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INTELLECTUAL SUBMARINES

THERE I WAS, lying in bed, wide awake, my eyes searching the dark bedroom ceiling for any sign of hope.

“Are you awake?” I asked my wife, Judy.

“I can’t sleep.”

“Is something on your mind?” I didn’t need to ask. I knew the answer. Our daughter was on a date with a friend we did not approve of. It was after midnight. In addition, since this relationship began she had been distant, obstinate, and uncooperative. Things were not well.

“I’m worried sick,” my wife whispered. “I can’t sleep.”

I reflected on the battles of recent weeks. My once-compliant daughter had become difficult. Most distressingly, she showed little interest in Christ or spiritual things. The influence of her new friend was not good. I reflected on the title of James Dobson’s book *Parenting Isn’t for Cowards*. I was a coward. I needed courage. I needed hope. I had little.

“Where is she?” my wife asked. “What are they doing? She has been so different lately. I’m worried sick.” Anxiety, stress, and fear dripped from her words.

I had not helped the situation. Exasperated by my daughter’s sullen rebellion, I had even flirted with the idea of spanking her. My wife’s commonsense appeal brought me back to reality. It was a dark time. We were discouraged and at the end of our resources. Maybe you have felt the same way.

God used this dark period in our parenting experience to deeply humble us, and we are grateful. For twenty years our parenting had been easy. We had what most would consider a model family. Sadly, we had begun to take pride in our parenting. We had begun to look down on friends with troubled teens. God’s Word is clear: “Pride goes before destruction” (Prov. 16:18); “God opposes the proud” (James 4:6, quoting Prov. 3:34). We were proud. The time for humbling had come. God opposed us through our daughter’s problems and brought us to our knees. We spent much time in prayer and confession. Looking back, we realize that it was a wonderful turning point.

Thankfully, our daughter also reached a turning point through this process. In a filthy Calcutta hotel (yes, India), sick with the flu and desperately homesick, this beautiful young woman finally called out to Christ. A year later God brought her a wonderful, godly husband. At this writing, they have three attractive children, and actively serve our local church. She has become a glorious gift to the church, to her husband, to her children, and to our wider family.

I told this true story to let you know that Judy and I do not “have it all together.” As do all parents, we have learned from

God's gracious discipline that we are absolutely dependent on God's Spirit to complete the parenting process. We have one job—faithfulness. It is God's job to bring results!

ASSUMPTIONS

Before chapter 2 digs into this book's thesis, I want to examine some important biblical assumptions about parenting. Assumptions are the foundation for our thought life. They are unseen intellectual submarines cruising beneath the surface of our consciousness. We presume them. We seldom think about them. Yet all our conclusions about life flow from these assumptions.

In the same way, all our conclusions about *parenting* flow out of our unconscious assumptions about God, man, and ultimate reality. Collectively, they constitute our parenting worldview—a worldview diametrically opposed to that of the secular world.

Assumptions are very practical. They always put on shoes and go walking. J. Gresham Machen noted that what is today a matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires. Francis Schaeffer added, "People have presuppositions [assumptions], and they will live more consistently on the basis of these presuppositions than even they themselves may realize."¹ This is also true about parenting.

Your capacity to parent effectively will be a function of your assumptions. I want to discuss five assumptions that you will need in order to internalize the rest of this book.

PARENTING IS NOT EASY

First, you cannot be a perfect parent. I opened with the story of our troubles to emphasize this point. If you could parent perfectly, your children might not need a Savior. But you are not perfect. From where you sit, you cannot even see perfection. Therefore, your children will desperately need Christ.

Your sins, failings, and inadequacies produce conflict with your children and misunderstandings with your spouse. At times you will deeply feel this inadequacy.

In addition to your inadequacies, there are external stresses. Some of your children might die prematurely, others might enter the world with congenital defects, or still others, like ours, might go through difficult stages of rebellion. Some will be bright, talented, or good-looking. Others will be slow, average, or unattractive. Some will have easy personalities. It will take all your perseverance and tenacity to love others.

Because parenting is difficult, and because you are imperfect, you will need the grace that comes to you through the gospel. God will use these problems to deepen your dependence on him. You will experience stress and obstacles. They will happen so that when your child comes to saving faith, your boasting will be in Christ, not your own best efforts. Like Paul, you will say, “I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10).

