our Sticky Faith research team, Dr. Cheryl Crawford, focused her research on kids who had been designated as leaders in their youth ministries in high school. After extensive conversations with these former student leaders, Dr. Crawford concluded that “loneliness and the search for friends seem to push the buttons for everything else. The primary reason students gave for participating in the ‘party scene’ was because that’s where ‘everyone’ was. One student told me, ‘I don’t think I’ve met many people

the not-so-sticky-faith reality

who don't drink here. It's really hard to meet people if you don't drink.' These key decisions about partying are made during the first two weeks of students' freshman year."

Partying and other challenges in transitioning from high school to college were described well by one college senior we interviewed: "Transitioning out of high school into college is like you're leaving on a giant cruise ship. You're heading out of this harbor and everyone's waving you off. Let's say this ship is your faith. As soon as you start sailing out to this new port called college, you realize you're in a dinghy. You don't have this huge ship, and you're completely not prepared, and your boat is sinking! Unless there's someone with a life raft who's ready to say, 'We got you. Come right here. This is where you can be, and this is where you can grow,' you're done."

Steps to Sticky Faith: Our Research

At the Fuller Youth Institute, we want to partner with you to offer your kids a stronger ship of faith and extend a life raft to those who feel like they are already drowning. In all of our research initiatives, our mission is to leverage research into resources that elevate leaders, kids, and families.

I've been parenting for ten years and serving kids in youth ministry for twenty-five. My coauthor, Chap Clark, has been parenting for thirty years and serving in various forms of youth, family, and pastoral ministry for, hmm, a few more years than I have! While that adds up to a lot of years of experience, we wanted to pair our experiences with insights from several additional research paths.

The first research path began with Chap's spending

sticky faith

most of a school year on a public school campus as a substitute teacher with permission to be a participant-observer researcher on campus. In his work, Chap recorded stories and other observations and sorted them first into impressions and then into coded conclusions. At the same time, a research team worked to integrate and compare Chap's findings with what other experts had written on adolescence.

Following this, Chap conducted twelve focus groups across the US and Canada, and in the end published his study in the book *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*.¹³ Chap and his team of Fuller Seminary faculty and students continue to study and interview kids, and many of the insights in this book come from that research.

The second research path was my work on the College Transition Project, a series of comprehensive studies of more than five hundred graduating seniors.¹⁴ You'll hear from these students (with fictitious names) through quotes in sidebars and at the start of each chapter. The six years of research by the College Transition faculty and student team have been fueled by two research goals: to better understand the dynamics of youth group graduates' transition to college, and to pinpoint the steps that leaders, churches, parents, and seniors themselves can take to help students stay on the Sticky Faith path.¹⁵

For more on the questions we asked in our surveys, please see the appendixes as well as www.stickyfaith.org.

In many ways, the students in this long-term study represent typical Christian seniors transitioning to college (e.g.,

the not-so-sticky-faith reality

they come from different regions across the United States, they attend public, private, and Christian colleges and vocational schools, and 59 percent are female and 41 percent are male). Yet the kids in our sample tend to have higher high-school grade-point averages and are more likely to come from intact families than the typical student heading to college. We also recruited kids from churches that have full-time professional youth pastors, which means they are likely to come from bigger-than-average churches (average church size was five hundred to nine hundred people). From the outset, we want to admit that these factors bring a certain bias to our findings, which we diligently tried to counter by examining other research studies and by conducting face-to-face interviews with students with more diverse academic, family, and church backgrounds.

In an effort to bring focus to our College Transition Project, we recruited high school seniors who intended to enter college after graduation, whether a four-year university, a junior college, or a vocational school. We can't be certain, but we think it's likely that our findings are relevant to those graduates entering the workforce or the military. Our hunch has been supported by one parallel study indicating that church dropout rates for college students and noncollege students are not significantly different.¹⁶

Sometimes we get asked about gender differences when it comes to Sticky Faith. While we have not extensively explored this question, we can say that in our study, overall there were no strong differences between men's and women's faith based on the measures we used.

Defining Sticky Faith

As we were initially conceptualizing this research, we quickly ran into one important question: what exactly is Sticky Faith? While it's tempting to apply former Supreme Court Justice Potter Stuart's famous definition of obscenity as "I know it when I see it," that doesn't fly in academic circles. Based on the research literature and our understanding of students, we arrived at three descriptors of Sticky Faith; the first two are relevant for all ages, while the last has heightened importance during students' transition to college.

