

How God Defines “Family”

Steven Lange

Does your family consist of a dad, a mom, and some kids, all living together? Or is your family more like a grandpa, a grandma, and some grandchildren, because Mom and Dad aren't a big part of the picture right now? Are you caring for nephews or nieces because your brother or sister can't care for them? Or are you a single mother or father, living alone with the kids? There are other combinations of people who may or may not be related, who consider themselves to be a *family*.

Fifty years ago the combination of Dad, Mom, and the kids was decidedly in the majority. At that time 78 percent of all American households were made up of married couples with children. Today that proportion has been reversed. Three-quarters of American families are not structured in the “nuclear family” model (2000 U.S. Census).

That is not to say that the traditional nuclear family is not valued anymore. In fact, 80 percent of Americans still say they believe it is better for children if their parents are married and living with them (2005 PBS survey). Yet most of us also recognize that family can mean many different combinations of people—not just Dad, Mom, and the kids.

How does the Bible define “family”?

It is clear from Scripture that God also values what we call the traditional nuclear family. That, after all, is the form in which he first established the family. When God created Adam and Eve, he told them, “Be fruitful and increase in

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number” (Genesis 1:28). And soon the world had its first nuclear family: Adam (the dad), Eve (the mom), and Cain and Abel (the kids).

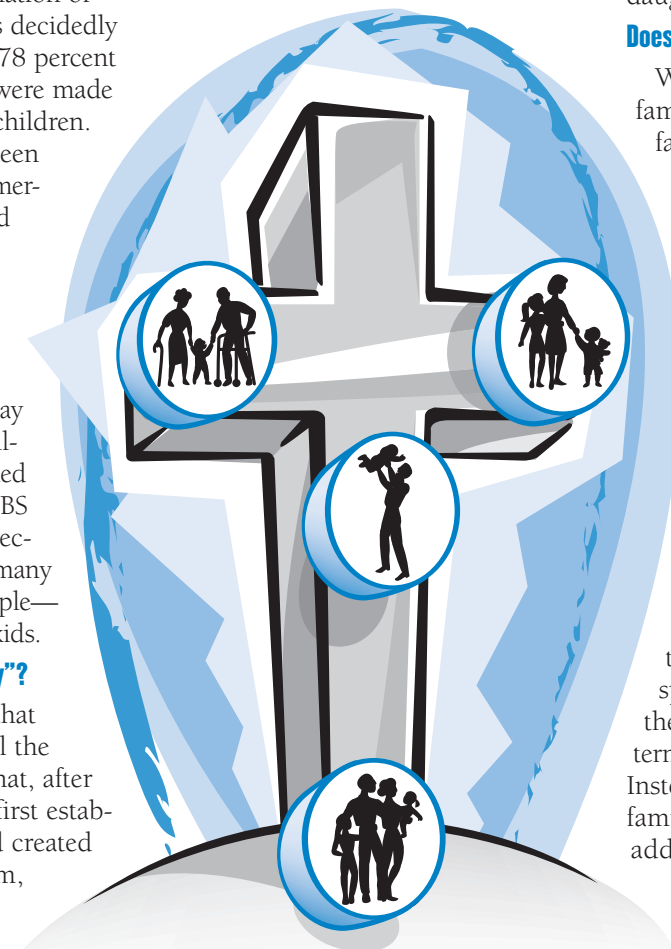
It also is clear from Scripture, however, that the traditional nuclear family is not the only form of family that God values. Many families in the Bible did not fit the nuclear family mold either. Abraham's family, for example, included his nephew Lot, long before it included his son Isaac. And, for a while, Naomi's family consisted only of Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth.

Does God have a preference?

When God established the first family, the template he used was a father and a mother, living together with the kids. He did this for a reason. God knew that this distinctive family structure would bring the most benefit to everyone involved.

Yet God also knows that human families are made up of sinners and people who suffer the effects of sin. Divorce, illness, death, irresponsibility, abuse, neglect, incarceration, and a host of other circumstances can reshape a family structure so that it looks quite different from the original. Perhaps that explains why the Bible doesn't spend much time talking about *who* the members of a family must be in terms of their biological relationships. Instead, when Scripture speaks about family, the bulk of the discussion addresses *what a family does*.

