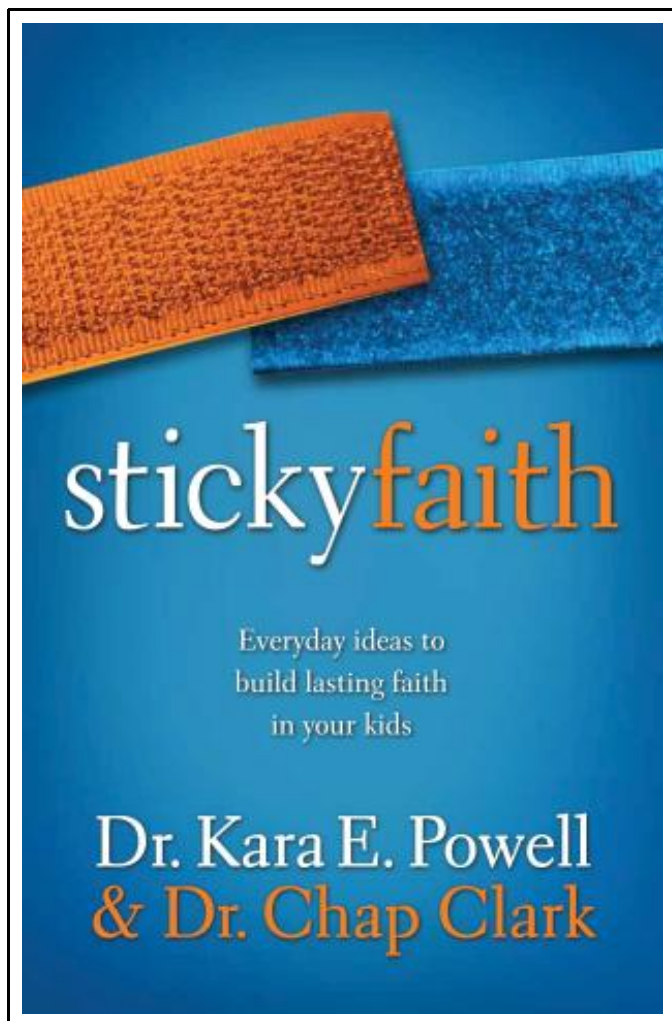


Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas To Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids

Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark

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Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark: Excerpt: Chapter 2, “The Sticky Gospel”

The Sticky Gospel

God is not the friend He was in high school. He is now more like the grandparent in the home that I visit only on holidays or special occasions.

—Ely

My parents were both raised in Christian families, but how they shaped me had a lot more to do with being a cultural Christian than being in a personal relationship with Jesus.

—Geoff

Darrin was a good kid, from a good home, who had grown up going to church. When he started coming to our youth ministry, he was more interested in who was there than in growing in God. The summer he went to camp, however, everything changed. Darrin soon got serious about his faith (as he described it) and became an overnight leader who not only encouraged others in their faith but was diligent in living out everything a youth leader or parent would want in a young disciple. He read his Bible every morning, even memorizing Scripture. He kept a prayer journal. He gave talks at church and volunteered for any and every need. Darrin was, in short, as committed a Christian kid as any.

Then he went to college.

The first week of school, Darrin found a group of friends and instantly bonded. He said he thought about going to church, but after a few weeks of enjoying some of the newly discovered opportunities of college life, he lost interest. I (Chap) called him and tried to meet with him the first weekend he came home, but he was too busy to connect with me or even to come to church. By the next summer, Darrin told me he wasn't sure if “this God stuff” was even real, or if it “worked,” and regardless he wanted to wait until after college to “get back into it.”

That phrase “get back into it” should have set off a warning bell in my mind, because it illustrated what faith had been to Darrin. During high school, his faith was real, of that I have little doubt. But it turned out to be a shallow, performance-based faith that was focused on Darrin's being “into it” or Darrin's “working” to have it make sense. In a matter of months,

Darrin had moved from being a committed Christian leader to being someone who had left the faith behind. He hadn't realized that the ultimate point of the spiritual duties he practiced was something much deeper.

Kara and I think that the core of Sticky Faith is developing a clear and honest understanding of both the gospel and biblical faith. As our kids are led into an awareness of their significant role in the kingdom of God demonstrated throughout Scripture, they will have the best chance of discovering a faith that is compelling and life-giving.