1. *Sticky Faith is both internal and external.* Sticky Faith is part of a student's inner thoughts and emotions and is also externalized in choices and actions that reflect that faith commitment. These behaviors include regular attendance in a church or campus group, prayer and Bible reading, service to others, and lower participation in risky behaviors, especially engaging in sex and drinking alcohol. In other words, Sticky Faith involves whole-person integration, at least to some degree.
2. *Sticky Faith is both personal and communal.* Sticky Faith celebrates God's specific care for each person while always locating faith in the global and local community of the church.¹⁷ God has designed us to grow in our individual relationships with him as well as through our relationships with others.
3. *Sticky Faith is both mature and maturing.* Sticky Faith shows marks of spiritual maturity but is also in the process of growth. We don't assume that a high school senior or college freshman (or a parent, for that matter) will have a completely mature faith. We are all in process.¹⁸

the not-so-sticky-faith reality

The vast majority of kids we interviewed—even those who thrived in college—reported that college was both a growth experience and challenging, full of new perspectives and experiences. Reading through the transcripts, it seems that the typical college student sits down at a table full of new and interesting worldviews and people. Instead of allowing faith to be merely one of many voices clamoring to be heard, those with Sticky Faith had determined that their faith would sit at the head of the table.

In college I think my faith finally got really serious to me. God is so real, and so important in my life. My faith finally got hard and inconvenient, which I think makes my faith real.

—Shelby

Parents' Central Role in Sticky Faith

Much of this chapter has been bad news. Chap calls me an eternal optimist. I don't mind that label. So let me give you some good news from our research: your kids are more connected to you than you might think. We asked graduating seniors to rank five groups in terms of the quality and quantity of support they received from them. Those five groups were friends inside of youth group, friends outside of youth group, youth leaders, parents, and adults in the congregation.

Which group did they rank number one? Parents.

More good news: our research shows a relationship between this parental support and Sticky Faith.

But parental support, while important, is not the only way you influence your child. More than even your support, it's who you are that shapes your kid. In fact, it's challenging to point to a Sticky Faith factor that is more significant than

sticky faith

you. How you express and live out your faith may have a greater impact on your son or daughter than anything else.

After his nationwide telephone survey of 3,290 teens and their parents, as well as after conducting 250 in-depth interviews, Dr. Christian Smith, a sociologist from the University of Notre Dame, concluded, “Most teenagers and their parents may not realize it, but a lot of research in the sociol-

My parents are my spiritual role models in every way; it is my goal to develop myself spiritually as they have.

—Tyler

ogy of religion suggests that the most important social influence in shaping young people’s religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents.”¹⁹

As Christian Smith more simply summarized on a panel with Chap and myself, “When it comes to kids’ faith, parents get what they are.”²⁰

To access the audio of this panel with both of us and Christian Smith, visit www.stickyfaith.org.

Of course, there are exceptions. Your faith might be vastly different from your parents’ faith. Plus, I’ve met plenty of parents whose kids end up all over the faith spectrum.

Nonetheless, a major reason Chap and I wanted to write this book was our deep desire for kids to journey through life with the God who loves them more than they can even imagine. You are more than a launching pad for that journey; you are also an ongoing companion, guide, and fellow journeyer.

the not-so-sticky-faith reality

“Sticky Findings” and “Sticky Faith Made Practical”

We have divided each chapter into two sections, the first of which is called “Sticky Findings.” In that first section, we summarize what we’ve learned from the kids we have studied, as well as from our ongoing exploration of Scripture. As researchers who are Christ-followers, we are convinced that simply crunching numbers about students’ experiences will leave us splashing around in the shallow end. It’s when we pair our study of students with a thorough examination of theology and Scripture that we are able to dive into deeper waters.

For the last few years, we have been discussing these Sticky Findings with parents through one-on-one consultations, focus groups, and nationwide seminars. We invited twenty-eight innovative churches from around the US to apply our research to their settings by joining our Sticky Faith cohorts. Through two summits and monthly webinars, these churches became diverse incubators for Sticky Faith ministry. From what we have learned from parents at these churches, as well as from a host of other churches of various sizes, denominations, and geographical locations, we can recommend a robust list of practical parenting ideas. Those ideas are described in detail in the second section of each chapter, labeled “Sticky Faith Made Practical.”