You will need grace, and you will need to know where to get it. Precisely because you are so flawed, the gospel, the saving work of Christ, must be your refuge.

Effective parents don't expect a cakewalk. They assume it will be difficult but that the end result—delightful Christ-centered adult children who are married to mates that you actually like—will make it all worth the effort.

GOD IS SOVEREIGN, BUT HE USES MEANS

Second, effective parents assume two parallel truths that go off into eternity and never find a satisfactory intellectual solution. First, God is sovereign over your child's salvation: "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son *chooses* to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27). This is why many from non-Christian homes become Christians. It is also why no children from Christian homes can turn to the Father unless Jesus draws them.

Second, they assume that God uses the normal means of grace to draw our children to himself. Parents are the "means" that God wants to use to reach our children. This means that we are responsible to reach our children for Christ.

Holding these two ideas—God's sovereignty and man's responsibility—in tension is important. Misunderstood, God's sovereignty can terminate in fatalism.

I knew a father whose children were completely out of control. He was passive. I was concerned, so I tentatively approached him: "I have observed your children. They seem to need discipline. They need more personal involvement and attention from you."

"God is sovereign," he answered. "He is either going to save them or not. It doesn't matter what I do. God decided

their salvation in the eternal council of the Godhead before the world was created.”

His response was partially true, but it was distorted by incompleteness. Yes, God is sovereign. But there is a parallel truth: *God uses means*. God gives children parents to draw them to himself. He can use other means, but he prefers parents. The point of this book is that God normally exercises his sovereignty through parents who faithfully practice biblical parenting.

We will constantly assume these two truths. God is sovereign, but parents are responsible. God’s sovereignty is our hope. Parents are utterly dependent on God. He can save any child, no matter how dark the circumstances. On the other hand, God normally reaches children through their parents. It is fatal to presume upon God’s sovereignty by neglecting parental faithfulness. Yet it is also a mistake to assume that it all depends on us. It doesn’t. In fact, none of your efforts will prevail unless God bestows the gift of faith on your children. We are utterly dependent and responsible at the same time.

A GOOD OFFENSE

Third, effective parents assume that a good offense is better than defense.

Nothing is more deadly to a football team with a big lead than a defensive mind-set. Instead of focusing on attacking and scoring, some coaches install “prevent defenses.” This strategy gives up small gains to prevent the “big play.” The mentality of the team members shifts from scoring themselves to preventing their opponent from scoring. We have all watched this

approach forfeit huge leads to an opponent with an aggressive, offensive, attacking mentality.

Parents can do the same thing. Dr. Tim Kimmel calls it “fear based parenting.”² Either we can focus on preparing our children to enter the world and conquer it, or we can concentrate on protecting our children from the world. A defensive mind-set worries about the evil influences of Halloween, Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or non-Christians on the Little League team. Although parenting always involves some protection, this should not be the main focus for biblical parents.

Often this defensive mentality is the fruit of legalism. The legalistic parent usually assumes that his or her children are born again. But this parent has little confidence in the *power* of new birth. Therefore, parenting is all about protecting the children from evil outside influence.

This approach can be deadly. A friend who graduated from a solid evangelical high school, and was still in contact with members of his graduating class, recently informed me that most of them (over 70 percent) smoke pot and engage in sexual promiscuity. “What went wrong?” I asked.

“Because they went to church and attended a Christian high school, their parents assumed their children were born again,” my friend answered.

Since these parents presumed their children’s new birth, all that remained was protecting them. That is why many of them sent their children to Christian high school.

Another example is a pastor friend who has five grown children. Only one is following Christ today. What went wrong? A man who knew him well described his parenting this way: No

TV, no movies, no public education, no non-Christian friends. In other words, his focus was defensive, protecting his children.

This book will assume that effective parents have an offensive mind-set. It will assume that your children are not Christians. It will assume that they need the overwhelming, all-conquering power of new birth. It will assume that, once they get it, its power will protect them from the world. “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). First John 5:4 reads, “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world.” And according to 1 John 3:9, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.”

