

THE POP CULTURE PARENT

Helping Kids Engage Their
World for Christ

**Ted Turnau, E. Stephen Burnett,
and Jared Moore**



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From Ted

To two of the most important women in my life: Vivian W. Turnau (1937–2019) who raised, guided, loved, and prayed for me constantly, even in the messy times; and Carolyn S. Turnau, an unbelievable gift of God, a wise, beautiful spirit, and a wonderful partner in the journey of marriage and parenthood. I would be so much less without these two.

From Stephen

To my parents, Eric and Jane, who embraced radical-missional ideas such as biblical faith and homeschooling and introduced me as a child to Christ-exalting popular culture; and to my beloved wife, Lacy, who not only loves the best stories with me but encouraged me to try writing nonfiction until finally I listened.

From Jared

To my children, who are gifts from God: Caden, Ava, Ian, and Jude. You've changed my life for the better, becoming one of the primary avenues through which I enjoy Christ. May this book provide us with the tools we need to enjoy God through pop culture as you prepare to engage your world for Christ.

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Chapter 3

Gospel-Centered Parenting

Now that we've grasped popular culture's meaning in biblical perspective, let's talk about kids and parents in light of the gospel. How do we best parent our children in a world shaped by popular culture? Unless we understand God's good news and what it means for children and parents, any advice we give about engaging popular culture will likely be misunderstood. We will remain focused on the delusion that we can keep sin away from our kids rather than on teaching them to repent of their sin, come to Jesus, be transformed by him, and engage the world for him. So bear with us; this stuff is important.

Ted's story: Everything is about the gospel

When we lived stateside, some of our local church's small-group leaders wanted to teach a certain parenting curriculum. Our children's pastor thought the curriculum was unbiblical and dangerous, but some families in the church supported it. So the head pastor formed a study group. Four couples would go through the curriculum together: two couples in favor of it and two against.

We all knew and genuinely liked each other, but we found deep differences. My wife and I took the anticurriculum side in what turned out to be a fun but intense teaching exercise.

My greatest concern was that the curriculum taught parents how to control their children's behavior, as if this were the most important aspect of child-rearing. The authors promised that if we followed their step-by-step method and rules, we would doubtless raise solid Christian kids who respect authority.

The curriculum barely mentioned the gospel, or even grace. So one of my refrains became, "OK, but how does this square with the gospel?" After I said this for the umpteenth time, one of the procurrriculum husbands blurted with exasperation, "The gospel! The gospel! Why does *everything* have to be about the gospel?"

I was dumbstruck. I think I said something like, "Ummmm, because it is?"

I still believe that is true. Everything *is* about the gospel. Many Christian parents with the best of intentions make parenting choices as if the gospel doesn't really matter. But if your parenting method edits out the gospel, it's not worth its salt. The gospel changes *everything*. And if parents don't get that—they might be decent, moral parents and maybe even "successful" parents—they won't be truly Christian parents.

THE GOSPEL TRUTH

People may understand the gospel differently, so let's make it plain what we mean.

We are God's creatures. We owe him everything—our lives, our obedience, our deepest love. But our lives are bent toward self, rebelling against God. Our rebellious hearts mess up everything—our relationship with God, with one another, with the very planet we live on. God could have watched us destroy ourselves, but he intervened by sending his Son, the God-man Jesus, to die and take the punishment we deserve. And God raised him by the power of the Spirit to a new life we are now allowed to share in. Once we were rejects, but if we are connected to Jesus by faith, we now have

the status of God's beloved children, and nothing can change that. Though we still mess up, God is patient, and his Spirit is at work in us to change us. Eventually, Jesus will return and bring lasting glory not only to God's beloved children but to the whole cosmos—a new creation.

That is what we mean by *the gospel*. This salvation is by grace from beginning to end: forgiveness of sins by God's detail-shaping and history-ruling grace and change in our lives by that same ruling grace. The gospel is not simply, "Jesus died and was raised so my sins can be forgiven." This truth might be the core of the gospel, but it radiates outward. And that changes everything, including the way we understand kids and parents.

THE GOSPEL PURPOSE OF CHILDREN

When we accept this biblical good news, it undoes some myths parents may hold about their kids. One myth is the *myth of innocence*. The Bible states that sin is hardwired into kids from the start. Experience teaches us the same, as any honest parent will tell you. Kids don't need to learn selfishness; it's human nature.

