

What is Zeal and Why Does it Matter?

DEEP DOWN, we wonder. We give them a Bible, teach them the truth, ask penetrating questions, lead them in prayer, affirm the good, confront the sin, provide a good example to follow, help them find good friends—but deep down we wonder if what we are doing is working.

They read the Bible and even memorize parts of it. They claim to believe the truth, give good answers to our questions, pray *the prayer*, do good things, admit their sin, follow our example, have good friends—but deep down we wonder if the fruit we are seeing will last.

We watch devoted, yet weary, parents faithfully bringing their children to church after a full week of family life, school, chores, social engagements, and endless activity to provide the best opportunities for their children to flourish in the life that is before them—and deep down we wonder if the Word of God that makes its way into the cracks of their busy lives will be enough to sustain their confidence in God and His Word.

We see young people rushing into youth group, wearing attire to fit in or to stand out, gathering for worship, singing songs of praise, and listening to the eternal words of life, while monitoring social media, thinking covetous thoughts about their friends' possessions, fearing rejection by those who have captured their hearts, and ignoring the one thing that will matter most in the last moment of their fleeting lives. Deep down we wonder if the Word of God that they're hearing and singing will penetrate their distracted hearts and conform them to the image of Christ.

We witness the tears and groanings of a Christian parent whose heart is broken over a child who has exchanged the truth he grew up with for the lies of the world.

We hear another parent weeping for a child who has forsaken the way that leads to life for a wider and brighter way that leads to destruction.

We observe bewildered parents who can hardly believe the words coming from the mouths of their offspring and the hard-hearted, God-defying attitudes and convictions that define their empty lives.

We listen to a dad speaking about his child who has married well and is raising delightful children, actively participating in church, flourishing in his profession, and doing all the good and right things he was taught to do, yet wondering if there is any evidence of saving faith.

Deep down we wonder if the children growing up in our homes, actively participating in our churches, and sitting in our classrooms will grow up to join the number of those who embrace Christ as their greatest treasure and passionately follow Him. Or will they instead join with those seeking treasure where it cannot be found, rejecting their only hope for everlasting joy?

We wonder if our children will be thriving in the way of infinite wisdom, or walking in the counsel of the wicked. Will they be joining the congregation of the righteous, or sitting in the seat of scoffers? Will they be like mighty oaks of righteousness sinking their roots deep into the life-giving streams of God's Word, or will they be like chaff nourished from the empty cisterns of the world and driven away by the wind of judgment? Will they stand in the freedom of Christ, or sink under the weight and condemnation of their unforgiven sin? Will they delight in the presence of the Lord, or dwell in everlasting darkness? Will they be forever singing praises to their Savior and King, or will they be forever weeping and gnashing their teeth with the ancient enemy of their souls?

For decades I have interacted with hundreds of Christian parents, children's ministry volunteers, youth leaders, teachers, pastors, grandparents, and ministry colleagues. Almost every one of them cares about the souls of the children growing up in their homes and churches. They want their children to trust in Christ, follow Him as

Lord, and obey His teaching. They desire nothing less for their children than everlasting joy and the fulfillment of all God's promises in their lives.

I have sensed, however, that not all of them were feeling an appropriate weight of responsibility for the souls of the children entrusted to them. Not all of them were paying close attention to the spiritual development of their children. Not all of them were taking the time to number their days of influence in the fleeting lives of their children. Not all of them were sensing the urgency of addressing the issues of a hardening heart.

Too many were lacking any plan for instructing their children in the truth. Too many were thinking that Sunday school was enough. Too many were believing that a Christian home was sufficient. Too many were assuming Christian friends offered adequate influence. Too many were consumed with other priorities at home and in the church. Too many were paralyzed by fear and overwhelmed by their parental circumstances without consistent support, wisdom, instruction, or encouragement. Too many seemed unconcerned about the absence of any appetite for the Word of God. Too many dismissed spiritually dangerous attitudes and behavior as "just a stage." Too many assumed it would all work out, and in the end their children would be fine. Too many were helping their children gain the world, while ignoring the threats against their soul.

Too many were lacking in zeal for the discipleship of the next generation. And zeal can make a significant difference.

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REASON FOR CONCERN

For more than 20 years, we've been hearing statistics and seeing disturbing trends indicating that between 50 and 90 percent of children growing up in the church no longer attend church after they leave home.¹ In 2003, George Barna not only provided data documenting the Church's decline

¹ For an overview of studies on young people leaving Christianity, including the range of estimates, see <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/are-young-people-really-leaving-christianity/>