

1 CHURCH KIDS

THE DYNAMICS OF GROWING UP CHRISTIAN

Saturday—1:00 A.M.

This is wrong.

Kara's conscience seemed to roar through the dark, silent house. She cringed and froze midstep, heart thundering so loudly she felt certain the sound would awaken her parents. When she'd made her plans this morning, sneaking out hadn't seemed like a big deal, but now the fear and guilt were so overwhelming, she thought she might throw up.

She spotted movement in the living room, and jumped a foot off the ground. For one horrified moment she was convinced that her father was sitting in his easy chair; then she realized that it was just a shadow shifting across the floor, as tree branches swayed outside the window. She gulped an uneasy breath. Kara had no idea what her punishment would be if her parents caught her, but she knew they would be disappointed in her. That was an awful thought. She suddenly wanted more than anything to go upstairs and crawl back into bed, but then she thought of Nick sitting in his Mustang waiting for her. She couldn't just ditch him tonight. She'd promised.

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When Kara had met Nick at a youth-group retreat last June, she'd never imagined things taking this turn. Both were sincere Christians who had strong convictions about their faith and their integrity. They even led worship together at Sunday evening youth group, but lately Kara's grades had been slipping, and her parents and friends were getting concerned about the amount of time that she and Nick were spending together. Two weeks ago, her parents had tightened her curfew and placed some limits on how much time she could spend with Nick. Kara knew they were trying to protect her, but she loved Nick, and the new rules seemed unreasonable. Last week she'd broken them twice. Worse, she'd lied to her parents about where she'd been. Tonight, sneaking out in the middle of the night, things were taking an even worse turn. Kara felt awful. She knew the guilt would be especially acute tomorrow evening, when she and Nick stood up to lead worship at youth group.

It felt so hard being a teenager and a Christian. She wanted to honor God and her parents, but living a Christian life in the twenty-first century seemed like an uphill battle. Her parents didn't seem to understand, just slapped down rules. Why couldn't they just let her lead her own life? Sure, she might make some mistakes, but things would work themselves out. Besides, it wasn't like Nick was a bad guy. He was a Christian, so why did her parents have to be so restrictive?

It was their fault that she had to sneak out like this, Kara told herself. They weren't leaving her any other choice. She furrowed her brow with resolve and tiptoed to the door.

Salvation

"There's more to life than baseball," Brian said through his mouthful of Egg McMuffin. He and Matt were huddled over their breakfast in a corner of the restaurant, which was bustling with other friends and families grabbing their pre-church breakfast and coffee.

"Not my life," Matt retorted. They both laughed. Matt's name was practically synonymous with baseball. He'd been playing since age eight, and was presently the starting shortstop on his college team. When he wasn't playing, he was training. You couldn't talk to him

without being barraged by the latest news from the sports page. Matt lived for the game.

This Sunday, however, Matt's laughter only thinly veiled his unease. He'd been meeting with Brian every Sunday morning for two months now, and their conversations had probed progressively deeper. Their small talk about baseball, college, and friends had steadily yielded to Brian's favorite subject: his faith in God. Matt had always thought of himself as a Christian, so he dismissed much of this talk as being familiar turf. After all, his parents were Christians and he regularly attended church. He had a Bible and knew most of the stories. What more did Brian really have to say?

But something was different today. Matt felt a sense of awe as Brian described the significance and meaning he attached to his faith. It was no casual belief. Brian's faith defined his life. And Brian was *cool*. Matt had grown up around plenty of adult Christians, but he'd never met a Christian like Brian, someone his own age who was joyful and intelligent and had such passion and certainty about his life. Matt had come to deeply respect his friend. He wanted what Brian had. Every word Brian spoke this morning seemed to pierce his heart.

Brian was right. Matt knew he had been defining his life by the wrong things. Now, as he spoke with Brian, he sensed the light of a new dawn breaking in his heart. Brian had shown him that genuine, deep, and significant faith was within his reach. The excitement rose in his soul. He had to tell Brian what he was feeling.

