
**A Review of Vern Bengston, Norella Putney, and Susan Harris,
Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations.
New York: Oxford, 2013. 288 pp. \$29.95.**

Shane W. Parker

Teaching Pastor

Crossroads Church

Columbia, South Carolina

Adjunct Professor of Leadership and Church Ministry

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Louisville, KY

In *Families and Faith*, social scientist Vern Bengston, along with his research assistants Norella Putney, and Susan Harris, offers three intriguing questions:

- To what extent are families able to pass on their religious faith to the next generation in today's rapidly changing society?
- How has this changed over the past several decades, in the context of remarkable cultural, familial, and religious change in American society?
- Why are some families able to achieve their goal of transmitting their faith to their children, while others are not? (11,12)

The responses to these lines of inquiry, as outlined by Bengston, form the core of *Families and Faith*. The book is the result of a 35-year longitudinal study, involving over 3,500 participants across four generations, which took place from 1970 to 2005.

The primary areas of exploration center around the concepts of "religious transmission" and "religious continuity" (4). The operative theory at work in the text is the "life course perspective," which "focuses on the influences represented by historical time ('period'), biographical time ('age'), and generational time ('cohort') and the way these intertwine to mold human behavior" (12).

The associated concept of "linked lives" is consistently emphasized, as Bengston looks at an

individual's maturation and notes that "their development is enmeshed with the developing lives of others in their social network, particularly parents and grandparents (or children and grandchildren)" (12). This becomes an integral focus of the proposed use of the research findings, as this framework disavows the notion of "a passive child receiving religious input from a parent," while providing added insight needed for the "longer years of linked lives" which are to come with increased life expectancy (12).

The summary conclusions derived from the data collection and analysis processes are as follows:

- Religious families are surprisingly successful at transmission.
- Parental influence has not declined since the 1970s.
- Parental warmth is the key to successful transmission.
- Grandparents are more important than we recognize.
- Interfaith marriage and divorce deter religious transmission.
- Religious Rebels, Zealots, and Prodigals are outcomes of nontransmission.
- Religious "nones" are also products of intergenerational transmission.
- High-boundary religious groups have high rates of transmission.
- Generations differ in their perceptions of God and spirituality. (184–92)

These conclusions lead the research team to formulate a theoretical framework that they term “intergenerational religious momentum” (192). The theory seeks to account for all of the varying “religious influences” (e.g., family religious inheritance, grandparent religious influences, parents’ role modeling, parent-child relationship quality) (192–206). While factors related to “contemporary culture,” “religious influence of peers,” “influences of historical events,” “generational religious differences,” “church, synagogue, temple activities,” “religious leaders,” and “religious influences in school or college” are maintained, Bengston declares that “at the center of the theory are family influences” (193).

Strengths

There is much to be commended in *Families and Faith*. First, performing a longitudinal study of this magnitude is a mammoth undertaking, which demands extensive dedication over decades. Bengston notes that this project, which in all its facets has taken 50 years to develop and complete, “became my academic career” (ix). This demonstration of both personal, and professional, commitment is a worthy example to those who seek to make significant contributions to their respective field(s) through research and writing.

Second, it is refreshing to pour over research findings that confirm parental influence and investment as primary and vital to a child’s “faith development.” The findings make clear that “interfaith marriages,” as well as those “ending in divorce,” inhibit “transmission” and “continuation” of faith (114–19), while “same-faith marriages” serve to provide a fertile environment for faith relay to take place (127–28). This is particularly evident in the even more direct emphasis placed on the role of the father. Bengston’s summative observations for family practice, for example, note, “Fervent faith cannot compensate for a distant dad” (196). The place of familial intergenerational influence is encouraging in an era where the “common knowledge” base, as Bengston labels it, assumes limited parental influence.

Third, among those faith traditions which are represented in the research sample, Mormons,

Jews, and “born-again” Evangelical Christians had the “highest degree of family continuity in religion across generations” (166). Bengston attributes these findings, in part, to the “common traits” of being both “distinct religious communities” and “minorities” (166). These traits also lend themselves to tight bonds between “family and church,” as well as “strong role modeling” along with “family closeness” (181). This emphasis on the relationship between the family and broader “faith community” is a primary factor in establishing religious commitment.

These familial, intergenerational, and community emphases serve to highlight related norms which are integral to the new covenant community. Examples of these biblical concepts are: (1) the parental, and particularly paternal, responsibility to instruct and train children (e.g., Deut 6:6–7; Ps 78:5–8; Eph 6:4); (2) the intergenerational nature of church community discipleship (e.g., Titus 2:1–10); and (3) the biblical portrait of community as a reconciled *people* (not unrelated individuals) to God and each other, by the “mercy” work of the gospel (e.g., 1 Pet 2:9–10). The findings cataloged in *Families and Faith* consistently uphold the value of general principles and practices associated with these biblical conventions.

Limitations

While these points of commendation are evident, they do not come without attendant limitations. First, among these concerns is the largely undefined concept of “faith.” The terms “faith,” “religion,” “spirituality,” and “values” are used interchangeably throughout the work (e.g., ix, 19, 54–55, 101, 142–44, 194–95). Since the data pool includes such varied backgrounds as Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, and None (nonreligious) participants, it would appear that establishing firm definitional categories would help to clarify the full import of the research (57–58).

A related weakness is that while the research measures religious “affiliation,” “intensity,” “participation,” and “beliefs,” each of these categories is assessed purely on the basis of socialization and relational-webbing (“linked lives”), which proves

limiting, or incomplete, for traditions that uphold not simply a passing on of societal or familial “values” and “ethics,” but a “faith” that is intended to be humanity’s “link” to God (57–64). Treating “religious” or “faith” appropriation as socially-derived, purely, does not make allowance for the formative “variable” of interaction with God, leading to transmission and continuity. In hope, New Covenant people actively long to see their children embrace the God of the gospel himself, not simply assume “religious practices” and “ethics” associated with him.

It is this inability to adequately address, or satisfactorily account for, the more holistic nature of biblical faith which warrants a cautious reading of *Families and Faith*. Bengston and his team offer a unique and helpful contribution to the social science pursuit of understanding how families come to bear on religious commitment; however, admittedly, their research does not intend to provide a biblical and theological understanding of intergenerational and familial faith development. As those who maintain gospel hope, assessing faith without establishing the central place of the God who is the founder and perfecter of such faith (Heb 12:2) will leave our attempts at family discipleship sorely wanting.