Sticky Findings

Many Kids Are Unable to Define Christianity

Many of our kids—even those who have grown up in church—have surprising views of what it means to be a Christian. We asked college juniors who were youth group graduates this question: “What would you say being a Christian is all about?” More than two-thirds listed answers related to “doing” the faith, like “loving others” and “following Jesus’ example.” More than one-third did not even mention Jesus, and of those, 35 percent did not mention God or Jesus! Certainly being a Christian involves an outcome of love and service, but is this work the central definition of faith?

While in high school, Darrin perceived that his job as a believer was to live up to the challenges and expectations of his parents, church, and Christian friends. He equated faith with spiritual disciplines, “good works,” and living as an example of Christianity that would please God. But in Darrin’s case, and for many other kids as well, that lifestyle of external faith is not enough to sustain Sticky Faith.

Many Kids Have Adopted the “Gospel of Sin Management”

When your children are taught what it means to live as a Christian, typically they receive a list of what to do and what not to do.

Do go to church and youth group as often as possible, read your Bible, pray, give money, share your faith, get good grades, respect your elders, spend spring break on a mission trip, and be a good kid.

Do not watch the wrong movies, drink, do drugs, have sex, talk back, swear, hang out with the “wrong crowd,” go to Cancun for spring break, or go to parties.

Philosopher Dallas Willard coined a phrase that sums up the way too many of us think of faith, calling it the “gospel of sin management”: “History has brought us to the point where the Christian message is thought to be essentially concerned with only how to deal with sin: with wrongdoing or wrong-being and its effects. Life, our actual existence, is not included in what is now presented as the heart of the Christian message, or it is included only marginally The current gospel then becomes a ‘gospel of sin management.’”

Kids are not picking up this gospel of sin management in a vacuum. They are learning this gospel from us—from the gospel we believe, talk about, and, most important, model to them every day. Our kids are mirrors of our attitudes and beliefs.

Kids Need to Discover What It Means to Trust Christ

At the heart of Sticky Faith is a faith that trusts in God and that understands that obedience is a *response* to that trust, in everything. The Greek word for *faith* is *pisteuo* (pronounced “Pis-tay-U-o”). In the New Testament, *pisteuo* can be translated as three different but closely related words: “faith,” “believe,” and “trust.” So as a general rule, when we see the

words *faith* or *believe* in the Bible, they come from *pisteuo* and thus can also be translated as “trust.” As you help your kids understand Sticky Faith, every decision, every thought, and every action comes down to this: in whom do I place my trust? Do I trust my instincts, my desires, my convictions, or do I trust in Christ?

Jesus affirmed this when he was asked, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe [or trust, *pisteuo*] in the one he has sent” (John 6:28–29). In Christ, that is the primary and central calling God has for our kids—and for us—as we develop our faith.

In contrast with assuming it’s our “doing Christianity” that makes faith work, the Sticky Faith process described by Paul shows that the way we deepen our trust is to put ourselves in a position to draw close to God even while the Holy Spirit is pursuing and surrounding us. Paul’s point in Galatians 5:6 that “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value” is not limited to circumcision or any of the other ancient Hebrew rituals. It also applies to our contemporary attempts to climb the ladder of righteousness on our own through our self-imposed gospel of sin management. We can insert any of today’s devotional duties that we say are the essence of faith into Paul’s phrasing in Galatians 5:6. “For in Christ Jesus,” for example, “neither reading the Bible nor not reading the Bible has any value” *in and of itself!*

Spiritual disciplines do not make us righteous because we do them, but rather they put us in a position to be drawn into trusting Christ more fully. If we or our kids are reading Scripture (or doing any devotional duty) because we think we will somehow in the course of our studying become more righteous, we are in effect saying that we don’t need God to change us. In contrast, the Sticky Gospel reminds us that our focus is to trust, and God promises to work within us at every stage of the process—by strengthening our trust, by giving us peace and patience as we wait for our lives to be transformed, and by actually changing us from the inside out.

The theme of focusing first on internal transformation instead of external behavior is echoed by Paul in Philippians 3:1–14. Paul calls his circumcision and his zealous pursuit of righteousness based on the law “garbage” compared with knowing Christ. In Philippians 3:12, Paul writes that he will “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

The outcome of a faith that is more concerned with working than trusting, or doing rather than freely living, is dangerous to young disciples. As we saw with Darrin at the start of the chapter, a performance-based Christianity can last only so long. When kids reach the awareness—through failure or pain, or insecurity or inner wrestling with who is the owner of their faith—that they do not have the power or interest to keep the faith treadmill going, they will put their faith aside.

To help our kids discover and grab hold of a sustainable, long-term, and vibrant Sticky Faith, we must stay true to the words of Jesus and heed the council of Paul: trust in the one the Father has sent, and live convinced that the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Paul describes our role in this Sticky Gospel in Galatians 5:5: “For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.” Or to put it in a simple equation, faith/trust plus waiting on God to change us equals righteousness.

