

***Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations* by Vern Bengtson**

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Vern Bengtson (1941-2019) was a professor at the University of Southern California who made a significant contribution to the study of family faith transmission across generations. Bengtson's book, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations*, presents helpful findings from a study that spans four generations of family members from the 1970s into the 2000s. The research for this book is based on the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG), a project developed by Bengtson and spanning his entire career.

The LSOG includes more than 3,500 respondents measuring how faith is passed down in 357 three- and four-generation families. In this book, Bengtson focuses on Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, and non-religious families.¹ Even though this study is a little older than other reviews we conduct, it is the consistency of findings from such a long period of time that makes this study relevant until another study can replicate its sample.²

At the heart of Bengtson's research were three questions:

1. To what extent are families able to pass on their religious faith to the next generation in today's rapidly changing society?
2. How has this changed over the past several decades in the context of remarkable cultural, familial, and religious change in American society?
3. Why are some families able to achieve their goal of transmitting their faith to their children while others are not?³

¹ Vern L. Bengtson, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.

² It is worth noting that Bengtson's study is limited to Southern California, since that is where he began the Longitudinal Generation of Studies during graduate school. This means that Bengtson's findings are limited to a very specific context, but there are enough studies that support his findings across a larger context that it is realistic to see these trends as more broad than limited in context.

³ Bengtson, *Families and Faith*, 11-12.



These questions feel remarkably relevant in today's ministry landscape, and to OneHope in particular given our mission to reach young people with God's Word. Discipling children in wholehearted faith must include an awareness of how parents play a key role in their children's spiritual formation.

Linked Lives Versus Cultural Influence

Bengston notes that an important concept in human development is that of "linked lives" or the idea that "as individuals develop, their development is enmeshed with the developing lives of others in their social network, particularly parents and grandparents."⁴

While a lot of generational research focuses on the influence of culture, Bengston sought to understand the effect of family influence in spite of cultural change. The unique span of his research allowed him to analyze data collected over a long period of time, construct links among families, and compare each generation at similar ages looking to see whether faith was maintained from young adulthood into maturity.

Bengston begins his study by unpacking an overview of the great deal of cultural change in the U.S. over the last century. He spills a good deal of ink unpacking specific changes relevant to each generation from World War I through Millennials.



Despite massive cultural change, the influence of parents remains remarkably consistent in their children's faith decisions.

Bengston demonstrates a full awareness of the complexities of religious and spiritual experience today and how they have shifted over the last few decades. However, in spite of these changes, Bengston's research demonstrates a remarkable consistency in the influence of parents on a young adult's faith decision.

Consistency of Influence

Bengston's study sought to understand parents' influence. He examined data collected between 1970 and 2005 along with subsequent qualitative data collected from interviews following 2005.⁵ The goal was to measure religious similarity between generations (for example, young adults in 1970 to young adults in 2005) within the same families over the span of three decades. To what extent were families able to pass along their religious belief? The results were quite surprising.

⁴ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 12.

⁵ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 19-20.



The study examined five categories of religiosity:⁶

Religious Tradition/Affiliation	Identifying with a particular religious tradition
Religious Intensity	How religious would you say you are?
Religious Participation	Frequency of religious attendance
Biblical Literalism	Agreement with literal interpretation of the Bible
Civic Religiosity	Agreement with the importance of religion in civic or public life

The goal of these categories was to provide indicators in order to measure the consistency of faith passed from generation to generation. In each of these categories Bengston found a statistically significant similarity between parents and their young adult children in 1970 and 35 years later.



In 1970 almost 7 in 10 young adults reported the same faith as their parents, and in 2005 that number was still 6 in 10⁷.

It is important to remember that these decades were a time of tremendous cultural upheaval as society was dealing with changes in family, sexual, gender, and other values. So much was the seismic shift in culture that this was the moment in history where researchers first began to discuss the idea of a “generation gap” between older and younger generations. In spite of these challenges, Bengston summarizes his research saying that, “despite sociohistorical changes in recent decades suggesting the decreased role of family and religion in society, we find considerable religious continuity between parents and children generations in our study.”⁸

Bengston’s overall conclusion was that “These results suggest that family influence on the religiosity of the younger generation have not weakened to the degree that has been widely reported.”⁹ For many in the church world, this conclusion might feel surprising.



While the Church may be losing influence in the lives of young people, parents’ influence remains steady.

⁶ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 55.

⁷ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 57.

⁸ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 66.

⁹ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 56.