Children do not need us to venerate them as models of innocence. They don't need a steady diet of self-esteem training. They need us to guide and love them wisely, knowing full well they are sinners. After all, this is how God loves us.

Here's a second myth: the *myth of ownership*. Some parents may see children as extensions of the self or a means of achieving their personal goals. We can invest our hopes and dreams so strongly into our children that we feel the right to bend them to our will. Treating a child this way will exasperate the child and can lead to childhood depression. But worse, it is a damaging attack on the created dignity of the child.

Parents don't own their child; God does. He has given each child an identity quite distinct from (though related to) the

parents' identity. Wise parents keep their eyes and ears open to the particular gifts, strengths, and weaknesses of their children to steer them toward what God wants, not just what they want.

So, the myth of innocence venerates children as innocent treasures who can do no wrong, while the myth of ownership treats them as property. What, then, is God's actual purpose for children? Here are some truths we can affirm.

1. Children are made in God's image and bear his dignity.

Children are human beings, and we humans are called to a great purpose. One Christian creed says that our primary purpose is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever."¹ Children share this purpose!

Imagine walking down the street, and a man bumps into you, knocking you to the ground. You're riled, and so you shout something nasty to him, dust yourself off, and go on your way. But the man's friend follows after you. He taps you on the shoulder and says, "We are sorry for bumping you. But the man you insulted is the Chinese ambassador. You really should apologize." And you do because it wasn't just some random guy. He's a dignitary, a man who represents a large and powerful nation.

The same applies to each and every child, with this difference: they all represent and bear the image of God, a being far more powerful than the Chinese government.

But we must say more because children have a particular nature that makes them more vulnerable than adults to harm and manipulation. Jesus issues a blood-chilling warning to adults, letting them know that God is watching carefully over these children, *his* little ones: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:5–6).

If Jesus says forced drowning would be the *easier* option, you know you're in trouble. Why is his warning so severe? Because God watches out for powerless people who bear his image, and children are among the most vulnerable. Yet they enjoy an exalted position in God's economy: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 18:10).

Parents need to be careful to respect the dignity of children by being open to the way God has made them glorify and enjoy him. In a sense, parenting a child is a dialogue between the parent and the person God has created the child to be. Have your antennae tuned to how God has made your child. Know that even when you make mistakes, grace and forgiveness is available to parents, but let's strive to respect the person God is in the process of forming. This respect means that we will also respect a child's popular culture favorites enough to try to understand them.

2. Children are weak and fallen, so they need our protection.

Some parents may hang onto leftover beliefs from the myth of innocence and think, *I should just let my child grow however he will, like a flower. I need only nurture him.* But these flowers actually have poison flowing inside! In their hearts "folly is bound up" (Proverbs 22:15). Left to themselves, they will choose self-destructive paths.

Your child is a vulnerable creature, prone to wander from God just as he or she might wander away from you and quickly be in danger. The child needs you. God has placed this child in your care to raise up "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). You have a God-derived authority to guide this sinful human into wisdom and grace. Your child, a sinner, needs the gospel daily—needs to be reminded

of the truth of God's holiness, power, and unstoppable kindness to the broken. This is all the more necessary for us to understand because we live in a confusing world formed by popular culture.

3. Children are God's gift to break up our self-centered living.

Parents are not only gifts to kids. Kids are gifts to parents. They intrude into our otherwise self-centered lives.

In becoming our Savior, Christ "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7). In doing so he not only paid for our sins but laid down a path for us to follow. This is where kids come in. For parents, it is often the kids who take us out of ourselves and into Christlike self-emptying.

As parents, we are called to sacrifice for our children, and this includes giving them much time and attention. This point is important because, if we are unwilling to make that sacrifice, the effort required to be a pop culture parent will feel like a bother. We must learn instead that it is an honor to serve and to empty ourselves. It is God's will, in giving us kids, for them to make demands on us—including the demand that we enter their world. And so the gift of self-giving comes to us as we set aside our time, our preferences, and most of all our pride, to watch *One Piece* with our kids. And when we fail to give of ourselves and our selfish hearts are exposed—and they will be—we will be driven to the cross. Self-giving parenting is formed only through repeated repentance.