I can't emphasize enough how much of an influence my parents had on me, and the more people I am around, the more people I get to meet whose parents didn't influence them in the same way my parents did.

—Chet

It's Never Too Late

If you're a parent or grandparent of teenagers or college students, you might be asking yourself if it's too late to develop Sticky Faith in your kids. Hear this good news: because faith development is a lifelong process for all of us, it is never too late to be more intentional in your parenting and the faith you model and discuss with your kids.

Having said that, we suggest that if you are starting late in the process, go slowly. If you sound a Sticky Faith siren and immediately launch into a long list of new Sticky Faith parenting practices, your kids' antennae will sense this as fake and forced. Instead, be more cautious and organic. Choose a few new rituals to try, and if they don't go all that well, abandon them and try something else. Your older kids will be much more receptive if you slowly start to turn up the volume on the way you discuss and model Sticky Faith.

It's Never Too Early

Early in our research, we concluded that building Sticky Faith doesn't start when your kids are seniors, or even juniors. The reality is that your kids' faith trajectories are formed long before twelfth grade. While we have devoted chapter 7, "A Sticky Bridge out of Home," to discussing how to build Sticky Faith in your high school seniors, we encourage you to apply the rest of the book to your younger kids too. My three children are five, nine, and eleven years old, and our research impacts the way my husband and I parent every day. Chap's kids are twenty-three, twenty-six, and almost thirty years old, but he and his wife, a marriage and family therapist, have been applying these principles along the way as they have discovered them.

the not-so-sticky-faith reality

In fact, you'll be more likely to develop Sticky Faith in your kids when you share our research with other friends, parents, grandparents, and especially with your church. Try to create as broad of a Sticky Faith team as possible. After studying seniors' transition to college, Dr. Tim Clydesdale, associate professor of sociology at the College of New Jersey, concluded, "Given the seeming importance of retaining youth for most religious groups in the United States, it is striking how haphazardly most congregations go about it."²¹ That's why we spend quite a bit of time not only giving you parenting tips but also providing tips for churches on how to disciple their young people into a solid, maturing faith. And because the church is *you*, we hope you will introduce these findings to your congregation and look for ways to implement them in your relationships, worship, and activities.

It is time to end the haphazard way we prepare our kids for all they will face in the future.

Above the Research: A Loving and Faithful God

As much as we wish there were a foolproof plan for Sticky Faith parenting, we will be the first to admit that there isn't. During this research, we've met parents with amazing faith and parenting skills whose kids had shelved their faith, and we've met spiritually lukewarm parents whose kids were on fire. There is no Sticky Faith silver bullet. There is no simple list of steps you can take to give your kids a faith that lasts. Part of what makes parenting so demanding is that easy answers are rare.

sticky faith

That might be disappointing, but let us make a few additional admissions that we hope will encourage you.

As much as we love research, we will also be the first to admit that we love God more.

As much as we believe in research, we will also quickly admit that we believe in God more.

As much as we value sorting through data, we value prayer far, far more.

As we share our research with parents, including parents who are grieving the way their children have strayed from the Sticky Faith path, we are repeatedly reminded of the God who transcends all research and all easy answers. We are struck by how much we need to depend on God for wisdom and strength for ourselves, and sometimes just plain miracles for our families. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit, not us, develops Sticky Faith in kids.

In one of our Sticky Faith parent presentations, one heart-broken mom told the group that she had been on her knees praying that God would draw her kids back to his love.

Upon hearing this, a mom sitting nearby said that she was doing more than praying on her knees. She had spent so much time praying for her kids, lying prostrate before the Lord, crying out for him to intervene, that the floor had left a mark on her forehead.

Another mom once told me that she never realized how much control she would lose over her kids when they became teenagers. She told me, "The more control I lost, the more I craved to pray."