(Continued on page 2.)



(How God Defines . . . cont.)

What does a Christian family do?

Family members, according to God, take care of one another. Most important, they take care of one another spiritually. In particular, those family members who are fulfilling the role of caring for and nurturing the children will be involved in teaching God's Word to family members. In Old Testament times, God told his people, "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:6,7). The command obviously refers to the home setting, though it is not aimed exclusively at parents. Consider how Timothy learned God's Word. Timothy's father appar-

ently was an unbeliever. So Eunice, Timothy's mother, stepped into the role of "spiritual head of house" and taught her son to know the Bible. She also received help in Timothy's spiritual training from her mother, Lois. Spiritually, Timothy did not belong to a "traditional" family unit consisting of a believing father and a believing mother. Yet his spiritually "nontraditional" family fulfilled God's will for the family by working together to teach him God's Word.

Regardless of how your family is structured, you can fulfill God's will by teaching God's Word to your family members. Read, study, and learn Scripture for yourself. Impress the precious truths of the Bible on your own heart, and marvel at all that your gracious God has done for you. Then impress

these same truths on the children in your family. Talk with them about Jesus . . . when you sit at home and when you drive along the freeway. Have devotions with them when they go to bed. Teach them to pray when they wake up in the morning. Be the kind of family God wants—a family immersed in his Word. Then your family will be truly blessed.

Steven Lange is pastor of Hope Lutheran Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He and his wife, Krista, have three children.

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Is it ever okay to lie?

Rahab lied to protect Israel's spies (Joshua 2). Jacob deceived his father to receive the birthright (Genesis 27). Both examples turned out well. Logic concludes that lies must be okay. But the Bible never commends these lies. Rahab is commended for her faith, not her lie. Jacob's life became a training ground for God to teach him a lesson.

Defining what constitutes a lie is very subjective, but the Bible never asks us to try. Scripture says, "Better to be poor than a liar" (Proverbs 19:22). "Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor" (Ephesians 4:25). "Do not lie to each other" (Colossians 3:9). Moreover, the Bible equates lying with our enemy. Jesus declared of Satan, "There is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

The biblical practice for us as Christians is to speak truthfully. When we do lie, rather than trying to justify the lie, we are to confess our sin and trust in the forgiveness in Christ by which we are already justified.

Our nine-year-old recently asked, "What does being gay mean?" His uncle, who is very dear, is gay. What should I say?

While being sensitive to the uncle-nephew relationship, begin with sin and grace. Children must know that all people, including adults whom they love, are sinful and need a Savior. The good news is that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). That's **grace**. God loves gay people with a love that was willing to die for them—the very same undeserved love that every Christian relies on for forgiveness.

You will need to be clear that the Bible discusses homosexuality as a sin (1 Corinthians 6:9,10). In God's eyes it is as morally wrong as drunkenness, greed, or idolatry. He will judge those who participate in a gay lifestyle because it stands in open disobedience to his will. A Christian's role is to lovingly point to the eternal jeopardy in which such individuals are placing their souls when

they participate in such sins. The role of a Christian requires strength. It is a hard message, but one that can lead to repentance and a new life. Pray with your nine-year-old. Ask God for the strength and confidence in his promise not to let his Word return empty.

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Does adoption still carry the same stigma it had in past generations?

In the past, insensitive people might have made the topic of adoption the focus of cruel gossip. In that climate it was not uncommon for well-intentioned adoptive parents to keep the fact of a child's adopted status secret even from the child. Many adopted children suffered from the painful stigma.

Today our population is much more diverse. Adoption is an everyday occurrence. On the other hand fewer children are being put up for adoption.

Every child is a precious gift of God. All children need caring and nurturing adults in their lives. And adoption will always be a reality in the lives of some children.

My Two Snowflakes

Karin Pacetti

Are you familiar with Yin and Yang? I mean, my two children, Paul and Nina Marie? They are brother and sister, yet they are as different as two children can be. One likes sausage; the other, pepperoni. One moves slowly; the other, too fast. They know exactly how to get each other into trouble. There isn't a day that goes by when I don't wonder to myself, "Why couldn't God have made them just a little more the same, a little closer to the middle of the teeter-totter to keep one from bouncing the other off?"