4. Children are our younger brothers and sisters in the Lord.

God has included in our children's identity the role of disciples, or potential disciples. That means they, like we, are called to be missionaries—not necessarily to foreign lands but to their own culture. Scripture assumes this calling in several passages, such as when Paul says our words should "always

be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:6). Peter also says we must set apart Christ in our hearts, so we are prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15–16) because we are called to shine in a dark world (1 Peter 2:9).

Because we are called on mission for the King, our homes should be missionary training grounds. Here our children will learn how to live in love for others, live in hope for eternal values, speak words of grace, and act for healing and peace—to be lights in the dark, messed-up world.

We see a hint of this when Paul commends Timothy, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Timothy 1:5). The gift of faith was passed down from generation to generation to produce Timothy, a missionary-pastor. Something right happened in Lois’s parenting of Eunice and Eunice’s parenting of Timothy. May we likewise raise up missionaries-in-training who will have a profound impact on our world for good.

THE PURPOSE OF GOSPEL-CENTERED PARENTING

When we take these truths about our kids’ identity seriously, it radically changes our parenting. The gospel rewrites our motives for parenting and our view of popular culture. If the gospel is true, our job as parents is not primarily about sheltering or protecting our children (though we do some of that). Rather, it is primarily focused on equipping and nourishing our children to bring them into a mature, living faith. If the gospel is true, we must let go of our fears and attempts merely to control our children’s behavior. We will be satisfied with nothing less than renewed hearts.

Of course, we naturally want our children to behave well and avoid the stain of worldly temptations. But if children

are fallen and sinful, it's hopeless for us to try to protect them from the world and keep them innocent. Their sin-stained hearts already work against us.

Consider a child whose parents have carefully made several rules about popular culture. These may include rational restrictions, such as no smartphone use before a particular age or no TV after 8:00 p.m. It's good for a child to be obedient and keep these rules, but this does not necessarily mean he is spiritually mature. In fact, if the child feels that keeping rules makes him acceptable to God, this may indicate that his hard heart has wandered far from Jesus. True spiritual growth comes from an increasing appreciation of God's grace through Christ's death and resurrection and an honest relationship with Jesus that transforms the child's whole life over time. The calling of the gospel-centered parent (or any adult invested into the lives of children and teens) is discipleship. We are called to equip and encourage younger brothers and sisters by pointing them to the life-changing reality of the gospel.

In pursuit of this mission, we present five hallmarks of gospel-centered parenting.

1. Gospel-centered parents aim for heart desires and motivations instead of behavioral conformity.²

All intentional, engaged parenting aims either for the child's heart or for her behavior. Gospel-centered parenting aims for the heart. Gospel-centered parents want to engage their child's affections and desires, not simply manage how well they follow the rules.

This is quite a serious difference in parenting approaches. At some point, every Christian parent must choose which goal is more important to them. Do we want our child to develop a soft heart toward God or good behavior that may be merely for show? Do we prize a child whose heart responds to the gospel or a child who has his act together and does all the right things?

Imagine you have the power to control the future, within limits. You have two, and only two, options for how your infant daughter will turn out as she grows:

1. You raise a daughter who struggles, falls sexually, and perhaps becomes pregnant outside of marriage. But her experience humbles her so that she ends up with a genuine grasp of how much God loves her in the gospel. She repents and learns to live life depending day by day on Jesus for grace.
2. You raise a daughter who doesn't struggle that way. In fact, she doesn't struggle with any scandalous behavior at all. She always follows the rules and makes it to her marriage day a virgin. She even marries a young man who is also a virgin. But she has a cold heart toward God and never really grasps the gospel because she feels she has never really needed much forgiveness anyway.

Which path would you choose? We would choose the first option. Every time. Why? Because if you take an eternal perspective, you want your daughter to be humbled and understand God's love more than for her to behave based on a sense of lifeless duty. The self-righteous attitude that follows is often far deadlier than sexual sin because it's socially acceptable among Christians. It seeps like poison into the soul of a person who seems to be doing OK.

In Jesus's parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–32), the wayward younger son is actually in a better spiritual condition than the older son. He at least *knows* he's a screwup, outrageously loved by the father, and he's humbled by that knowledge. He is under no illusions about his own holiness. He knows he is home only by virtue of his father's great mercy. By contrast, the older brother lives under an illusion.