We may not say this outright, but it is so easy to slip into the kind of faith that says, “God loves you, sure ... but he’ll *really* love you when you [fill in the blank].” Galatians 5:5 reminds us that it is God’s job to work in us and to present us as righteous, and it is our job to learn to trust him and let the process of becoming the quality of person he created, redeemed, and called unfold.

As parents, then, instead of concentrating on—and sometimes fretting about—whether and how our kids are living “righteous” lives, we have the opportunity to help them discover, access, and strengthen their trust and faith in Jesus Christ. In so doing, the righteousness they eventually display will be the product of the Holy Spirit.

For some of us, trusting this process in our kids can be hard. We tend to want outcomes that are immediate and measurable. When our kids don’t seem to get what we think they ought to know or do or be, we can easily fall into a “because I told you to, that’s why!” mentality.

Our Role in Helping Kids Learn to Trust Christ

In life and in faith, growth is a process. Our job as parents throughout this process is twofold: First, we help our kids learn to trust God and create the kind of environment where they are able to explore faith and trust while practicing their freedom to respond in love. Second, we model an unconditional, nonjudgmental, and ever-embracing love in which our kids can do nothing that jeopardizes or even lessens that love.

I realized that I was believing something that I had been taught. I had to learn to own my faith and to understand why I believed what I believed. I had to learn to say what that was about—who God is, what he’s done in my life, why I put my faith in him.

—Lanz

But I’ll be the first to admit that this is easier said than done.

An issue that seems rather minor now, but surely wasn’t when our boys were in middle school, was our boys’ wearing their baseball hats in church. The battles tended to be more about who would win (us or our sons) than about hats in church. Inevitably, we as parents won, but not without having to pull the parental power card. Usually I waited until we got in the van to mention the hats, without warning or process. They in turn, predictably, would grouse and argue.

Finally, when our boys were eleven and fourteen, we had a series of conversations about why they wanted to wear a hat in church and why we didn’t think it was respectful. After that we made progress. (It actually didn’t bother us much, but there were several folks, especially older folks, in our church who were clearly and vocally bothered by the hats.) Helping them see that the hats were not really the issue at all, but how we were called to treat people, even if we disagreed with them, was what ultimately mattered.

Dee and I were trying to help our boys put their own desires aside and to trust that Jesus would in time help adults at church understand that to a middle school guy, wearing a hat was vital to his social survival (at the time) and not a matter of disrespect. We eventually did get to the place where our boys agreed to forgo their hats for the sake of others who were bothered by their hats. So even if the adults were more concerned with their sense of propriety and decorum than whether an eighth grader wanted to be in church at all, our guys came to own the decision to hold off on the hats in church. (But the second they were on the patio, forget it!)

Sticky Faith Made Practical

The all-important question, then, that puts wheels on the biblical call to trust God to change us from the inside out is, “What does it mean to trust God?” or to put it another way, “How do we put this into practice every day?” We suggest three ways to help foster this kind of faith: teach your kids that obedience is our response to trusting God, frame all family discussions and activities as opportunities to know and trust Christ, and respond with grace when your child misbehaves.

Focus on Trusting God versus Obeying God

With apologies to the old hymn “Trust and Obey,” theologically trusting God and obeying God are not meant to be seen as two equal and different tasks of the Christian life. Trusting God is the call of the gospel, as we’ve seen in Galatians 5. Obedience, then, is our response as we trust. In other words, God makes it clear that he is not interested in obedience geared merely to obtain his favor, yet obeying him is important.

Imagine your daughter is the target of vengeful gossip. Our default parenting style might be to offer a quick fix by tossing out a bumper-sticker platitude, perhaps quoting 2 Timothy 2:24, “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone.” Then we might follow that up with, “Honey, God wants you to be kind to people, so you need to forgive her and move on.” Done. End of story.

This kind of “obey God, move on” Christian parenting may or may not be helpful in the immediate situation, but in the long term it is certainly counterproductive to Sticky Faith. Instead, use this event to reinforce the idea of trusting Christ in ordinary life circumstances. First, assure your daughter that the Lord understands what she is going through and has been there. Following that, remind her that Christ can be trusted even when others cannot, and that the Lord has promised to be with her and protect her. Then, as you talk about trusting God, who is faithful and powerful, she may be given the ability to be kind to that person.