Sitting squarely between baby photos of my two blessings is this cross-stitched verse: "Children are like snowflakes. No two alike." My friend gave it to me as a subtle reminder during teeter-totter days that *uniqueness* is part of God's plan. So as I gaze at the beautiful hand-made snowflakes that surround the verse, I think, *Are they really always different?* The snowflakes, I mean.

Turns out snowflakes are water crystals in a constant state of growth. At their core, they all begin as one of three or four basic design structures. But as they slowly descend, they continue to grow. The odds of the crystal configurations being exact increases so greatly that it is nearly impossible to find two that are identical. And doesn't that sound familiar?

My two—children, I mean—pretty much started out the same from birth: with thick, dark hair and close in length and weight. But it wasn't long before major physical and personality differences began to appear.

Now, four years into raising two children, they are, well, *yin and yang*, two totally different personas.

But here's the mystery of it all: as different as one is from the other, they are still completely drawn to each other, screaming or hugging, with undeniable brotherly and sisterly love.

Being different, as siblings, can come in handy. You don't have to fight over flavors of fruit roll-ups. You can let your little sister be the first to open the door so you can be the first to pick the channel on the TV.

You can jump on your brother's back, knowing he's too big to do the same without getting into trouble.

After the initial sense that I was being

scammed, I realized that it was their differences that initiated their interactions. And knowing each other's unique qualities has helped them get along. In fact, they understand each other's distinctive attributes so well that such knowledge can be used, with equal effectiveness, for both good and evil. For example, such knowledge comes in handy for irritating each other, but it also gives them a reason to seek each other out, just as children do, because "same" is boring and "different" is fun.

I once had a rare snowfall experience—a sudden spring shower of snowflakes that were almost an eighth inch or more in diameter. I wish my children could have been there, but I was alone, acting like a child on the first snowfall of winter. I caught as many flakes as I could. Surprisingly, they all appeared to be enormously different. Still, each one was beautiful in its own distinct way. I've started

to appreciate that about people in general and not just in my own offspring.

My friend Beth has three children with very different personalities. Treating everyone the same would make life easier. But she's learned that stopping to consider each child's unique attributes first is much more successful than just reacting with a standard response. It

takes a whole lot of patience, but the payoff is rewarding.

So, what about us *big kids*? Is there a lesson to be learned by us when we embrace the differences in our children? I've adopted a familiar phrase to effectively address the perennial problem of sibling rivalry: "Brothers and sisters, go in peace!" Our kids know exactly what it means. They've often heard the speech that accompanies the phrase. It means we have to learn to get along with one another, accepting one another for his or her unique qualities—to appreciate the beauty in our distinctiveness.

I am so grateful my children are unique and distinctive. I pray they will always be able to embrace a wide range of differences in other people. I also pray that they will be able to share their unique perspective on what Jesus means to them with others. That would be as wonderful as the first snowfall in winter.

Karin Pacetti, an adjunct art instructor at Wisconsin Lutheran College, lives in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

IS THERE A LESSON WE CAN LEARN AS WE EMBRACE THE DIFFERENCES IN OUR CHILDREN?

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Inform Their Hearts

Jason Nelson

Jordan became the baby of our family after a different kid had occupied the position for eight years. Growing up with older siblings enabled him to become precocious in some ways. It also nearly resulted in his developing a Jordan-centric view of life. One night at the supper table, our astute three-year-old carefully surveyed the rest of the family, waited for his moment, and impulsively announced, “You know, I’m the cutest one.”

Jordan’s unexpected declaration was met with an outburst of laughter around the table. It taught him a lesson that in some settings might even save his life. The lesson: You can’t always say what you are thinking. That night before the spaghetti got rigor, three mildly offended teenagers connected some cerebral synapses for Jordan that hadn’t been connected before. The result for Jordan was a giant leap forward in managing his expressions of the inner self. In the parlance of current brain research and intelligence theory, they helped him develop his *emotional intelligence*.

A lot has been said and written about the interplay of thoughts and feelings. We are complex beings. In spiritual terms we are sinner/saints—redeemed by the blood of Christ, but still wrestling with our old sinful flesh. But there also are thinking-feeling-behaving dimensions to nearly everything about us.