In other words, this book will assume that effective parents equip their children to overcome the world—not by changing and controlling their environment (things external to their children), but by going after *their children’s hearts*. We change their hearts by teaching the gospel, modeling the gospel, and centering our homes on the gospel. The gospel, rightly understood and modeled, makes Christianity attractive. Effective parents make the gospel so attractive that the world cannot get a foothold in their children’s hearts.

Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847), a Scotch Presbyterian, wrote a famous essay entitled *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*. In it Chalmers proposes that the best way to overcome the world is not with morality or self-discipline. Christians overcome the world by seeing the beauty and excellence of Christ. They overcome the world by seeing something more attractive than the world: Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). A man who

owns an Acura is not interested in a Geo Metro. In the same way, Christian parents try to make Christ and his kingdom glorious. Their children conquer the lusts of this world with a higher passion: the moral beauty of Christ.

By contrast, defensive parents have little confidence in the attractiveness of the gospel. They think the world is more powerful. Fundamentally, they are not confident in the gospel's power to transform their children from the inside out. They do not believe Jesus' words, "Take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). They have little confidence in the world-conquering power of new birth.

My wife and I have seen the fruit of this approach in our own experience. My five children all attended public high schools, and then the eldest four matriculated to a state university. Despite the raunchy non-Christian—even anti-Christian—environment (and it was foul), they thrived spiritually. Why? Through the miracle of new birth, God changed their hearts. To them the Holy Spirit had begun to unveil the superlative value of Jesus Christ. The conviction that all their happiness was tied up in their relationship with Christ had begun to bud and grow. The world's allurements could not compete.

When they arrived at college, they immediately sought out Christian fellowship. We didn't make them do this. We didn't even suggest it. They did it because their hearts were already in God's kingdom. They thrived in this environment. They found and married vibrant Christian mates.

How did we give this to our children? We didn't. We couldn't. This change only God can give. It was the miracle of new birth. I am and will be eternally grateful for his *unmerited* grace and mercy toward Judy and me. Here is my point:

Our parenting approach was fundamentally offensive, not defensive. We aimed all our arrows at our children's hearts, knowing that once their hearts had been changed, the decisive battle was fought and won. The rest of their lives would be just mop-up.

By contrast, many parents who assume their children's new birth have little confidence in the new birth they assume, and therefore pour their energies into protection. Many times their children never actually receive new birth. They leave home, grateful to be away from their parents' rules and regulations. They have no heart tools to fight off the world's allurements. They go where their hearts want to go, to the party scene far from God.

What motivates the defensive approach? I am convinced that parents with a defensive mind-set usually fail to understand the power of the gospel. They have little confidence in the power of new birth. They don't understand the role of the heart in conversion and sanctification. Instead, they emphasize the child's external environment. They put their confidence in rules, restrictions, and protections.

UNDERSTAND NEW BIRTH

Fourth, effective parents understand new birth. Statistically, most Christian parents assume their child's new birth. This could be your biggest parenting mistake.

WORLD magazine cites a new book by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.³ After surveying three

thousand American teens about their religious beliefs, the authors summed them up with the phrase *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*, or *MTD*.

These teens believe in a combination of works-righteousness, religion as psychological well-being, and a distant, noninterfering god.⁴ Ironically, many of these young deists are active in their churches. “Most religious teenagers either do not really comprehend what their own religious traditions say they are supposed to believe,” conclude Smith and Denton, “or they do understand it and simply do not care to believe it.” The article’s author goes on to note that “MTD has become the ‘dominant civil religion.’ And it is ‘colonizing’ American Christianity. . . .”⁵

It is important for every Christian parent to discern MTD from Christianity. A child can be compliant and well-behaved, attend Sunday worship, and socialize with the church youth group, but merely possess MTD. Many “nice” people are not Christians. Being “nice” has little to do with Christianity.

The sexual habits of evangelical children also reveal the prevalence of MTD. Sociologist Mark Regnerus in his book *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*⁶ exposes the failure of evangelical homes to discern and mold their children’s spiritual values.⁷ The author points out that evangelical teenagers are just as sexually active as their non-Christian friends. In fact, there is evidence that evangelical teenagers on the whole may be *more sexually active*. Those who identify themselves as evangelical teens tend to have their first sexual encounter at a younger age, 16.3 years, than liberal Protestants, who tend to lose their virginity at 16.7 years. And young evangelicals are far more likely to have

had three or more sexual partners (13.7 percent) than non-evangelicals (8.9 percent). What about abstinence pledges? Those work—for a while—delaying sex on an average by about eighteen months, with 88 percent of pledgers eventually giving up their vow.