Through our research, our nationwide conversations with kids and parents, and even our own parenting, we have

the not-so-sticky-faith reality

learned much about Sticky Faith. We are full of suggestions. But our top suggestion is this: trust the Lord with your kids and continue to ask—maybe at times beg—the Lord to build in them a Sticky Faith.

sticky reflection and discussion questions

1. When people decide to read a book, usually they are trying to solve a problem. What problems are you hoping to address by reading this book?
2. How would *you* define *Sticky Faith*?
3. How does it make you feel to think that you are the most important influence on your child's faith?
4. As you think about how you've parented thus far, what have you done that has contributed to your kids' faith? What do you wish you had done differently?
5. What do you think of the suggestion that parents trust the Lord with their kids and beg the Lord to build Sticky Faith in them? Perhaps you'd like to put this book down and pray for a few moments before you even turn the page.



2

the sticky gospel

*God is not the friend he was in high school.
He is now more like the grandparent in the home
that I visit only on holidays or special occasions.*

—Ely

*My parents were both raised in Christian families,
but how they shaped me had a lot more
to do with being a cultural Christian than being
in a personal relationship with Jesus.*

—Geoff

Darrin was a good kid, from a good home, who had grown up going to church. When he started coming to our youth ministry, he was more interested in who was there than in growing in God. The summer he went to camp, however, everything changed. Darrin soon got serious about his faith (as he described it) and became an overnight leader who not only encouraged others in their faith but was diligent in living out everything a youth leader or parent would want in a young disciple. He read his Bible every morning, even memorizing Scripture. He kept a prayer journal. He gave talks at

sticky faith

church and volunteered for any and every need. Darrin was, in short, as committed a Christian kid as any.

Then he went to college.

The first week of school, Darrin found a group of friends and instantly bonded. He said he thought about going to church, but after a few weeks of enjoying some of the newly discovered opportunities of college life, he lost interest. I (Chap) called him and tried to meet with him the first weekend he came home, but he was too busy to connect with me or even to come to church. By the next summer, Darrin told me he wasn't sure if "this God stuff" was even real, or if it "worked," and regardless he wanted to wait until after college to "get back into it."

That phrase "get back into it" should have set off a warning bell in my mind, because it illustrated what faith had been to Darrin. During high school, his faith was real, of that I have little doubt. But it turned out to be a shallow, performance-based faith that was focused on Darrin's being "into it" or Darrin's "working" to have it make sense. In a matter of months, Darrin had moved from being a committed Christian leader to being someone who had left the faith behind. He hadn't realized that the ultimate point of the spiritual duties he practiced was something much deeper.

Kara and I think that the core of Sticky Faith is developing a clear and honest understanding of both the gospel and biblical faith. As our kids are led into an awareness of their significant role in the kingdom of God demonstrated throughout Scripture, they will have the best chance of discovering a faith that is compelling and life-giving.

Sticky Findings

Many Kids Are Unable to Define Christianity

Many of our kids—even those who have grown up in church—have surprising views of what it means to be a Christian. We asked college juniors who were youth group graduates this question: “What would you say being a Christian is all about?” More than two-thirds listed answers related to “doing” the faith, like “loving others” and “following Jesus’ example.” More than one-third did not even mention Jesus, and of those, 35 percent did not mention God *or* Jesus! Certainly being a Christian involves an outcome of love and service, but is this work the central definition of faith?

While in high school, Darrin perceived that his job as a believer was to live up to the challenges and expectations of his parents, church, and Christian friends. He equated faith with spiritual disciplines, “good works,” and living as an example of Christianity that would please God. But in Darrin’s case, and for many other kids as well, that lifestyle of external faith is not enough to sustain Sticky Faith.

Many Kids Have Adopted the “Gospel of Sin Management”

When your children are taught what it means to live as a Christian, typically they receive a list of what to do and what not to do.

Do go to church and youth group as often as possible, read your Bible, pray, give money, share your faith, get good grades, respect your elders, spend spring break on a mission trip, and be a good kid.

Do not watch the wrong movies, drink, do drugs, have

sex, talk back, swear, hang out with the “wrong crowd,” go to Cancun for spring break, or go to parties.