When we knew less about the way things work, we ascribed thinking to the brain and feeling to the heart. The Bible itself speaks in those terms. It is a picturesque way to describe the way God made us. But in reality, it is all in our heads. To be precise, it is all in different regions of our brain; the heart is just a pump. But matters of the heart are special mental processes that are embedded in a very powerful integrated

system of gray, wet jelly, nerve fibers, and electriclike impulses.

Through sophisticated imaging and brain mapping, we know that emotions emanate from the middle part of the brain in a structure called the limbic

If our children are to thrive, they will need informed hearts. Their EQ is as important as their IQ.

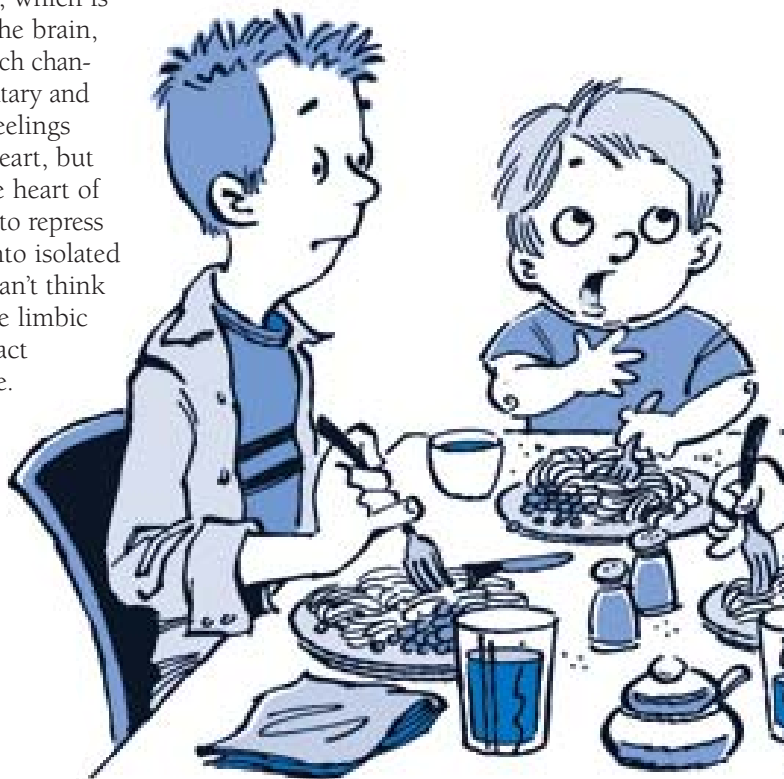
system. God placed it strategically between the cerebrum, which is the reasoning part of the brain, and the brain stem, which channels messages for voluntary and involuntary actions. Feelings don’t come from the heart, but they do come from the heart of the brain. Any attempt to repress thinking and feeling into isolated silos is inhuman. We can’t think without lighting up the limbic system, and we can’t act without doing the same. There is constant neurological interplay.

Emotion is highly enriched thought: enriched with associations, enriched with experiences, enriched with memories, and enriched with certain chemicals in the brain.

It is one of the key elements that makes us the crown of God’s creation—a little lower than the angels and very different from the beasts. It is what causes us to deny thoughts that are unpleasant and repeat behavior we find rewarding. For a child to become a whole and mentally healthy person, this system needs to develop fully.

Parents are the chief architects of emotional development. The goal of parenting is not to control what our children think, feel, or do; instead, it is to teach them to control those functions for themselves. This is not just an idea promoted by our scientific understanding of how human beings are put together; the Bible encourages us to “add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control” (2 Peter 1:5,6).

Self-awareness and self-control are valuable concepts for understanding emotional intelligence. People are like



icebergs; there is a lot more beneath the surface. Disaster strikes when what is not seen in us collides with what we don't see in others. The capacity to control our emotional output during these daily collisions with one another is called our *emotion quotient* or *EQ*. Having a healthy EQ implies an ability to see beneath the surface, to regulate our own impulses, to empathize with others, and to be resilient in the face of obstacles and challenges. A well-developed EQ is a collection of intrapersonal competencies that are demonstrated in interpersonal ways. A healthy EQ can make the difference between getting along with others in emotionally charged situations or not.