He thinks that because he performs well he has the right to treat the father with contempt, refusing to join the celebration. His holiness is a sham because it is a cover for a hard, unrepentant, unloving, and unlovely heart. It masks spiritual poison that will eventually destroy him if left untreated.

Of course, all parents would prefer raising a child who doesn't struggle with messy sins *and* has a gospel-softened heart for God and a generous heart toward others. We don't want to pose a false dichotomy between gospel-heartedness and obedience. But we imagined this hard choice because you must be clear about priorities. Then you will be ready to show grace to your children when they mess up and struggle.

And they *will* struggle. Different children will struggle differently, but they are all sinners and they all struggle somehow. If we as parents are ready to embrace strugglers with gospel grace, we will be less controlled by fear—even in the scary world of popular culture.

2. Gospel-centered parenting allows freedom to fail.

Gospel-centered parenting also allows room for children *and* parents to fail. As our hard-choice illustration shows, being a parent rooted in the gospel means we are available for our children no matter what. We know firsthand God's redeeming grace. We know we are God's adopted children, and he will hold on to us. How then can we do anything but extend that same grace and faithfulness to our children?

This is easier said than done. Too often, we pay lip service to gospel grace, but our words and actions betray quite another attitude.

Ted's story: "You want me to be perfect!"

My oldest daughter was seventeen, and she had done something dumb, dangerous, and rebellious. She felt terrible guilt—but she only came to us to talk about it weeks later.

When I asked her why she had waited so long, she said with tears, “Because I was afraid of what you’d say. I was afraid of what you’d think of me. You want me to be *perfect!*” She seriously believed that we wanted perfect behavior from her and that if she couldn’t deliver we would prefer the *appearance* of perfection. She was afraid that if she showed us the real her, she’d be rejected.

I responded, “When did we *ever* say that?! We know you’re a sinner. We’re *all* sinners who need grace. How many times have we told you the gospel? We don’t expect perfection. You *know* this!”

But as I thought about it, I realized how often I had let critical comments slip out. I recalled how I tended to vent my frustration by making cutting, sarcastic remarks. I *said* I believed in gospel grace, but I lived quite a different message: that she’d better shape up or she was not worthy of my love.

I ended up having to seek my daughter’s forgiveness, just as she had to seek ours. I told her I was sorry for being an idiot, for criticizing her rather than encouraging her, and that she shouldn’t let my knuckleheaded comments obscure the fact that we did in fact love her, warts and all. A huge part of gospel-centered parenting is having the freedom as a parent to repent and ask your children for forgiveness.

My wife and I also told my daughter that we adored her and would not let her go, no matter what. No matter what stunt she pulled, no matter what sins she struggled with, we were there for her and loved her. We weren’t going anywhere.

That is what the gospel looks like in a parent-child relationship. It doesn’t mean we never discipline for disobedience, but love shapes whatever discipline we must enforce. We discipline *only* out of love, never out of annoyance or anger, and never in a manner that would make her doubt our love for her. We want only her best, to see her conformed to the love of Christ.

The gospel gives so much freedom and security for both children and parents. Children needn't fear rejection by parents, so they can show their true faces. Parents needn't fear that their mistakes will irredeemably scar and embitter their children, so they also can show their true faces. Parents and children can be real, forgiven sinners with each other.

Ted's story: The culturally sheltered son who rejected the gospel

Some years ago, I taught a Sunday school class about engaging popular culture, and someone asked how to engage popular culture with children. As we started discussing, one mother broke down in tears. I stopped the class and asked her what was wrong. She confessed she had been overprotective of her son. With the best intentions, she had shielded him from popular culture, forbidding him from seeing certain movies. Years later, her son left home to study film, and he discovered how many cultural riches had been denied him. He developed bitterness toward his mother and later rejected the faith in which he was raised. For him, Christianity became a killjoy religion of narrow-minded do-gooders who "protect" their children from good movies. He wanted no part of it.

On that Sunday, this mother asked me with tears how she could mend those bridges. I told her repentance was the key; she must ask her son's forgiveness and seek to rebuild those bridges. It would be a slow, painful process. But God has the power to restore the years the locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25). He can heal the damage we ourselves inflict.