Philosopher Dallas Willard coined a phrase that sums up the way too many of us think of faith, calling it the “gospel of sin management”: “History has brought us to the point where the Christian message is thought to be essentially concerned with only how to deal with sin: with wrongdoing or wrong-being and its effects. Life, our actual existence, is not included in what is now presented as the heart of the Christian message, or it is included only marginally. . . . The current gospel then becomes a ‘gospel of sin management.’”¹

Kids are not picking up this gospel of sin management in a vacuum. They are learning this gospel from us—from the gospel we believe, talk about, and, most important, model to them every day. Our kids are mirrors of our attitudes and beliefs.

Kids Need to Discover What It Means to Trust Christ

At the heart of Sticky Faith is a faith that trusts in God and that understands that obedience is a *response* to that trust, in everything. The Greek word for *faith* is *pisteuo* (pronounced “Pis-tay-U-o”). In the New Testament, *pisteuo* can be translated as three different but closely related words: “faith,” “believe,” and “trust.” So as a general rule, when we see the words *faith* or *believe* in the Bible, they come from *pisteuo* and thus can also be translated as “trust.” As you help your kids understand Sticky Faith, every decision, every thought, and every action comes down to this: in whom do I place my trust? Do I trust my instincts, my desires, my convictions, or do I trust in Christ?

the sticky gospel

Jesus affirmed this when he was asked, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe [or trust, *pisteuo*] in the one he has sent” (John 6:28–29). In Christ, that is the primary and central calling God has for our kids—and for us—as we develop our faith.

In contrast with assuming it’s our “doing Christianity” that makes faith work, the Sticky Faith process described by Paul shows that the way we deepen our trust is to put ourselves in a position to draw close to God even while the Holy Spirit is pursuing and surrounding us. Paul’s point in Galatians 5:6 that “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value” is not limited to circumcision or any of the other ancient Hebrew rituals. It also applies to our contemporary attempts to climb the ladder of righteousness on our own through our self-imposed gospel of sin management. We can insert any of today’s devotional duties that we say are the essence of faith into Paul’s phrasing in Galatians 5:6. “For in Christ Jesus,” for example, “neither reading the Bible nor not reading the Bible has any value” *in and of itself!*

Spiritual disciplines do not make us righteous because we do them, but rather they put us in a position to be drawn into trusting Christ more fully. If we or our kids are reading Scripture (or doing any devotional duty) because we think we will somehow in the course of our studying become more righteous, we are in effect saying that we don’t need God to change us. In contrast, the Sticky Gospel reminds us that our focus is to trust, and God promises to work within us at every stage of the process—by strengthening our trust, by giving us peace and patience as we wait for our lives to be transformed, and by actually changing us from the inside out.

sticky faith

The theme of focusing first on internal transformation instead of external behavior is echoed by Paul in Philip-
pians 3:1–14. Paul calls his circumcision and his zealous
pursuit of righteousness based on the law “garbage”
compared with knowing Christ. In Philippians 3:12, Paul
writes that he will “press on to take hold of that for
which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

The outcome of a faith that is more concerned with working than trusting, or doing rather than freely living, is dangerous to young disciples. As we saw with Darrin at the start of the chapter, a performance-based Christianity can last only so long. When kids reach the awareness—through failure or pain, or insecurity or inner wrestling with who is the owner of their faith—that they do not have the power or interest to keep the faith treadmill going, they will put their faith aside.

To help our kids discover and grab hold of a sustainable, long-term, and vibrant Sticky Faith, we must stay true to the words of Jesus and heed the council of Paul: trust in the one the Father has sent, and live convinced that the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Paul describes our role in this Sticky Gospel in Galatians 5:5: “For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.” Or to put it in a simple equation, faith/trust plus waiting on God to change us equals righteousness.

We may not say this outright, but it is so easy to slip into the kind of faith that says, “God loves you, sure ... but he’ll *really* love you when you [fill in the blank].” Galatians 5:5 reminds us that it is God’s job to work in us and to present

the sticky gospel

us as righteous, and it is our job to learn to trust him and let the process of becoming the quality of person he created, redeemed, and called unfold.

As parents, then, instead of concentrating on—and sometimes fretting about—whether and how our kids are living “righteous” lives, we have the opportunity to help them discover, access, and strengthen their trust and faith in Jesus Christ. In so doing, the righteousness they eventually display will be the product of the Holy Spirit.

For some of us, trusting this process in our kids can be hard. We tend to want outcomes that are immediate and measurable. When our kids don’t seem to get what we think they ought to know or do or be, we can easily fall into a “because I told you to, that’s why!” mentality.