Christian parents are actively engaged in helping their children develop robust EQs. We do this by drawing on the depth of our own EQs. When we love our children as Christ loves them, we give them a sense of temporal and eternal security. At the same time, we are helping them deal with the telltale demonstrations of insecurity. When we lead our children along the paths of the Bible's righteousness, we give them moral confidence. Other people will recognize this as inner strength.

This is arduous work. And we dare not outsource it. Day by day we teach right from wrong. Day by day we verbalize pleasantries, act with courtesy, and expect our children to do the same. Day by day we are firm in our reprimands and lavish with our encouragement. Day by day we

toughen them up and make them soft all at the same time. Every little bit of parental loving and leading instills emotional stops and gates in the psyches of our children. Day by day



we connect our informed hearts with theirs so they will know when to dismiss a thought as insignificant, when to ignite it in passion, and when to drown it cold in repentance.

When God offered to give Solomon anything he wanted, Solomon asked for an informed heart. He understood that without an informed heart, he would remain an emotional child. He wouldn't be able to distinguish right from wrong. He wouldn't have the ability to govern himself or God's people.

Our Savior has a perfectly informed heart. When he lived on earth, the outward expressions of the inner Jesus were always in tune with his heavenly Father's holy will. And they were always perfectly appropriate for the circumstances. He wept by the grave of his friend, though he knew he would bring Lazarus back to life. He disarmed a mob of temple lawyers by challenging the "sinless" to cast the first stone. With righteous indignation, he drove greedy swindlers from his temple. He refused to segregate himself from the woman at the well but rationally led her to feel sorrow over her sin. The foreknowledge of his own suffering produced anxiety that pressed blood out of his sweat glands. And, in astounding compassion, he prayed from the cross for his Father to forgive his executioners, because they didn't *know*, or for that matter *feel*, that what they were doing was wrong.

Our children live in a big-boy and big-girl world. If they are to thrive, having a healthy EQ will be as important as their IQ. They will need informed hearts. Sometimes they will need to *think* themselves into the right way of feeling about things. Sometimes they will need to *feel* themselves into the right way of thinking about things. All so that they can do things that will give glory and honor to God's name.

Jason Nelson, former national administrator for the WELS Commission on Parish Schools, has spent nearly 30 years working with students, parents, schools, and churches. He lives in Pewaukee, Wisconsin, with his wife, Nancy, and their son Jordan.



EQ Under Development

INTRAPERSONAL

Confidence
Conscientiousness
Self-control
Flexibility
Motivation
Initiative
Resilience

INTERPERSONAL

Empathy
Commitment
Social skills
Patience
Persuasion
Collaboration
Leadership

FOR FURTHER READING

Eric Jensen,
*Teaching with the
 Brain in Mind*

Roger R. Pearman,
*Introduction to Type and
 Emotional Intelligence*

David A. Sousa,
How the Brain Learns

Viewpoint

Point/Counterpoint

The home-school partnership depends largely on common goals and constructive communication between parents and teachers. When this vital relationship breaks down, the child's learning suffers. The parent and teacher who wrote the following letters need to get on the same page; but how?

Dear Mrs. Murray,

I'm sure you have a lot going on in your classroom, and I can only imagine how busy you must be. I am wondering though, can't more be done to help my son? Are all the kids bringing this much work home? I struggle to understand why Billy has so much to do every night. And then when he finally gets everything else done, there is memory work to learn. Could you possibly find time to cover more of these things in class? There just isn't time for me to do all of it. Between after school care, karate lessons, and soccer practice, Billy is busy from the time he is done with school until he goes to bed. As you may have heard, Billy's father and I are no longer together. Arrangements are for Billy to spend weekends with his father. When notes are sent home on Fridays, I don't see them. Also, any homework sent home over the weekend will probably not be done. This is the time Billy spends with his father; they don't seem to do homework.

I realize these personal issues aren't your concern; however, they do affect Billy. Also, if you could send notes home on any day except Friday, it would be helpful.

I'm trying to do what is best for Billy. Your help would be appreciated.

Thank you,
Valerie Forrester

Dear Mrs. Forrester,

It's clear we're not on the same page. As your child's teacher, I want you to know how I feel. Please don't take what I am saying personally, but this is not about you or me. It's about what is best for your child. We are not going to get anywhere if we continue to point our fingers at each other.