For my part, I've sometimes needed to ask forgiveness of my children for the exact opposite failure: letting them see too much. Sometimes we're watching a movie or television show, and I am too slow with the remote control. I have to hit stop and say, "I am sorry for letting you watch that scene. This wasn't the best for you. I messed up as a parent. I should have protected you better. Would you forgive me?"

And they do. So far, none of my children has turned out to be an ax-wielding prostitute. But more importantly, all of them understand the gospel. They get how Jesus's death demonstrates to messed-up sinners that God loves them always. His love is like a river that never runs dry. He pours his love upon them and us with ridiculous generosity.

An important side note: understanding the gospel is *not* a guarantee that your child will continue the faith into adulthood. Some walk away *despite* understanding the gospel. But even when a child does wander away, being grounded in the gospel is key to maintaining a good relationship with that child.

God's unfailingly faithful and generous love is the context for a parent-child relationship to grow. Nothing can harm us while we're under God's protecting grace. He alone is our north star, guiding us home.

3. Gospel-centered parenting woos the child's heart with the gospel's beauty.

This context of God's wildly undeserved love transforms us into people who *do* long to keep God's laws as Jesus did because we long to be like him. Paul puts it this way: "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:11–14 NIV).

Paul affirms that mere commitment to Christian duty is not why we are able to obey God. Rather, we are powerfully motivated by grace. God transforms us through the power of

his undeserved love for messy, screwed-up rebels like us (and our children).

How does that work?

The great nineteenth-century Scottish pastor-theologian Thomas Chalmers might help us figure out how grace changes us. In his sermon “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” Chalmers asserts that behavior is controlled by our hearts’ affections; we do what we want to do.³ It’s all about desire. So, if our heart desires an idol—a false god that promises life to the full—we will chase after it. The solution? Change the desires of the heart.

But heart desires are notoriously difficult to change and cannot be overcome by mere willpower or moral effort. A desire that has been installed on our heart’s throne, to rule our wants, will remain king until a more beautiful and powerful ruler topples it and woos our hearts away from idols. Parental focus on behavior modification misses the point, for it effectively does an end run around the child’s inner desires. The deeper, more significant battle is for the affections of the heart, and that is not won by scowling at the world so much as it is by showing your child the beauty of the gospel.

As the heart changes its base loyalties and affections, behavior will also change. But these changes don’t work in reverse. If we force conforming obedience on a child, we will produce only resentment that will later bear a bitter harvest. Your mission is the heart—to ferret out the distorted desires, hopes, and fears that lurk within your child and to woo your child’s heart to a better affection: the beauty and majesty of Jesus.

How would this work in everyday life? Obviously, the family must be learning the Bible together because that is where the gospel is found. Make your home a Scripture-soaked place through family devotions, Bible story times, private quiet times, catechism, any means you can use to familiarize yourselves and your children with biblical truth. Pray for and with your kids, that the gospel will enter their hearts.

You will also apply the gospel to real-life situations. If you have a young son who hit his kid sister, you may need to discipline him, but you also need to make a case in an age-appropriate way regarding the heart issue at the core of his behavior. You need to woo his heart back to gospel love—even love for annoying little sisters. When he understands that he has done wrong and feels the wrongness (the guilt), he comes to understand and appreciate God’s love for him more deeply *because* of his sin. When guilt gives way to gratitude, God once again is installed as the rightful king of your son’s heart.

Over time, however, the gospel itself can seem cliché. All three authors of this book grew up in the church and can attest to how hearing the same phrases over and over, singing the same songs, can breed an overfamiliarity. The gospel no longer seems strange and wonderful. It is here that engaging with popular culture can help reignite kids’ imaginations. Popular culture is a key part of showing the beauty of the gospel *especially for kids who have grown up in the church* and are tired of the typical phrases and clichés we use to describe it.

Popular culture can woo imaginations both through contrast and reflection. By *contrast*, we mean the gospel shines brighter when we see the emptiness of the false gospels in popular culture. When the hero saves the world through violence, you can talk about how violence often *doesn’t* save the world and how God actually saved the world by allowing his Son to become a victim of violence, absorbing its ugliness. By *reflection*, we mean that popular culture sometimes gives hints and echoes of the beauty and power of the gospel. When we see a character learn to forgive a friend who has betrayed her trust, we hear an echo of the gospel—of God’s forgiveness of our betrayal. As counterintuitive as it sounds, with adult guidance, popular culture can actually place the gospel into new imaginative contexts for children, helping them see its power and beauty anew.