Matt set aside the remains of his forgotten sandwich, leaned eagerly across the table, and started to share.

Popularity

Every girl in Jackson Community College seemed to be enamored of Eric. Every day when Tim walked into his freshman literature class, he saw a whole pack of them surrounding Eric's desk, giggling and smiling and throwing him shy looks. It was unbelievable. Less than two weeks into the school year, and Eric already had the standing of a Greek god. He was popular with the guys, too. Tim never saw him without a gaggle of worshipful, tagalong friends. Tim couldn't blame

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them. Eric had it all: six-foot-three, linebacker on the football team, a charming sense of humor, and a heavily muscled body.

Tim took a seat in the back corner of the classroom and watched as Eric recounted one of his drunken escapades from Friday's party. Guys and girls alike erupted in riotous laughter. Tim sighed with envy.

Tim had always been in the popular crowd at his Christian high school, where he'd played sports, served in the student government, and led Bible studies. He'd had high expectations of celebrating his newfound freedom and new friends in college, but so far, he just felt lost in the crowd. Hardly anybody knew who he was. Tim was quickly discovering that his faith didn't earn him much popularity here because Christians were few and far between, and the popular circles mostly revolved around the party scene.

The fact was, he just wasn't enjoying his college life so far. Serious Christianity and secular college didn't seem to mix well. Maybe he should loosen up a little. He was young and still learning about himself, so why couldn't he experiment? That's what college was about, right? There would be time to get serious later. Why not enjoy himself now?

Eric cracked a crude joke, and the gathering around his desk laughed once more. Tim found himself laughing, too. Eric *was* funny. Tim looked around, took a deep breath, then rose to join the circle. Maybe he could learn a few things from Eric.

Can you relate to Kara, Matt, or Tim? Kara had a strong, sincere faith, but found herself increasingly ensnared in sin. Matt had always considered himself a Christian, but at the age of 19 he realized that he wasn't. Tim claimed to be a Christian, but his craving for popularity led to serious compromises when he reached college. Each had grown up in a Christian home, yet faced particular challenges and temptations. They were church kids wrestling with the desires of their hearts, trying to find their true identities.

What's a Church Kid?

Once, I spoke at a high school leadership conference where a few of the teenagers didn't like the term "church kids." To them it had the same connotations as "pastor's kids," a term often synonymous with troublemakers. Maybe you feel the same way, but when you really understand what a church kid is, I think you will see that it's an overwhelmingly positive term.

Church kids are individuals who have grown up in the church. They come from Christian homes, have Christian parents, and have attended church their entire lives. They live in a Christian culture surrounded by Christians at home, church, and often school. It is a wonderful privilege to be a church kid.

I'm a church kid myself, and I am incredibly grateful to God for the many blessings we church kids experience while growing up in Christian homes. We have been raised and trained by godly parents; we have been repeatedly told the message of the gospel; we have been taught the Word of God from a young age; we have regularly attended church where we have worshiped God and have been taught about his character; we have lots of Christian friends; and we have been protected from many of the negative influences of the world.

In July of 1971, God greatly blessed me by allowing me to be born into a strong Christian family in a small town in New Hampshire. My parents had not grown up in Christian homes, but God had saved them about six years before I was born. They faithfully raised me according to biblical principles. Our family regularly attended church, prayed together, and had times of family Bible study. My parents sent me to youth-group meetings, a Christian school, and a Christian college. I grew up a fairly typical church kid.

Just before I turned four, in July of 1975, God drew me to himself through the gentle teaching and leading of my parents. At that time I repented of my sins and professed Jesus as my personal Savior. I had a four-year-old's understanding of the gospel and, in retrospect, I think a genuine conversion. (Isn't it amazing that the gospel message is simple enough for a four-year-old to grasp!) I do not remember the time prior to my salvation. I practically grew up a Christian.