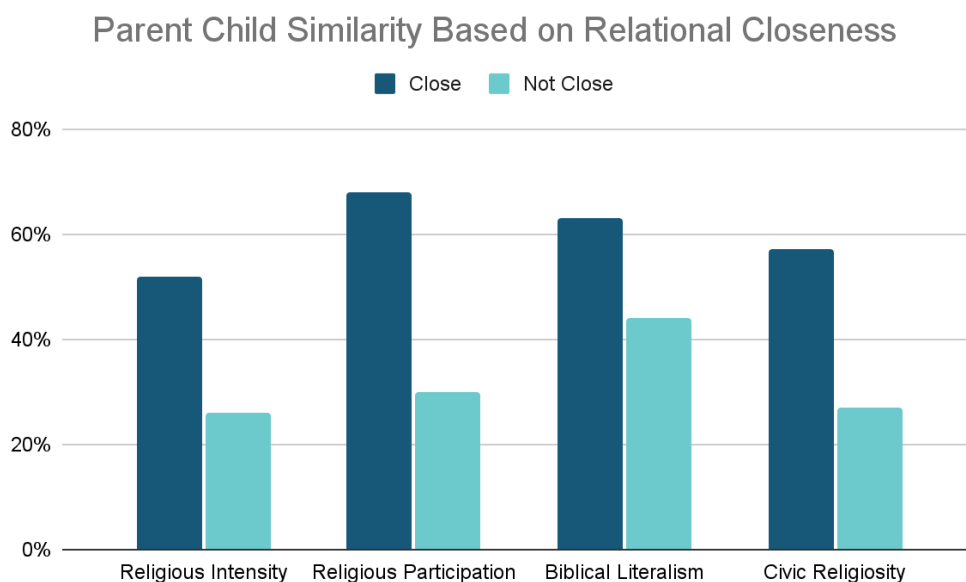


The Importance of Closeness

Bengton's next goal was to discover why some families are able to transmit their faith to their children while others are not. The research uncovered a distinct indicator of success in passing on a family's religious tradition: closeness.¹⁰

Family Closeness

The perception of a close relationship between parent and child was seen to make a remarkable difference in four of the five dimensions of religiosity measured in the study. In three out of the four categories, young adult children who perceive a close relationship with their parents are twice as likely to show a high level of correlation to their parents' religion.



“When a child feels close to a parent, he or she is more likely to imitate or model that parent,” Bengston writes. “. . . in the absence of close parent-child bonds, this transmission effect is less likely to occur.”¹¹

The Influence of a Father

While the study confirms the importance of both mothers and fathers playing a role in family closeness, the research reveals a special link in childrens' relationship with their father.

¹⁰ “Taking everything together, how close do you feel is the relationship between you and your father (or mother) these days?” Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 73.

¹¹ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 74.