4. Gospel-centered parenting is incarnational.

A time-tested proverb declares, “90 percent of parenting is just showing up.” This is no doubt true. Being there for events big and small—Little League games, elementary school performances, graduations, a college rejection letter—means a lot to a kid. But showing up is not enough; *how* you show up is decisive. Some kinds of parental involvement make the gospel attractive. Others do not, as we see in these examples.

Ted’s story: “Repent, or devil smash you in hell!”

Several years ago, I took my wife and daughters to a fan convention called Dragon*Con. People of all colors, shapes, sizes, and backgrounds came together to participate in panel discussions, watch and discuss their favorite shows, catch sight of their favorite celebrities, and dress up in bizarre costumes (the more bizarre the better). One of the highlights of the convention is the parade. Costumed fans converge and march through downtown Atlanta. We watched row upon row of Darth Vaders, hobbits, Marios, superheroes, zombies, and other characters pass before our eyes. Wonderful stuff.

Right after the last float passed, the street preachers descended with their bullhorns, blaring out their messages of judgment and repentance. One preacher was followed by a man holding a huge sign on a pole. On it was a picture of the Incredible Hulk. Its text read, “Hulk say, REPENT, OR DEVIL SMASH YOU IN HELL!!!”

Fans drifted away, muttering resentfully. My eldest daughter overheard one fan say, “We don’t go into their churches, so why do they invade ours?”

Please notice: in his mind, this street preacher probably believed he was being culturally relevant because his sign had a picture of the Hulk. In reality, he was anything but. He was judging the fans from the outside and doing more harm than good for the cause of the gospel.

On the other hand, I met a number of Christian fans. They too dressed in odd costumes and contributed to the discussions. Dragon*Con even gave the group a room for a Sunday worship service. The sermon was delivered by a pastor dressed up as King Fergus, Merida's father from the film *Brave*. These Christians hung out with the fans in the fans' own territory. They didn't judge fans from the outside. They even dressed in "native garb" (cosplay).

Guess which method comes closer to Jesus's own method for reaching sinners. Which approach looks more like Jesus hanging out with the deeply unpopular tax collectors and sinners? Hint: it's not the guy with the bullhorn. And guess which method has a greater impact? If we want to draw people to the gospel, we must be incarnational and relational, entering into their worlds. Parents are often tempted to parent from above, from a position of detached authority looking down on the child's world, judging and dismissing it, safely ensconced in the parent's comfort zone. But we only effectively woo our children's hearts to the beauty of the gospel when we mimic Jesus by being incarnational. That is, just as Jesus entered our world, we *enter* the worlds of our children, including the culture they enjoy.

Children long to share the things they love with their parents. They long for our approval. They want us to enjoy their culture with them. This longing is an opportunity: we can step into their worlds or else reject them. One path leads to more engagement with your child's cultural choices. The other leads to less.

Ted's story: How not to enter your child's favorite world

When my brother and I attended middle school, our local public television station ran the British comedy program *Monty Python's Flying Circus* late on Saturday nights. We loved the bizarre, slightly naughty humor, even when we didn't get the jokes. After some years, the television station

decided to end the show. But before they did, they ran a *Python* marathon to give their viewers one last giant dose of absurd British humor. It was during this marathon that my father, after years of ignoring it, finally decided to come down to the basement to watch the show with us.

It was awful. He just sat there and said, “That’s not funny. . . . That’s not funny. . . . Why do you boys find this funny?” My brother and I could not wait for him to leave. Through his attitude, he effectively abdicated the right to speak meaningfully into our cultural choices. He hadn’t cared about the show before, and he obviously didn’t get it now. So what right did he have to criticize our show? He had rejected what we held dear without even trying to understand. In a sense, we felt as if he had rejected us. *That* is parenting from above, parenting from the outside.

Compare that to my decision to join my kids in watching *One Piece*, a show I was tempted to dismiss. By repenting of my above-it-all attitude and jumping in with them, I was in a position to woo their hearts with the gospel and show them how beautifully the gospel shines when compared to what the world offers.