Second, I have a difficult time communicating your child's needs to you. Do you check in with me or respond to my letters or e-mails? I feel you have left me alone to fix your child's problems. The reality is that you are the best advocate your child has. If you fail to communicate what is going on at home, my job as a teacher becomes even more difficult.

Finally, try to have realistic expectations. I don't have all the answers, but I am trying to do my best. Every child seems to need more attention than I can give. Multiply that times 17 children. Teachers are just people; we have gifts, abilities, failings, and shortcomings. We need help from parents like you.

Please realize that I am here for you and your child. Pray for me, as I am praying for your family.

Sincerely,

Anita Murray - your child's teacher



Dear Jesus,

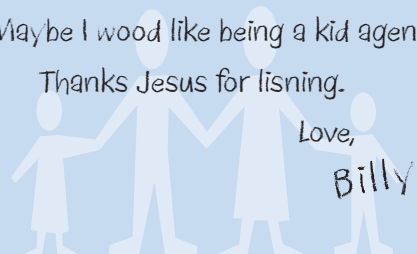
I wish we were a family agen. Mom is hardly ever home. When I need help with skoolwork she says, "Try to get it yourself." When I am with Dad on weekends, he says that time is just for fun. No one helps me, but they yell if my grades are bad.

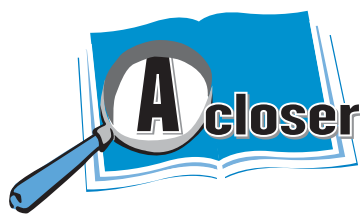
Sometimes they say its the teacher's fallt. Its not. Its my fallt if I cant keep up. The other kids can. When my teacher is unhappy with me I feel sad. Just like Mom and Dad expecting me to get strate AS. Sometimes I am tired in skool becuZ I cant sleep at night. I worry a lot about stuff. Its hard to be a kid specially if your not super smart.

Jesus I wish Mom and Dad wood talk to each other about me. Even if we are not a family. I wish they wood talk to my teacher too. Maybe if they all talked to each other my grades wood get better. Maybe I wood be happyer. Maybe I wood have to work harder if evryone was waching me. Thats scary but its a nice feeling too. Maybe I wood sleep at night. Maybe I wood like being a kid agen.

Thanks Jesus for lising.

Love,
Billy





**A closer look
at**

Katie Martin

THE ROCK OF OUR SALVATION

Simon Peter was a man of contradictions. Though nicknamed Peter by Christ—a name that means “rock”—Peter’s own faith life was often marred by pride, doubt, and denial.

On the first Maundy Thursday evening, we see what a contradiction Peter’s faith life could be. In the upper room, Jesus made the prophetic prediction that his disciples would desert him and that Peter would deny him three times before the rooster crowed. We can almost imagine the reaction of Peter’s bruised ego, “Come on, Jesus, I’m the rock, remember?” Arrogant and overconfident, Peter exclaimed, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Matthew 26:35). And yet despite Peter’s misplaced confidence, the Savior’s words rang true.

That night in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was taken into custody by the temple guards. Peter valiantly came to his master’s defense, drawing his sword and slashing the ear of one of the temple servants. But the gentle way in which Jesus attended to the bleeding man’s injury confused Peter even more. And the events of that night spun quickly out of control.

The Savior’s friends scattered, leaving only Peter and John following the unfolding events at a distance. At Caiaphas’ palace, John was able to get inside, but Peter was left alone in the courtyard. Excitement buzzed on that chilly night. Soldiers and servants gathered around a charcoal fire to talk about the arrest of Jesus of Nazareth, the rabbi whose teachings were causing such a stir. Brimming with curiosity, yet trying to remain inconspicuous in the midst of Jesus’ enemies, Peter stayed near the fire to hear what was being said. His first challenge came from a servant girl who thought she had seen Peter associating with Jesus. Without hesitation, Peter denied her assertion.

Frightened, Peter retreated to the gateway. There another servant approached

him. This woman also sought to reveal Peter’s identity as a follower of Jesus. But the tone of her voice was more accusatory. A second time Peter protested.