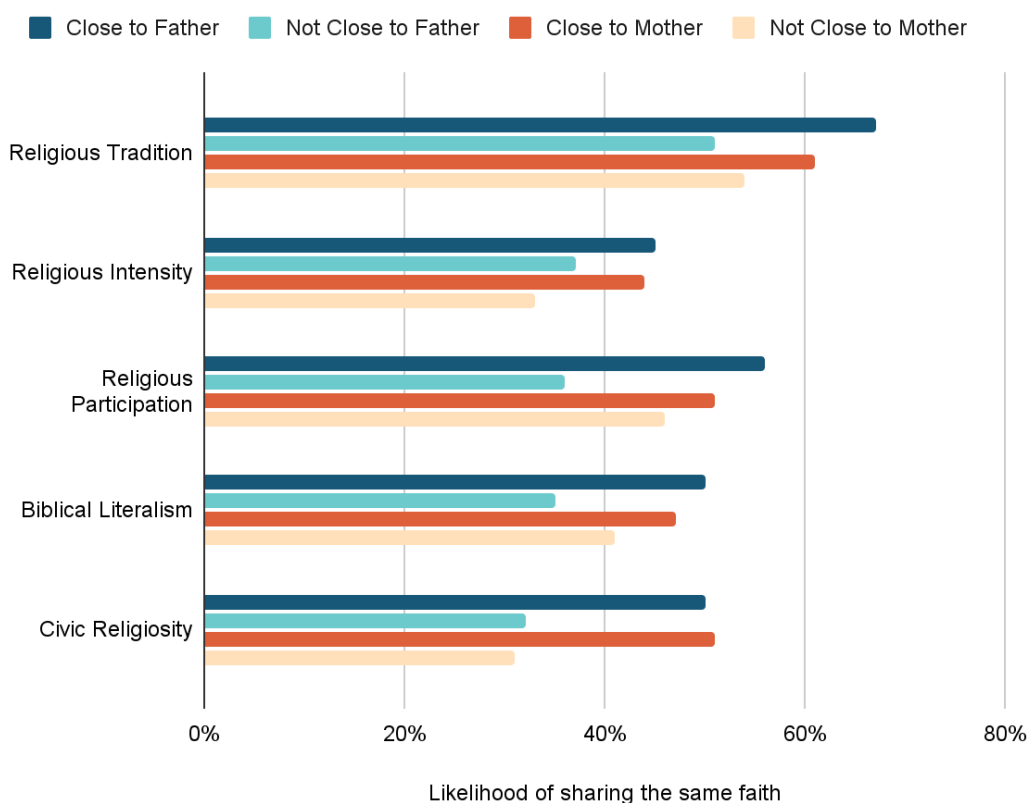


In passing down family faith, a close relationship between father and child might be the most significant indicator.

“... having a close bond with one’s *father* matters even more than a close relationship with the mother,” Bengston writes. “Emotional closeness with mothers remains important for religious inheritance but not to the same degree as it is for fathers.”¹²

Looking again at the dimensions of religiosity, the father’s influence is clear. While young adults who report a close relationship with their mother demonstrate a consistently higher religious correlation than those who do not, the relationship with the father demonstrates an even more noticeable difference.

Parent Child Relationship



The closeness in one’s relationship with their father consistently results in higher highs and lower lows in the five dimensions of religiosity, demonstrating the key influence of a father.

While Bengston’s research puts an exclamation point on the influence of fathers, the study also demonstrates that closeness with *either* of one’s parents is a strong predictor

¹² Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 76.



for passing on family faith. This should be an encouragement for any ministry serving parents and families.

Closeness = Imitation

Relational closeness is not just a feeling, but also results in action. Bengston found that young people who feel close to their parents wish to imitate them.

“When children perceive their relationship with parents as close . . . they are more likely to identify with their parents’ religious practices and beliefs while relationships marked by coldness, ambivalence, or preoccupation are likely to result in religious differences.”¹³

Young adults with warm family relationships described their family as “a team” and recalled times when parents stayed up late into the night discussing “faith and how to live a Christian life.”¹⁴ These young adults were notably more likely to want to imitate their parents’ faith in their own lives.

In comparison, young adults who experienced a cold and distant relationship with their parents used phrases like “highly critical”¹⁵ and were less likely to want to carry on their parents’ faith.

The Unexpected Importance of Grandparents

Bengston notes that grandparents today have a greater involvement with their grandchildren than in past generations within the U.S. Gen X and Millennials have already enjoyed that involvement more than any previous generation in U.S. history, and it is reasonable to believe that Gen Z and Gen Alpha will see the same benefits into young adulthood.¹⁶

There are at least two reasons for grandparents’ increased involvement. First, grandparents are in better health longer than in previous generations, allowing more time to be involved in the lives of their grandchildren. Second, with the majority of mothers working and also a growing number of single-parent homes, a larger number of grandparents are active in providing childcare for their grandchildren.

¹³ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 98.

¹⁴ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 83.

¹⁵ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 85.

¹⁶ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 100.



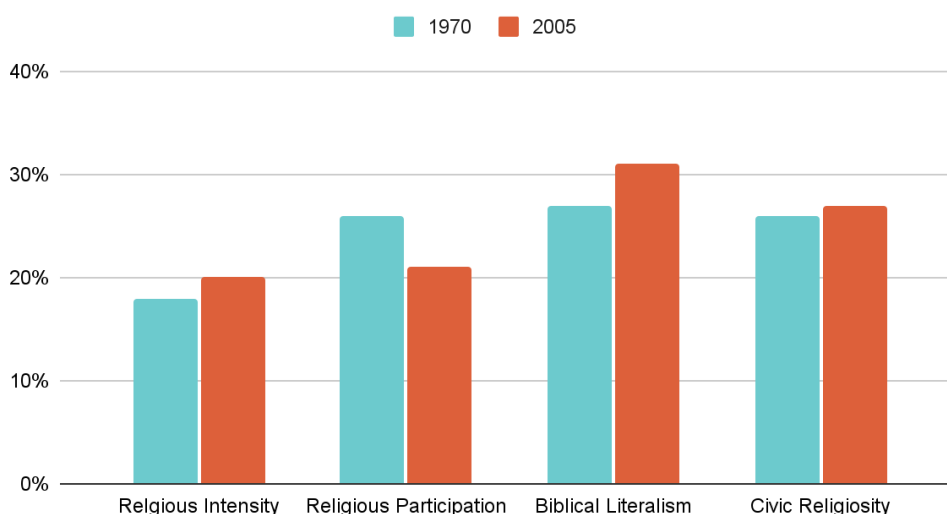
U.S. census data shows that 7.1 million American grandparents are living with their grandchildren under 18. Some 2.3 million of those grandparents are primarily responsible for their grandchildren.¹⁷