I realized that I was believing something that I had been taught. I had to learn to own my faith and to understand why I believed what I believed. I had to learn to say what that was about—who God is, what he’s done in my life, why I put my faith in him.

—Lanz

Our Role in Helping Kids Learn to Trust Christ

In life and in faith, growth is a process. Our job as parents throughout this process is twofold: First, we help our kids learn to trust God and create the kind of environment where they are able to explore faith and trust while practicing their freedom to respond in love. Second, we model an unconditional, nonjudgmental, and ever-embracing love in which our kids can do nothing that jeopardizes or even lessens that love.

sticky faith

But I'll be the first to admit that this is easier said than done.

An issue that seems rather minor now, but surely wasn't when our boys were in middle school, was our boys' wearing their baseball hats in church. The battles tended to be more about who would win (us or our sons) than about hats in church. Inevitably, we as parents won, but not without having to pull the parental power card. Usually I waited until we got in the van to mention the hats, without warning or process. They in turn, predictably, would grouse and argue.

Finally, when our boys were eleven and fourteen, we had a series of conversations about why they wanted to wear a hat in church and why we didn't think it was respectful. After that we made progress. (It actually didn't bother us much, but there were several folks, especially older folks, in our church who were clearly and vocally bothered by the hats.) Helping them see that the hats were not really the issue at all, but how we were called to treat people, even if we disagreed with them, was what ultimately mattered.

Dee and I were trying to help our boys put their own desires aside and to trust that Jesus would in time help adults at church understand that to a middle school guy, wearing a hat was vital to his social survival (at the time) and not a matter of disrespect. We eventually did get to the place where our boys agreed to forgo their hats for the sake of others who were bothered by their hats. So even if the adults were more concerned with their sense of propriety and decorum than whether an eighth grader wanted to be in church at all, our guys came to own the decision to hold off on the hats in church. (But the second they were on the patio, forget it!)

Sticky Faith Made Practical

The all-important question, then, that puts wheels on the biblical call to trust God to change us from the inside out is, “What does it mean to trust God?” or to put it another way, “How do we put this into practice every day?” We suggest three ways to help foster this kind of faith: teach your kids that obedience is our response to trusting God, frame all family discussions and activities as opportunities to know and trust Christ, and respond with grace when your child misbehaves.

Focus on Trusting God versus Obeying God

With apologies to the old hymn “Trust and Obey,” theologically trusting God and obeying God are not meant to be seen as two equal and different tasks of the Christian life. Trusting God is the call of the gospel, as we’ve seen in Galatians 5. Obedience, then, is our response as we trust. In other words, God makes it clear that he is not interested in obedience geared merely to obtain his favor, yet obeying him is important.

Imagine your daughter is the target of vengeful gossip. Our default parenting style might be to offer a quick fix by tossing out a bumper-sticker platitude, perhaps quoting 2 Timothy 2:24, “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone.” Then we might follow that up with, “Honey, God wants you to be kind to people, so you need to forgive her and move on.” Done. End of story.

This kind of “obey God, move on” Christian parenting may or may not be helpful in the immediate situation, but in

the long term it is certainly counterproductive to Sticky Faith. Instead, use this event to reinforce the idea of trusting Christ in ordinary life circumstances. First, assure your daughter that the Lord understands what she is going through and has been there. Following that, remind her that Christ can be trusted even when others cannot, and that the Lord has promised to be with her and protect her. Then, as you talk about trusting God, who is faithful and powerful, she may be given the ability to be kind to that person.

When we take the time to help our kids respond to their circumstances with love from the standpoint of trusting Jesus with their struggles, instead of offering quick and directive advice, we point them toward Sticky Faith. This builds in them a willingness to live out of an obedience that is based on knowing and walking with God, as opposed to “be nice, God says so.”

Frame Discussions and Activities as Opportunities to Know and Trust Christ

Too often we talk about the everyday issues of life in a way that leaves Christ in the corner of the room, or even outside, until it's time to have the “God talk” around the table. For many, family devotions are genuine, sincere, and enjoyable times to focus on God together. Especially when kids are younger, family devotions can be a useful tool to help them see God as an active member of the family.