When we take the time to help our kids respond to their circumstances with love from the standpoint of trusting Jesus with their struggles, instead of offering quick and directive advice, we point them toward Sticky Faith. This builds in them a willingness to live out of an obedience that is based on knowing and walking with God, as opposed to “be nice, God says so.”

Frame Discussions and Activities as Opportunities to Know and Trust Christ

Too often we talk about the everyday issues of life in a way that leaves Christ in the corner of the room, or even outside, until it’s time to have the “God talk” around the table. For many, family devotions are genuine, sincere, and enjoyable times to focus on God together. Especially when kids are younger, family devotions can be a useful tool to help them see God as an active member of the family.

As kids get older, family devotions can sometimes become exercises that are more about getting through the ritual than a way to encourage our kids to talk about God as a family. When kids reach middle school or so, the most productive kinds of family devotions are often those that are less rigid and scheduled, and more organic and even spontaneous (what we sometimes in our family call “planned spontaneity”). These kinds of “God talks” can provide opportunities to integrate faith and the Lord into our normal conversation, instead of falling into a forced, and maybe even boring or “religious,” production.

If you're talking with your son or daughter and you can tell they are giving you the Sunday school answers they think you want to hear, push them a bit deeper by asking "Why?" or "What makes you say that?" Take the time to dig a bit deeper in your conversation to unearth your child's authentic thoughts and feelings.

When discussing whether a film is appropriate for a teenager to see, for instance, perhaps steer the question not to WWJD but to "What does it mean to trust Jesus with how I spend my money?" or "As we trust Jesus for our entertainment and fun, how does that change how we make our weekend plans?" Parents have to be creative and, again, organic and contextual in bringing ordinary issues and faith together. Over time, especially with the bigger issues, this helps our children see that trust in Jesus, and how that trust is eventually translated into love, is the only thing that counts to God.

I understand and seek for my walk with Christ to be much more holistic than it ever was in high school. God calls me into a relationship with him, which then calls into play every area of my life. As a follower of Jesus, my faith is more than a youth group event or a "quiet time." (Oh, how I hate that term!) It affects the way I spend my money, the way I spend my time, the career path I choose, the way I treat my body, the way I treat the environment. ... These things have the potential to be my spiritual act of worship. And as I seek a more holistic Christian faith, the more united I feel with Jesus' call and vision for the world, and the more fulfilled I feel spiritually.

—Sophie

When we were invited to move from Denver to teach at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, we decided to include our kids in the conversation. The process was far from perfect, and in thinking back, there are things we might have done differently. But the one thing we are glad we did was to let them know that their voices mattered as we tried to decide what God was saying to us as a family.

During that season of processing whether God was calling us to move, we spent several long dinners discussing the pros and cons of moving from the "home of the Broncos" to the wild metroplex of Southern California. Dee and I took the lead in steering the discussion to the question of God's desire and design for us, and what it would look like to trust the Lord with this decision. As we look back, we sometimes wonder what God was up to with this move. But this outcome we have seen: all three of our children, now in their twenties, approach life as a grand adventure of trust and risk. Each is walking their own faith journey; they are at various stages, but all three would tell anyone who asked that there is no other way to live.

To further illustrate, here are a few sample topics that families deal with every day. These tips and ideas are offered only to prime the pump of your own ideas. Don't feel like you have to try them all right now. Given your family's personality and schedule, choose a few to experiment with over the next month to grow together in trusting God.

Trust God with Your Money

As a family, adopt a Compassion or World Vision child and write monthly letters to them.

Schedule a "family giving meeting," in which every child and adult has equal say in how the family is going to distribute the funds the family has available, or even those funds that require sacrifice so another family has

clothes at Christmas. (Notice I didn't say tithing, because some of us have lots more than 10 percent to give to those in need, and that is one more way to teach our children that we no longer live by rules or laws. In freedom, we give freely as God has given to us.)

Build into your family life regular patterns that remind you that all of your money belongs to God. Every Christmas, our family begins the morning by reading Luke 2, praying, and then deciding where our "Christmas gift" will go for the year. Each year, one family member gets to suggest to which charity the gift goes, and how much, and then we discuss it until we come to consensus.

Teach your children to be extravagant with the resources God has entrusted to them. For example, when you go out to eat, represent Christ to the person who serves you. When appropriate, let the waiter or waitress see or discover that you are a Christ-following family by asking them when you pray if there is anything they need prayer for. Because most waitstaff have experienced Christians as among the rudest people and worst tippers they serve, give them a far bigger tip than they would likely receive from anyone else, regardless of the level of service. Generosity to all, not only to those in need but toward everyone, is an expression of God's graciousness to us, and it helps us to trust him even more.