This increased involvement opens the door to a greater influence from grandparents on many areas of their grandchildren’s lives—including faith.

Grandparents’ Influence

Overall, about 4 out of 10 grandparents and grandchildren shared the same religious tradition, a number higher than expected by Bengston and his team.¹⁸

Religious Similarity Between Grandparents and Grandchildren



The data showed little change in similarity over thirty years, again a result that was surprising to the researchers.

A “Skipped Generation”

In some cases, grandparents serve as a restorative generation in families where Bengston describes a “skipped generation” of faith. One woman who was interviewed—Nina—demonstrated a strong faith in spite of being raised in a home that never discussed religion or participated in church. When Nina went to her grandparents’ house, though, they attended church together and her grandfather encouraged her religious beliefs throughout her life, sending inspirational religious messages and talking to her about faith into adulthood.

¹⁷<https://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-2023/grandparents-become-parents-again.html#:~:text=U.S.%20census%20data%20shows%20that.them%20are%20younger%20than%206.>

¹⁸ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 112.



Nina describes a trying time in adulthood and says that the person she went to was her grandfather. It was his warm and affirming involvement in her life that led her to seek his wisdom in a moment of need. Bengston sees a pattern of these relationships in his study where faith-filled grandparents provide a replacement of sorts for parents who do not emphasize faith in the home.

The same factors that applied to parents in the study were seen to apply to grandparents—the importance of a close and warm relationship and the higher influence of grandfathers over grandmothers.

Rebels, Zealots, and Prodigals

Although a central finding in Bengston’s research was the consistent influence of the family in childrens’ faith development, it must be admitted that not all children carry on the same faith of their parents. This study unpacks what it describes as three failures in religious transmission:

- **Religious Rebels:** Young adults who actively reject the beliefs and practices of religious parents.
- **Religious Zealots:** Young adults who are considerably more fervent in their religious commitment than their parents. (In most cases they convert to a religious tradition different from their parents.)
- **Religious Prodigals:** Young adults who start out as Religious Rebels but their departure from the faith turns out to be temporary.¹⁹

This study draws several conclusions related to these failures in passing along faith. First, Rebels tend to come from devoted religious families but describe the experience as “too much of a good thing.” These young adults describe experiencing parents’ religious socialization efforts as “excessive or intrusive.”²⁰ Bengston says, “When highly religious parents pushed their resistant children to participate in religious activities . . . or to conform to church doctrine or moral dictates, this was experienced by some children as having religion ‘shoved down my throat.’ The result was religious rebellion.”²¹

Second, the study found that Zealots often produced Rebels. It seems that parents who are considerably more fervent in their faith (most likely due to being converts to a different tradition) are more likely to push their children away. In fact, the study found

¹⁹ A more complete explanation of these categories can be found in Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 132-133.

²⁰ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 142.

²¹ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 142.



that Zealots tend to produce Rebels, and occasionally the Rebels become Zealots, especially as converts to a different tradition.



An excessive reaction to the faith of an earlier generation can lead to a rejection of faith in subsequent generations.

Prodigals who Return

The study identified three factors in Prodigals who rebelled from their parents' faith but eventually came back:

- They have warm affirming parents who maintain a close relationship with them as adults.
- They have parents who allow considerable latitude to make decisions.
- They have a strong religious foundation to build on, laid and modeled consistently by parents with regular conversations and activities centered on the family's faith.

The study highlights a family with four Prodigals and describes the mother's role in drawing them back to faith: "Her warmth, openness, and example left them with the freedom to leave, and then return to, her faith."²²

Finally, the study demonstrates the strain that family faith transmission can place on the relationship between parents and young adult children. Prodigals are most likely to return to faith in a family that maintains its closeness in spite of their faith decisions. However, young adult children who have walked away can start to feel alienated and instinctively withdraw from conversations. It can be a struggle on both sides to maintain closeness in these circumstances.