As kids get older, family devotions can sometimes become exercises that are more about getting through the ritual than a way to encourage our kids to talk about God as a family. When kids reach middle school or so, the most productive kinds of family devotions are often those that are less rigid

the sticky gospel

and scheduled, and more organic and even spontaneous (what we sometimes in our family call “planned spontaneity”). These kinds of “God talks” can provide opportunities to integrate faith and the Lord into our normal conversation, instead of falling into a forced, and maybe even boring or “religious,” production.

If you’re talking with your son or daughter and you can tell they are giving you the Sunday school answers they think you want to hear, push them a bit deeper by asking “Why?” or “What makes you say that?” Take the time to dig a bit deeper in your conversation to unearth your child’s authentic thoughts and feelings.

When discussing whether a film is appropriate for a teenager to see, for instance, perhaps steer the question not to WWJD but to “What does it mean to trust Jesus with how I spend my money?” or “As we trust Jesus for our entertainment and fun, how does that change how we make our weekend plans?” Parents have to be creative and, again, organic and contextual in bringing ordinary issues and

I understand and seek for my walk with Christ to be much more holistic than it ever was in high school. God calls me into a relationship with him, which then calls into play every area of my life. As a follower of Jesus, my faith is more than a youth group event or a “quiet time.” (Oh, how I hate that term!) It affects the way I spend my money, the way I spend my time, the career path I choose, the way I treat my body, the way I treat the environment. . . . These things have the potential to be my spiritual act of worship. And as I seek a more holistic Christian faith, the more united I feel with Jesus’ call and vision for the world, and the more fulfilled I feel spiritually.

—Sophie

sticky faith

faith together. Over time, especially with the bigger issues, this helps our children see that trust in Jesus, and how that trust is eventually translated into love, is the only thing that counts to God.

When we were invited to move from Denver to teach at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, we decided to include our kids in the conversation. The process was far from perfect, and in thinking back, there are things we might have done differently. But the one thing we are glad we did was to let them know that their voices mattered as we tried to decide what God was saying to us as a family.

During that season of processing whether God was calling us to move, we spent several long dinners discussing the pros and cons of moving from the “home of the Broncos” to the wild metroplex of Southern California. Dee and I took the lead in steering the discussion to the question of God’s desire and design for us, and what it would look like to trust the Lord with this decision. As we look back, we sometimes wonder what God was up to with this move. But this outcome we have seen: all three of our children, now in their twenties, approach life as a grand adventure of trust and risk. Each is walking their own faith journey; they are at various stages, but all three would tell anyone who asked that there is no other way to live.

To further illustrate, here are a few sample topics that families deal with every day. These tips and ideas are offered only to prime the pump of your own ideas. Don’t feel like you have to try them all right now. Given your family’s personality and schedule, choose a few to experiment with over the next month to grow together in trusting God.

Trust God with Your Money

As a family, adopt a Compassion or World Vision child and write monthly letters to them.

Schedule a “family giving meeting,” in which every child and adult has equal say in how the family is going to distribute the funds the family has available, or even those funds that require sacrifice so another family has clothes at Christmas. (Notice I didn’t say tithing, because some of us have lots more than 10 percent to give to those in need, and that is one more way to teach our children that we no longer live by rules or laws. In freedom, we give freely as God has given to us.)

Build into your family life regular patterns that remind you that all of your money belongs to God. Every Christmas, our family begins the morning by reading Luke 2, praying, and then deciding where our “Christmas gift” will go for the year. Each year, one family member gets to suggest to which charity the gift goes, and how much, and then we discuss it until we come to consensus.

Teach your children to be extravagant with the resources God has entrusted to them. For example, when you go out to eat, represent Christ to the person who serves you. When appropriate, let the waiter or waitress see or discover that you are a Christ-following family by asking them when you pray if there is anything they need prayer for. Because most waitstaff have experienced Christians as among the rudest people and worst tippers they serve, give them a far bigger tip than they would likely receive from anyone else, regardless of the level of service. Generosity to all, not only to those in need but toward everyone, is an expression of God’s graciousness to us, and it helps us to trust him even more.²

Trust God with Your Time

As a family, take on one service project in the community a month.

As a family, do something together for the church at least monthly.