These and similar findings suggest that American evangelical teens are substantially no different from their unbelieving friends. Why? I want to suggest that one crucial assumption explains these dismal statistics.

Most Christian parents assume that church attendance or youth-group involvement equates to new birth. Parents are naive about new birth and its symptoms. “One key reason that evangelicals often don’t stand out,” notes Regnerus, “is [that] the measure itself—affiliating with an evangelical Protestant congregation—is not a measure of dynamic religiosity but simply one of *affiliation*. . . . There is no shortage of religiously apathetic evangelical adolescents and adults in America.”⁸

Regnerus makes a good point. “Affiliating” with a church is not Christianity. As the old saying goes, your child can sleep in the garage for a month, but that won’t make him a car. Your children must be born again to “see” or “enter” God’s kingdom (John 3:3–5).

Even a child’s testimony that he “accepted Jesus” or “asked Jesus into his heart” means very little. That is because God initiates new birth. Of course, the child is responsible to respond to God with faith and repentance. But a child can go through these steps and not have the saving faith and repentance that point to new birth. That is why it is foolish for parents to presume upon new birth. New birth is a radical change of heart that ushers in new desires, new loves, and a new life direction.

“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God” (1 John 3:9). It means that the child now owns Christianity for himself.

Tom Bisset notes four reasons why evangelical teens abandon the faith in droves. The fourth is that they failed to own it for themselves.⁹ In other words, they were never born again. A. W. Pink observes that

The new birth is very much more than simply shedding a few tears due to a temporary remorse over sin. It is far more than changing our course of life, the leaving off of bad habits and the substituting of good ones. It is something different from the mere cherishing and practicing of noble ideals. It goes infinitely deeper than coming forward to take some popular evangelist by the hand, signing a pledge-card, or “joining the church.” The new birth is no mere turning over a new leaf, but is the inception and reception of a new life. It is no mere reformation but a complete transformation. In short, the new birth is a miracle, the result of the supernatural operation of God. It is radical, revolutionary, lasting.¹⁰

I recently asked a panel of four young married couples when they came to Christ. They all said something like this: “I asked Jesus into my heart when I was at grade school summer camp, but I didn’t really get serious about Christianity until I was in my late teens or early twenties.”

I responded, “So what you are really saying is, ‘I asked Jesus into my heart when I was in grade school, but my life didn’t really revolve around Jesus, he was not really on the throne

of my life, I did not increasingly trust him with my life and future, until I was a young adult.' Is that right?"

"Yes, that is a good description."

"New birth," I responded, "means that one has enthroned Christ in the center of one's life. You become a Christian when your life, thinking, and behavior begin to revolve around Jesus Christ. Until that happens, professions and decisions mean little. Changed behavior proceeding from a spiritual heart transplant is the only certain evidence of new birth."

My friends were like so many of us. They had simplistic ideas about new birth. They thought a decision for Christ was the same thing as new birth. But the truth is different. Conversion is outside of our control. God is sovereign over the process. "The Son gives life to whom he will" (John 5:21). In his book *Spiritual Birthline*, Stephen Smallman writes, "The lesson learned from the birthline—that we cannot cause spiritual birth, nor can we make the birth happen until it is ready—applies to our children as well. We trust God, but we are also willing to wait."¹¹

The bottom line is this: New birth is known by its fruits, not by a decision. The most important fruit is hunger for God himself. Effective parents assume this, and patiently wait for sustained fruit before they render a verdict.

God *gives* new birth to the children of parents who please him. Neither the child nor the parent can earn new birth. It is a gift of grace. But those who believe, and live as though they really believe, please him. One expression of the faith that pleases God in parents is the fear of God. (More on this in chapter 3.)

He is sovereign. Sometimes he regenerates children of parents who do not please him. Sometimes new birth is sudden and dramatic. The recipient remembers the day and hour. And sometimes the Christian is not sure when it occurred. For most, it occurs during a process of growing into faith. The person cannot identify the exact moment or day.