Similarly, when I helped pastor a church with Korean kids, I engaged in their favorite pop music. This opened so many avenues for discussion about deep subjects: sex, work, play, faith, reality. This provided me golden opportunities for getting into important issues with adolescents in a nonthreatening way. But many others had overlooked these opportunities. I remember one high school student coming up and saying, “It’s just so weird, having you, an adult, treating this music as if it *means* something.” In other words, they only knew parents who habitually dismissed their music as frivolous and not worth discussing or were ready to judge it as too sinful to be worth talking about. How much these parents were missing! They were passing up a golden opportunity to

live in their children's worlds and speak encouragement and wisdom into their lives at a delicate time in their development.

Of course, sometimes you must say no when your child has gotten involved with a show, game, or music that is age inappropriate, too dark, or too much for them to handle. But *why* you say no and the *way* you say no—these make all the difference.

We will discuss this more in later chapters. For now, suffice it to say that the normal, go-to pattern for incarnational parenting is involvement over judgment. Play the games your kids play. Watch the shows your kids watch. Listen to the songs your kids listen to. And talk about what you find. Enter their world rather than dismissing or judging their cultural choices out of hand. Being involved in this way deepens relationship and helps you to understand your child's heart. And then, when you need to say no, you can talk with your child about the heart issues involved and how to make wise choices given their strengths and weaknesses.

The guiding principle for incarnational parenting is this: we must be present in our children's popular-culture worlds in some significant way. The important word is *significant*. This means we do more than occasionally pop our head into their rooms to see what they are watching on YouTube (though that's advisable). It means finding time to watch stuff, play stuff, listen to stuff *with* your kids and to talk with them about it. If we don't, we're letting our kids build their own little worlds in which popular culture alone, and not the gospel, is wooing their hearts.

5. Gospel-centered parenting raises culturally savvy people lovers.

Let us suppose your child's heart is wooed by the beauty of the gospel, and her imagination begins to be captured

by the depth and breadth of God's love for her. Now what should you expect?

One way it will inevitably show is in relationship. The apostle John says repeatedly that if someone really understands what God has graciously done in Christ, it will show in how he loves other people (1 John 3:16–18, 23–24; 4:7–12). This is the truest and most reliable indication that God's transforming grace has gotten ahold of the heart and wooed the affections. People who understand God's crazy love for them will have a hard time suppressing a crazy love for other people. That's why they will also want to share that good news about this grace with others. They will have a natural enthusiasm for sharing, like a fan who has just seen an awesome trailer for a coming movie. There's too much awesome not to share.

But how do you share in a way that people can hear? In our post-Christian culture, most people are dismissive toward Christianity. So do you hoist your Hulk placard and dust off the bullhorn? Or do you step into their world and try to speak their language? This is what culturally engaged gospel-centered parenting prepares your children to do: share the awesome in a language their peers can comprehend.

Of course, sometimes parents should be concerned about the influence of non-Christian friends. Bad company can surely corrupt good character. Parents should be involved with their children's non-Christian friends, as they should be involved with their non-Christian popular culture. But if we truly believe in the gospel's beauty and power to change lives, we will naturally want to follow in Jesus's footsteps and get involved with people who are far from God. That's true for us and for our children.

Yes, children need solid Christian friends, but they also need non-Christian friends. They need to "shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life" (Philippians

2:15–16 κJV). *This* is the chief end of gospel-centered parenting: to raise up and equip the next generation of children who worship Jesus and shine like stars to the non-Christians around them as they hold out the word of life.

This is an exciting and weighty calling. Parents shouldn't be preoccupied with only surviving until Jesus returns. We have a job to do: train young apprentices in the art of soul diplomacy. Someday, God willing, student will surpass teacher. Our children will have learned the gospel as lifestyle, walking the path God has put them on with gospel-wooded hearts as they woo others. This is what the Christian parent longs for, our reward for years of engagement with kids and their cultural worlds.

One last thought: no one does this perfectly. Every parent makes mistakes, has regrets, wishes they could find a do-over button. Parenting is messy. Our children are messes, and so are we. But we are messes who have been saved by the blood of the Lamb, in whom the Spirit is working, slowly, patiently. The same gospel to which you are trying to woo your children prevails also for you and your parenting. It's all woven through with grace and divine power.