The "Nones"

Another significant finding of this study is that family faith transmission applies not just to religious families, but also in passing along "non-faith" to the next generation. Bengston found that "nearly 6 out of 10 unaffiliated young adults come from families where their parents were also unaffiliated."²³

²² Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 143.

²³ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 152.



The study's findings regarding "non-faith transmission" are remarkably similar to faith transmission: namely a close parent-child relationship. "The presence or absence of a warm, supportive relationship between parents and their children is the most plausible explanation for intergenerational similarity or difference in non-religiosity," Bengston writes.²⁴

In a way, it is encouraging to see that the study's results hold true no matter what kind of family faith or non-faith is involved.

Conclusion

The *Families and Faith* study is not just interesting information, but is deeply applicable to OneHope's next gen initiatives. As we learned through our own *Global Youth Culture* research, teens identify their family members as their number one voice for guidance and influence.²⁵ This led us to further explore how we and our partner churches can journey well with parents as they support and disciple their children in faith.

When we surveyed parents themselves through our *Family Matters* research, we asked them their primary parenting goal. Just 14% of US parents said their top goal in parenting is to pass down values and faith to their children. Even among Christian parents only 1 in 4 said passing down their faith is their number one goal.²⁶

Looking at this research alongside Bengston's conclusions and others²⁷ is a sharp reminder that ministry to children and youth must account for the importance of parental discipleship.

²⁴ Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 164.

²⁵ GYC, 46-47.

²⁶ *Family Matters: Understanding the reality of parents in the United States*.

²⁷ Christian Smith can also be added to this research. He first introduced this idea in his landmark study with American teenagers, the National Study of Youth and Religion, in Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Today's Teenagers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009; and followed that up with a study on parents in Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk. *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021.



Key Insights

OneHope's parent project team joined in this review to envision some specific insights that can be taken from Bengston's study.

Parent influence remains stable. First, it is important to be reminded of parents' influence and how it has remained remarkably consistent despite a great deal of cultural change. The Church has wrestled with its shrinking influence in an increasingly secularized Western world, but the influence of parents has stood the test of time.

Closeness is key. Second, this study drives home the point that parents who have a close and warm relationship with their children are the most likely to see their faith (or non-faith) passed from generation to generation.

Nurturing Faith: Bengston mentions three cornerstones that play a role in closeness between parent and child: warmth of relationship, modeling the faith at home, and leaving space for open conversations, curiosity, and doubt.²⁸ It's important to note that Bengston's study indicates that closeness is more than just warmth; it's also leading by example and encouraging open conversations.²⁹

Father relationships are critical. In addition, Bengston's study is a reminder that the father-child relationship is critical. While many churches are actively engaged in some sort of ministry to men, few are designed around the kind of warm, close parenting that this study finds to be so important. This seems to be a space where OneHope could advocate and contribute to church strategies.

Grandparents are involved. The findings around the involvement and influence of grandparents should also be seriously considered. OneHope's own focus groups confirmed that grandparents are a primary source of help, advice, and practical support for parents. Their role in the spiritual formation of the next generation should not be overlooked. It should be noted that some parents did express concerns around generational gaps though, so it is possible that grandparents need some level of generational insight in order to best pass along their wisdom in an appropriate way.

Partner with parents in their stage of faith. Finally, it is important to be aware of parents in their own stage of faith. For example, it might be helpful to identify and come

²⁸ Bengston discusses these cornerstones through the conclusion to his book. Bengston, *Families and Faith*, 184-206

²⁹ Christian Smith adds to the picture of effective faith transmission by finding that an authoritative approach (vs permissive or authoritarian) is the best parenting style to pass on faith. Authoritative parents have high standards which coexist with high levels of warmth and communication. Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 218.



alongside parents who Bengston would categorize as zealots—newly converted to Christianity or pursuing a deeper faith that stands in contrast to their own parents and upbringing. Bengston’s research warns of the potential overreactions this can create in their parenting of the next generation. These parents might need special assistance as they learn wisdom in establishing family faith rhythms and cultivating their own passion for following Jesus and raising their children to do the same. Another group of parents who could be poured into by the church are parents of prodigals. How might we help these parents continue to cultivate warm, close family relationships that make space for children to explore outside the faith and return to it when they are ready?

Additional Resources

[New York Times Review and Summary](#)

[Author Lecture on “Millennials, Parents and Grandparents: Family Transmission of Religion \(and Non-Religion\)” at College of Heath](#)

[Research review by Brigham Young University](#)