New birth normally comes to children through the teaching, example, and relationship that they have with their parents, especially the father. Parents are God's means of grace given to effect the child's conversion.

The moral is simple: Be wise. Don't presume your child's new birth until you see solid evidence. The first sign is growing hunger for God. Other signs are hunger for holiness, growing obedience to parents, and desire for secret prayer and Bible reading.

CHILD-CENTERED FAMILIES

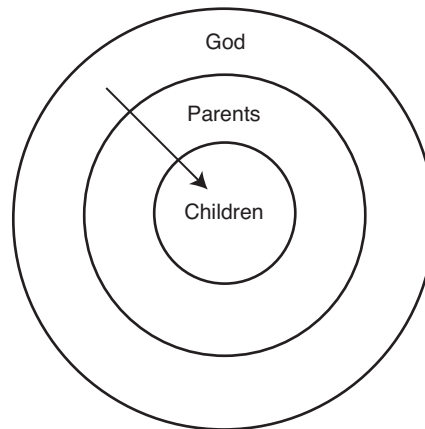
Fifth, effective parents are not child centered. They are God centered. They strive to put God at the center of their family. The eighteenth-century New England Puritan pastors warned their congregations not to love their children too much. If they lived today, they might say, "Don't put your children at the center of your life. That spot belongs to God."

Ken and Jackie were sincere parents. But their sincerity was their problem. They loved their children. In fact, they loved them too much. The oldest son was a talented athlete. He excelled on the local U16 soccer team. Because the team

practiced during the dinner hour, the family stopped eating meals together. They had been in the habit of praying and reading the Bible after meals. This also ended.

Their daughter was an exceptionally talented ballerina. Her lessons were expensive. Ken and Jackie couldn't afford them and tithe at the same time. *We will resume tithing when she graduates*, they rationalized.

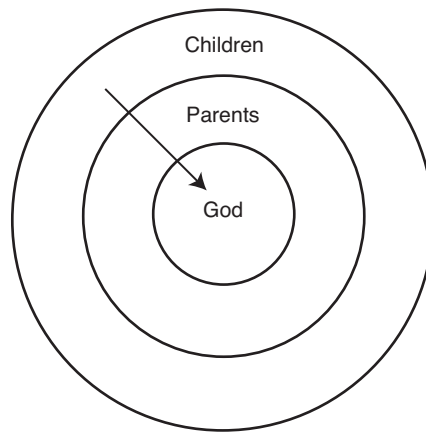
Fig. 1. Child-Centered Family



Soon the family was traveling to weekend soccer tournaments. Most were on Sunday, so church attendance became increasingly sporadic. Slowly, their social world began to revolve around the other soccer parents rather than their church family. Although their son and daughter attended the church youth functions, soccer and ballet always came first. At age sixteen, their daughter began to audition with professional ballet troupes in distant cities. Soon the family was traveling to her weekend auditions.

Eventually the children went off to college. Within a few years they had both quit attending church. They forgot God. They threw themselves into their real interests, athletics and dancing. Ken and Jackie were deeply troubled. *What went wrong? What can we do to get our children back?*

Fig. 2. God-Centered Family



They had made a common mistake. They centered their family around their children. It is important to love your children, but there is a fine line between healthy parental love and child worship. We know the latter has happened when we begin compromising God's will for the sake of our children or their activities. Ken and Jackie stopped tithing and praying together as a family. They made soccer and ballet, not the local church, the center around which their family orbited. (See Figure 1.) Compromise always points to idolatry. It displeases God. He does not like competitors, especially when they are our children.

Ken and Jackie's children imitated their parents. Mom and Dad taught them well. Church was not important. God was not at the center of their lives. What really mattered were their children's activities. Ken and Jackie had placed their children, and their success, on the throne of the family. Their children heard the message, understood it, and imitated it.

By contrast, Tim and Angie centered their home in God and his will (Figure 2). Tim told his son's soccer coach, "My son will be available any day but Sunday. I'm sorry if this inconveniences the team, but God is more important to us than soccer." This was a problem. Tim's son was the best player on the team. They needed him to win. The coach and the other players put tremendous pressure on Tim to compromise, but he refused to budge.