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As I grew older, my faith steadily grew, too. God used specific trials in elementary and high school to refine my faith and teach me how to trust him. After high school, I left rural New Hampshire and headed to the suburbs of Chicago to attend Wheaton College, where God helped me begin to live out my faith and form a walk of my own. He also confirmed a call on my life to work in Christian education, and since graduating in 1993, I have worked full-time as a teacher and principal in a Christian school.

I am a church kid. I grew up surrounded by church kids, went to college with church kids, and have worked closely with church kids for the past twelve years. I have experienced and observed both the blessings and the dangers of growing up in a Christian environment, and I have a strong desire that church kids learn to praise God for the privileges they experience and to carefully navigate the dangers they face.

Blessings

Growing up in a Christian home is a wonderful privilege. We have been given so much: godly parents, training in the Word of God, friends from Christian homes, support from a Christian church community, and most importantly an opportunity to know God at a young age. Throughout our lives, we are repeatedly taught about the love of God, his plan of salvation, ways to recognize and resist sin, and living for the glory of God.

Not only are we given much, we are also protected from much. Our God-fearing and loving parents wisely limit our entertainment options—television, music, movies, books, and magazines. They carefully monitor our friendships and our exposure to the message of the world. We learn about the lies of secular values and other religions. We are trained to evaluate all of life according to the standards of Scripture.

Daily, I benefit from years of being taught the truths of Scripture and from countless hours of reading the Word. My parents have provided for me a clear example of living all of life for the glory of God, maintaining a strong marriage, and raising children. Because of faith-

ful training by my parents, teachers, and church leaders, I have not had to break many bad habits and regret years of godless living.

I have a friend who became a Christian at the age of 41. He is determined to live every moment of his life for God because he feels like he wasted his first 41 years. My friend wishes he had had the opportunities of the young people in his church. He sees how they know more about God than he does at only a third of his age, and he gets excited about the difference they will make for Christ as they move into adulthood.

When I think that I have lived thirty years as a Christian and (Lord willing) may live another fifty years, I'm amazed at God's love and kindness toward me. It truly is a great blessing to be a church kid.

Dangers

Church kids do face some unique challenges like the ones Kara, Matt, and Tim encountered. Though surrounded by the things of God, we, like Kara, can still be drawn to sin and live double lives; like Matt, we can easily assume that we are saved even if we are not; or, like Tim,

THINK ABOUT IT

J. C. Ryle reminds us of the privilege of having religious parents and warns us about the dangers we face:

I ask the children of religious parents to mark well what I am saying. It is the highest privilege to be the child of a godly father and mother, and to be brought up in the midst of many prayers. It is a blessed thing indeed to be taught the gospel from our earliest infancy, and to hear of sin, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and holiness, and heaven, from the first moment we can remember anything. But, oh, take heed that you do not remain barren and unfruitful in the sunshine of all these privileges: beware lest your heart remains hard, impenitent, and worldly, notwithstanding the many advantages you enjoy. You cannot enter the kingdom of God on the credit of your parents' religion. You must eat the bread of life for yourself, and have the witness of the Spirit in your own heart. You must have repentance of your own, faith of your own, and sanctification of your own.¹—J. C. Ryle

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we may be driven by a desire to be popular more than a desire to live according to biblical values. While it is a great blessing to grow up in a Christian environment, if we are not careful we can make some dangerous assumptions about ourselves, which have serious consequences.

I know firsthand what it is like to simply copy our parents' beliefs and convictions. I know how difficult it can be to live according to the standards of the Bible and our parents. I know what it is like to obey simply to avoid punishment instead of truly wanting to please God or my parents. I have had friends who appeared to be Christians in high school, but later walked away from their faith. I've known individuals who have partied on Saturday night and put on their Sunday best for church the next morning. I have observed students act one way when an adult is present and completely differently when they think no one is watching. I have watched students be attracted to the values and practices of the world around them and believe the lies the world promotes. I have had students lie to me in an attempt to avoid discipline.