As a family, or at least with one of your children, teach a Sunday school class or children's summer program.

Take one day a month or quarter to play with your child. I have heard it said to "never let your child's education get in the way of your child's education," meaning sometimes a day with you at the beach or a movie and lunch will have more long-term impact than sitting in class for that one day.

Make the dinner experience a sacred time and space. At least once a week, gather everybody in the kitchen a half hour before dinner until a half hour after dinner. No phone calls, no checking texts or emails, and no TV. Everybody finishes the preparation, everybody serves each other, and everyone helps clean up. Play a game. Sing a song. Dance.

Trust God with Your Relationships

Invite another family, or those who need some family time, to eat a meal once a month or more.

Open your home and family to your neighbors and friends from work, church, or school.

On special holidays, have an open house for those who have no place else to go.

Adopt a senior adult or couple to be additional, or surrogate, grandparents.

Invite others into your lifestyle, plans, and major decisions. Have a small group that is as committed to you as a family as they are to the adults in the small group. Raise each other's kids. (More on this in chapter 5.)

Respond with Grace *When Your Child Misbehaves*

Because our kids grow up in an increasingly complex and precarious world, filled with expectations and agendas that at times feel impossible to navigate, the odds are great that your child will “cross the line,” or for some of our kids, catapult over the line. What do we do then?

Default with compassion. When our kids go through rough spots, whether it is because of circumstances beyond their control or the choices they make, their greatest need from us is gentle stability and compassion. Regardless of the offense, whether getting a D or getting arrested, underneath the rhetoric and even outright outbursts, your child is not doing this to get at you. Even in the most egregious of situations, remember that they are, at the core, suffering, and they need you to care. As Jesus cares for us in all we go through, so we too are dispensers of his grace.

Don't panic. There are very few issues you will face as parents that are irredeemable, even the biggies. Regardless of the circumstance, becoming overly distraught or emotional, especially within earshot (or eyeshot) of your child, only heightens your child's sense of dread, fear, and shame. We can take Paul's words seriously: “Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when

sticky faith

Christ displaces worry at the center of your life”
(Phil. 4:6–7 MSG).

Take the long view. The ultimate hope that is part and parcel of trusting God is the hope we have that in the long run, God’s mercy will win. We may not see it or experience it exactly the way we want to for months, or even years, but trusting Christ means we believe that he is at work, bringing healing and redemption to the most hopeless of circumstances. Parenting is a marathon, but in Christ, as we trust him, we are offered the gift of hope.

A Few Final Notes

In this chapter, we make the distinction between a performance-driven gospel of sin management and a Sticky Faith of trusting Jesus to lead, guide, and change us from the inside out. In making the case, we do not claim that trusting Jesus with our lives is easily understood. There is a great deal of mystery involved in how God works with and in us by the Holy Spirit. We sometimes can barely figure this out for ourselves, much less teach it to our children. We need God to help us know how to put this together. And in this truth lies our hope.

The greatest gift you can give your children is to let them see you struggle and wrestle with how to live a lifetime of trust in God. As you live out your faith in trust, your life will never be static, stale, or boring. You will be disappointed, discouraged, and maybe even thrown around a bit at times. You likely will even wonder if such a life is really worth it. But as you faithfully hold on to the God who has taken hold of you, the life you live and model will be a beacon of hope

the sticky gospel

and direction that no sin-management faith can hope to achieve. As you trust the gospel, and the Lord who saves, your Sticky Faith will help your children discover their own Sticky Faith.

sticky reflection and discussion questions

1. Dallas Willard describes the “gospel of sin management” as dealing only with sin and its effects, instead of the real life we live. In what ways is your faith an experience of the gospel of sin management?
2. What is the biggest obstacle to helping your son or daughter understand that the primary call of the Christian is to trust Christ? Describe where this is a difficult concept for you, and where it lines up with what you already believe and practice.
3. We stated that “obedience is the response to trust.” Why is it better to begin with trust and then respond through obedience? Is it ever good to go the other direction: obey first and hope that trust follows? Have you ever experienced either of these in your faith journey? If so, what was it like, and what happened?
4. How do you see your child’s faith in light of this chapter? Where do you see them growing in what it means to trust Christ, and where do you see them living out of the do’s and don’ts of Christianity?