In the same way, when Tim found out that his daughter's piano lessons would be during their family dinner hour, he gently asked her to find another teacher, reminding her that the family dinner hour was sacred. It was the only time for the family to be together, and that family unity was more important than her piano lessons.

Tim's decisions might seem small, but they had immense long-term consequences. Tim centered his family in God and his will. Ken centered his family in his children. God was at the center of Tim and Angie's family. Ken's world orbited around his children. Tim's decisions disappointed his children in the short run, but won them for Christ in the long run. Ken and Jackie thought they were loving their children, but they were actually forfeiting their children's respect, driving them away with overindulgence.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians describes what a God-centered family looks like: "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11:3). For Paul, the Christian family is hierarchical. *Hierarchy* is a nasty word in our anti-authoritarian culture. Yet heaven, a world of intense joy, love, and peace, is profoundly hierarchical. God the Father is Lord of all, God the Son submits to his authority, and the Holy Spirit delights to obey both Father and Son.

To the degree that heaven permeates our homes, they also will be hierarchical. Christ is the Head of every husband. He rules by dying. The husband is the head of his wife. God asks him to rule the same way. Children submit to God through their parents.

In a God-centered family, everyone serves God by submitting to the authority over them. The husband focuses on pleasing God, not his wife. The wife focuses on pleasing God by submitting to her husband's authority rather than pleasing her children. The children please God by honoring and obeying their parents.

This concept applies equally to single parents. The head of the family might be a single mom, but she is still the head of her family, and she can still bring her home under God's gracious rule.

Where a family centers itself—God or children—will first depend on where the family's head centers himself. Is he seeking to please God or his children? Is he willing to disappoint his family to please God, or does he fear their disapproval? Does he have a clear grasp of God's will for his family, or have the nuances of the therapeutic age effectively evangelized him?

Does he fear God's disapproval, or does he fear his family's disapproval?

A God-centered family also requires the cooperation of a godly mate. Can she trust God to speak through her husband, or does she resist his efforts to lead? Is she willing to trust God to parent her children through her husband, or is she constantly grasping for the reins of power and control? Does she encourage her man to lead, or does she fear his leadership?

The symptoms of God-centeredness are numerous. The first is a willingness to say "no" to a child when it is in the child's best interest. A second symptom is a marriage in which Dad and Mom are united before their children, even when they disagree about a parenting direction. A third symptom of God-centeredness is the willingness to make our marriages more important than our children. Our children are with us for only eighteen to twenty-five short years. Most marriages have as many years without children as they do with. It is a big mistake to put your children ahead of your marriage. A fourth symptom is a willingness to be different. God-centered homes will be radically different.

In conclusion, it is positively hurtful to build your lives around your children instead of God. It damages children, it tears down our marriages, and most importantly, it displeases God.

SUMMARY

This chapter argues that assumptions are important. Ultimately, they put on shoes and go walking, practically affecting our parenting. We briefly looked at five assumptions that par-

ents need to make. First, effective Christian parents assume that parenting will not be easy, but that the rewards will ultimately make it all worthwhile.

Second, effective Christian parents are willing to hold God's sovereignty and their responsibility in tension.

Third, effective Christian parents assume an offensive mind-set. They pursue their children's hearts. They do everything possible to make the gospel attractive. Protecting their children from worldly influence is not their fundamental goal.

Fourth, effective Christian parents are shrewd about new birth. They do not assume it. They understand the nature of new birth, and they carefully look for its symptoms.

Fifth, effective Christian parents labor to focus their families on God, not their children.

In all of this, we have continually referenced the gospel. The thesis of this book is that the gospel empowers effective parenting. To that argument we now turn in chapter 2.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In a few words, how would you sum up the main point of this chapter?
2. With what assumptions did your parents raise you? How have their assumptions affected your approach to parenting?
3. Which assumption in this chapter is most important to you at your current stage of parenting?

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4. Which assumptions mentioned in this chapter have you not assumed? Why?
5. Can you think of any other assumptions that would be important to a Christian parent's worldview?
6. Which of these assumptions are most difficult to live out? Why?
7. What pressures from our culture make these assumptions difficult to believe and apply? Why?