Take His Word for It

Timothy

Scripture is full of stories of individuals with religious parents—Isaac, Jacob, Solomon, and Eli's sons—who serve as both good and bad examples for us. Some had genuine faith and accomplished much for God, while others had no relationship with God and were wicked. We can learn a lot from each of these individuals.

A negative example that should sober us is the story of Samuel's sons, Joel and Abijah. Samuel lived an amazing life, serving as God's representative to the people of Israel. He was recognized as a godly man who spoke directly to God and heard directly from God. There is no doubt he had a genuine faith. But when we look at his sons, it is clear that their faith was different. They didn't walk in the ways Samuel walked. Instead, "They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice" (1 Sam. 8:3).

On the other hand, the story of Timothy should inspire us. Although his father was a Greek, his mother and grandmother were Jewish Christians who taught him Scripture from a young age (2 Tim. 3:15). Paul

said of Timothy's faith, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Tim. 1:5). Timothy had a personal faith that was genuine and commendable, and Paul wanted to take him along on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:3).

We can also learn a lot from Paul's two letters to Timothy. Although Timothy had traveled extensively with Paul, Paul eventually left him in Ephesus to lead and care for the Ephesian church. Both letters were written toward the end of Paul's life. Second Timothy may even be Paul's last letter, written from jail just before he was martyred.

Paul knew of Timothy's training. Paul saw the fruit of Timothy's mother and grandmother, who had read and explained holy Scripture to Timothy. Paul saw the strong biblical foundation Timothy had, and he remembered Timothy's amazement as Paul preached about Jesus Christ and the message of the gospel. So Paul urged Timothy to continue in his faith, remembering who had taught him the truths of God. Paul wanted Timothy to look back at his training, remember the people God had used, and recall the truths taught to him so that Timothy could live passionately for God.

Our situation is similar to Timothy's. We have a religious heritage, having been trained in the truths of Scripture from infancy. Our parents read to us—countless times—the stories of the Bible. They have taught us about God, his plan of salvation, and how to live godly lives. We need to look back at our training and the people God used to teach us, appreciating the great blessing we have in growing up in a Christian home. We, too, need to continue in the faith, seek to grow in our love for our Savior, and become church kids on fire for God.

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Paul's words were written for Timothy, but also speak to us today:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 3:14–15)

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We need the same attitude as Paul: “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. . . . Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12–14).

Straining toward what is ahead and pressing on toward the goal, we must have our own faith, our own passion, and our own walk with God. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we need to live every aspect of our lives for the glory of God.

A Look in the Mirror

You're a Church Kid If . . .

So would you say that you are a church kid? If yes, please understand the favor God has shown in allowing you to grow up in a Christian environment, and know that you do face some unique challenges. You have benefited greatly from godly parents who deeply love you

THINK ABOUT IT

How do you know if you are a church kid? You're a church kid if many of these statements apply to you:

Check each statement that applies to you.

Your parents are Christians.

Your parents became Christians before you were born.

You have considered yourself a Christian for most of your life.

You have attended church most of your life.

You regularly attend youth-group meetings or other church ministry meetings.

You often read the Bible.

You know most of the stories of the Bible.

You often pray.

Your family has family Bible studies.

Most of your friends are Christians.

You attend a Christian school or you are homeschooled.

and desire that you love and obey God. Yet your life and faith are different from those of your parents and others who became Christians as adults. This book is designed to help you become aware of these differences. It will help you understand your tendencies so that you can accurately know your heart and live in a way that truly pleases God.

If you are a teenager and you are not a church kid, please know that there is still much for you in this book. Even if you cannot relate to the characteristics listed above, but you are currently attending church and youth group, the truths outlined in this book will benefit you. Even if you are not a typical church kid, but you are a young person growing up in the church, the themes of this book apply directly to you.

What about You?