It didn’t take long for a third confrontation. When it came, it shook Peter to the core of his faith. Someone standing nearby recognized his Galilean accent. This time Peter denied knowing his dear friend and Savior with a flurry of curses to add some emotional weight to his lie. Rather than trusting in his Savior’s protection and turning to Jesus’ promises to be with him, instead of making a bold witness of his faith, Peter denied knowing Jesus. It was a pathetic reflection of the fear and doubt in his heart.

**TO ADD WEIGHT
TO THE LIE,
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As a rooster crowed a second time, Jesus was being led out through the courtyard. As he passed, he looked straight at Peter without saying a word. It was a look, no doubt, that Peter would carry in his mind’s eye for the rest of his life—a look that convicted Peter’s conscience. Outside the courtyard, alone, crushed by his own weakness of faith, Peter wept bitterly.

In spite of Peter’s fall, Jesus still had great plans for him. One morning after his resurrection, Jesus reassured Peter of his full forgiveness and reinstated him as an apostle. Three times the Lord questioned Peter’s love for him. And three times, in humble submission, Peter confessed his love for his Savior. He trusted in the Savior’s ability to know all things; he knew that Jesus could see the love in his heart. Peter would no longer be a reed swayed in the breeze. He was soon to become an important tool in building God’s kingdom.

We too are people of many contradictions. On Sunday mornings, we stand and proclaim our love for Jesus only to cave in frequently to the pressure to conform to the world’s views and standards. Whenever we choose the way of the world over Christ and fail to make a bold witness of our faith, we deny our Savior. Like Peter’s, these sins are evidence of the doubt in our hearts.

God provides the antidote for a weak and doubting faith. The blood of Christ offers us full and free forgiveness, and his Holy Spirit strengthens us through Word and sacrament. We cling, in faith, to the rock of Christ. Sometimes our old sin-ridden self still has influence over us. We will, like Peter, stumble and fall, contradicting God’s will from time to time. Nevertheless, we are reinstated in God’s family by the cross. And because of Jesus, we are given the privilege to serve as instruments in building his kingdom. God’s power will be made perfect in our weakness, as we seek opportunities to make a bold witness for the rock of our salvation.

Katie Martin lives in Killeen, Texas, with her husband, Josh, and their three children. She runs a home-based business and enjoys writing and leading women’s Bible studies.

Give a gift
that says

Love

IS CONVERSATION BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR TEEN A RARE EVENT?

Do you wish that communication in your household could be more meaningful? Here are a few great ideas for conversations that could turn out to be the best gifts of the season.

At the local pizza joint, ask your children how many hours they think someone (Mom or Dad perhaps) had to work to pay for the meal. This is a casual way to talk about finances and being good stewards of our money.

Begin a meal with a circle prayer. Ask everyone to contribute one new thought. Discuss the power of prayer. Talk about some of the items that were included in the prayer.

Begin a conversation with, "I really like your friend (Jim). It's great to have friends influence us in positive ways." Share a positive influence in your life. Talk about surrounding ourselves with friends who will be positive forces in our lives.

Place a \$10 bill on the table, explaining that the money will belong to your teen if she or he can pass a simple test. The test is to explain how to use the money according to God-pleasing stewardship principles.

After watching a movie with negative sexual overtones, ask your child why he or she thinks the world has this distorted view of a wonderful gift from God. Be ready for some interesting discussion.

Tell your teen that you are proud of the choices made this past week: when he or she decided to finish the math assignment instead of going online or chose to visit an aging relative instead of going out with friends. Make this the start of a conversation about the importance of the choices we make in our lives.

Pick a favorite Bible character, and explain why you seem to relate to this character more than others. Then ask your teen to identify a Bible character that he or she can readily relate to. Talk about the character traits of other favorite people in the Bible or in literature.

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Readers are invited to add new suggestions.



Cartoon by Ed Koehler

First reported case of Mad Cow disease.

Parents Crosslink

DEAR READER,

Today's parents learn from each other, sharing ideas and encouraging one another to meet the daily challenges of living in an increasingly godless society. In the context of the gospel, this is a very powerful dynamic. *Parents Crosslink* (PCL) is a response to the demand for an interactive approach to assisting parents with a biblical view of family. Please join our ongoing conversation about Christian parenting at the PCL Web site located at www.parentscrosslink.net.

Kenneth Kremer, PCL Editor

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