Trust God with Your Time

As a family, take on one service project in the community a month.

As a family, do something together for the church at least monthly.

As a family, or at least with one of your children, teach a Sunday school class or children's summer program.

Take one day a month or quarter to play with your child. I have heard it said to "never let your child's education get in the way of your child's education," meaning sometimes a day with you at the beach or a movie and lunch will have more long-term impact than sitting in class for that one day.

Make the dinner experience a sacred time and space. At least once a week, gather everybody in the kitchen a half hour before dinner until a half hour after dinner. No phone calls, no checking texts or emails, and no TV. Everybody finishes the preparation, everybody serves each other, and everyone helps clean up. Play a game. Sing a song. Dance.

Trust God with Your Relationships

Invite another family, or those who need some family time, to eat a meal once a month or more.

Open your home and family to your neighbors and friends from work, church, or school.

On special holidays, have an open house for those who have no place else to go.

Adopt a senior adult or couple to be additional, or surrogate, grandparents.

Invite others into your lifestyle, plans, and major decisions. Have a small group that is as committed to you as a

family as they are to the adults in the small group. Raise each other's kids. (More on this in chapter 5.)

Respond with Grace When Your Child Misbehaves

Because our kids grow up in an increasingly complex and precarious world, filled with expectations and agendas that at times feel impossible to navigate, the odds are great that your child will “cross the line,” or for some of our kids, catapult over the line. What do we do then?

Default with compassion. When our kids go through rough spots, whether it is because of circumstances beyond their control or the choices they make, their greatest need from us is gentle stability and compassion. Regardless of the offense, whether getting a D or getting arrested, underneath the rhetoric and even outright outbursts, your child is not doing this to get at you. Even in the most egregious of situations, remember that they are, at the core, suffering, and they need you to care. As Jesus cares for us in all we go through, so we too are dispensers of his grace.

Don't panic. There are very few issues you will face as parents that are irredeemable, even the biggies. Regardless of the circumstance, becoming overly distraught or emotional, especially within earshot (or eyeshot) of your child, only heightens your child's sense of dread, fear, and shame. We can take Paul's words seriously: “Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life” (Phil. 4:6–7 MSG).

Take the long view. The ultimate hope that is part and parcel of trusting God is the hope we have that in the long run, God's mercy will win. We may not see it or experience it exactly the way we want to for months, or even years, but trusting Christ means we believe that he is at work, bringing healing and redemption to the most hopeless of circumstances. Parenting is a marathon, but in Christ, as we trust him, we are offered the gift of hope.

A Few Final Notes

In this chapter, we make the distinction between a performance-driven gospel of sin management and a Sticky Faith of trusting Jesus to lead, guide, and change us from the inside out. In making the case, we do not claim that trusting Jesus with our lives is easily understood. There is a great deal of mystery involved in how God works with and in us by the Holy Spirit. We sometimes can barely figure this out for ourselves, much less teach it to our children. We need God to help us know how to put this together. And in this truth lies our hope.

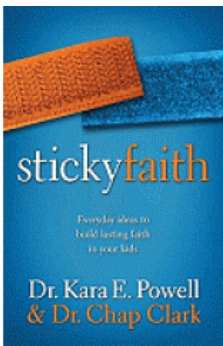
The greatest gift you can give your children is to let them see you struggle and wrestle with how to live a lifetime of trust in God. As you live out your faith in trust, your life will never be static, stale, or boring. You will be disappointed, discouraged, and maybe even thrown around a bit at times. You likely will even wonder if such a life is really worth it. But as you faithfully hold on to the God who has taken hold of you, the life you live and model will be a beacon of hope and direction that no sin-management faith can hope to achieve. As you trust the gospel, and the Lord who saves, your Sticky Faith will help your children discover their own Sticky Faith.

1. Dallas Willard describes the “gospel of sin management” as dealing only with sin and its effects, instead of the real life we live. In what ways is your faith an experience of the gospel of sin management?
2. What is the biggest obstacle to helping your son or daughter understand that the primary call of the Christian is to trust Christ? Describe where this is a difficult concept for you, and where it lines up with what you already believe and practice.
3. We stated that “obedience is the response to trust.” Why is it better to begin with trust and then respond through obedience? Is it ever good to go the other direction: obey first and hope that trust follows? Have you ever experienced either of these in your faith journey? If so, what was it like, and what happened?
4. How do you see your child’s faith in light of this chapter? Where do you see them growing in what it means to trust Christ, and where do you see them living out of the do’s and don’ts of Christianity?



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