Church kids may grow up in similar environments (Christian homes and church every week), but our hearts, thoughts, and lives can vary significantly. Some church kids are genuinely saved at a young age while others may not truly believe until they are adults. Many are saved and growing in their love for God, others may be saved but not growing much at all, and some are not even saved. Some take their sin seriously while others do not even see their sin. Some trust God from their hearts while others constantly worry.

What about you? How would you describe yourself?

- Are you on fire for God?
- Are you for the first time realizing that you may not be a Christian?
- Are you beginning to take your personal relationship with God more seriously?
- Does your life resemble the values of the world more than the Word?
- Do you love holiness and hate sin? Do you strive to fight the sin of your heart and not simply address your sinful behaviors?
- Do you like attending church?
- Do you appreciate and obey your parents?
- Do you enjoy reading and studying the Bible?

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- Are you prepared for the new freedoms in your life now that you're getting older?
- Do you have strong personal convictions?
- Are you getting ready to head off to college and move away from your family for the first time in your life?
- Are you experiencing significant anxiety as you think of the future?

Church kids come in all types of shapes and sizes. Although we all grow up in Christian homes, our hearts can be in very different places. Although we have known about God most of our lives, our love for him can vary greatly. Although we know the Bible, our pursuit of thinking and living biblically can vary significantly.

Taking Your Faith to the Next Level

This book is for individuals who have grown up in Christian homes and who want to take their faith to the next level. It is for young adults who realize their responsibility to take hold of their personal relationship with God. It is a book that describes the unique perspective and tendencies of church kids. It is filled with warnings as well as practical suggestions for growth in godliness. It contains biblical truths that will guide individuals in thinking and living in a way that pleases God.

Here are some of the themes we will explore in the three sections of this book:

Part 1 explains some of the dangers church kids face. We'll learn of the danger of assuming we are saved when we are not. We'll discover that an improper view of our sin leads to a dangerous lack of appreciation for the saving and forgiving grace of God. We'll understand the dangerous effects of loving and pursuing the world. We'll learn about each of these dangers and concentrate on biblical ways to avoid each of them.

Part 2 goes on the offensive. We'll learn the importance of thinking biblically. We'll start by learning how biblical greatness requires a humble heart. We'll explore the necessity of developing personal

convictions based on the Word of God. We'll look at the importance of being grateful for God, the Bible, our parents, and our church. We'll examine the importance of trusting in God. We'll discover the freedom and strength that comes from pursuing sound, biblical doctrine. We'll realize that thinking biblically is the first step toward living biblically.

Part 3 urges us to put into practice what we know and demonstrate our love for God through obedience. We'll examine the seriousness of our sin and specific methods to battle our sin at the heart level. We'll discover the need to passionately practice the spiritual disciplines. We'll understand the many opportunities we have to carefully steward our God-given talents. Ultimately, we'll learn what it means to live biblically.

A Call to Action

As a church kid, you have been entrusted with many blessings and privileges. If you recognize the blessings and carefully navigate the dangers, you will be prepared to make a great difference for Christ and his kingdom. If you learn to think and live biblically, you will be a passionate church kid on fire for God.

Commit today to:

- ✓ Be grateful to God for the many blessings of growing up in a Christian home
- ✓ Recognize and avoid the unique challenges that you face
- ✓ Take personal ownership of your faith and your relationship with God
- ✓ Think and live in a way that pleases God

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is a church kid?
2. Are you a church kid? Which qualities of a church kid apply to your life? In what ways is your experience different?

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3. What are some of the blessings of growing up in a Christian home?
4. What are some challenges that church kids face?
5. What did Paul mean when he told Timothy to “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it”?
6. The subtitle of this book asks, “Have you taken ownership of your relationship with God?” What does this mean? What is your answer?
7. Part 2 of this book is titled “Thinking Biblically” and part 3 is titled “Living Biblically.” What is the connection between thinking biblically and living biblically?
8. What do you hope to gain from reading this book?