

THE HERALD

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Understanding the Biblical Role of Grandparents

By Josh Mulvihill

What is the biblical role of a grandparent? Biblically, every member of the family has been given an important, God-ordained role that is not interchangeable with other members of the family. Husbands are told to be the head of the home and to lovingly lead their family (Eph. 5:23). Wives are given the role of helpmate and are to follow their husband's leadership (Gen. 2:18; Eph. 5:22). Children are told to honor their parents through obedience (Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:1).

If the Bible clearly defines the role of other family members, does it also define the role of grandparents? The Bible is clear on the subject, but American culture is not, and many Christians have unintentionally adopted a non-biblical view of grandparenthood.

In American culture, there is great uncertainty concerning the meaning and purpose of old age. Ambiguity surrounds the grandparent role. For example, one author states that we have a "cultural crisis" concerning the meaning and purpose of old age. Another author says, "there is new uncertainty about what it means to be a grandparent and what grandparents are supposed to do." Many Christian grandparents do not understand their God-designed role or the specific

ways God wants them to pass faith on to future generations.

Three Cultural Messages Christian Grandparents Must Reject

1. You need to live your life independent of your family.

America has unwritten expectations for grandparents, and it is known to scholars as "the social contract." The core values of the social contract include non-interference by grandparents (don't interfere, don't overstep, don't be a burden), emotional independence from children, and personal autonomy. Families unconsciously operate according to the agreement that children will grow up, move away, start their own family, and become independent from one another. Experts encourage families to aim for closeness at a distance, but what is gained is lonely, overburdened, and disconnected families. The social contract has amputated generations from one another and left countless grandchildren as grand-orphans who do not have the intimate influence of a grandparent in their life.

Because the role of a grandparent is not clearly defined by American culture, it is viewed as an extra, a role not essential to the functioning of the family or the development of grandchildren. Grandparents fear meddling in their children's and grandchildren's lives as they do not want to harm the relationship with their adult children or lose privileges with grandchildren. While the relationship, when it exists, can be very positive, its limited nature removes grandparents from an

important place in family life and places them on the periphery with a minimal role. The cultural message that is communicated: You must live your life independent of your family.

2. Your role is to be a companion and playmate to your grandchild.

The role society gives grandparents is obvious when we look to children's literature about grandparenthood. A few notable titles of children's books include *Grandmas Are for Giving Tickle*s and *Grandpas Are for Finding Worms*. The children's book *What Grandpas and Grandmas Do Best* suggests that grandparents are for playing hide-and-seek, singing a lullaby, building a sandcastle, and playing games. In *Grandma, Grandpa, and Me*, grandparents are to play with, work alongside, and have fun with. Children's literature speaks of a grandparent's role as one of playmate and companion.

3. You've worked hard, and now it's time to enjoy yourself.

The world tells you that you did your time, and now it is time to rest, travel, and play. The essence of this message is that you are to indulge yourself with whatever makes you happy. The Bible never speaks positively about a self-focused season of life, and this is what retirement has become for many Christians. Billy Graham writes, "Retirement presents us with two choices: Either we can use it to indulge ourselves, or we can use it to make an impact on the lives of others." When everything is summarized, the role given to grandparents is independence and indulgence.

In general, society has lost its compass regarding why the generations should interact, how they are to do so, and what responsibilities one has to the other. A high percentage of families have embraced an unbiblical view of grandparenting and need a renewed biblical vision regarding their role in the family and purpose in society.

The Biblical Foundation for Grandparenting

The Bible has many references to grandparenting, but they are often missed because the Bible uses phrases such as children's children, son's son,

father's father, or forefather to speak about grandparenting. As you read three examples, pay attention to the responsibilities that God gives grandparents.

"Teach them [God's commands] to your children and your *children's children*" (Deut. 4:9).

"Fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your *son's son* by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children..." (Deut. 6:2-9).

"Tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord ... which he commanded our *fathers* to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the *children yet unborn*" (Ps. 78: 4-8).

The one word that describes the totality of a grandparent's role biblically is the word heritage. Grandparents have inherited a faith they are to pass on to their children (Eph. 6:1-4; Deut. 6:2-9) and their grandchildren (Deut. 4:9; Ps. 78:1-8). This is the biblical idea of heritage.

Specifically, the grandparent's role is to be a disciple-maker of future generations by focusing on the salvation and sanctification of their family (Ps. 78:7-8). Grandparents are to pay close attention to their own walk with Christ (Deut. 6:4) and live a Christ-centered life worthy of imitation where they can say to a grandchild, "imitate me as I imitate Christ." A grandparent's priority is to be their grandchild's Christ-like maturity (Col. 1:28-29).

Psalm 78

Psalm 78 is one of my favorite passages to explain the role and responsibility God has given grandparents. Psalm 78 is a historical Psalm that serves as a warning to motivate grandparents to look at a failed example of family discipleship in hopes of avoiding a similar outcome with their

family. Psalm 78:8 states, “That they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.” The words “stubborn” and “rebellious” summarize the outcome that this passage wants you to avoid with your family.

God identifies three key methods that are central to passing faith on to future generations (Ps. 78:1-7). First, God provides *a four-generation vision* for families: fathers, children, children yet unborn, and their children (Ps 78:5-6). God wants you to think multi-generationally and gives you a large vision to leave a lasting legacy in Christ that will last for generations to come.

The second aspect of a grandparent’s role is to *tell God’s works*: “tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders he has done” (Ps 78:4). To “tell” means to report, to count, to make known, to make a written record. God wants you to report to your grandchildren (the coming generation) what God has done in your life (His glorious deeds). Telling focuses on describing the work of God and His nature with the hope that your grandchildren will be captivated by God and worship Him. God has given you a testimony and wants you to be a messenger using your life as the means to glorify God.

The third method is to *teach God’s law*: “God has appointed a law in Israel which he commanded our fathers [grandfathers or forefathers] to teach...” (Ps 78:5). Teaching is a central element of a grandparent’s role. The Hebrew word “teach” means to instruct or guide. Guidance is a goal-oriented word. It suggests that there is a specific outcome you are working toward, and teaching is a method to that end. A good guide knows the end destination, shows others the path, and instructs along the way.

Grandparents are to teach God’s law, which includes the following:

God is the source of morality. Your grandchild must develop the firm conviction that God determines right and wrong.

The gospel. Every grandchild has broken God’s law and needs the free gift of grace through faith in Christ.

Obedience to authority. Your grandchild must be encouraged to live in a manner worthy of the gospel in accordance with God’s commands (Matt. 28:18-20).

The core truths of Christianity. The pattern of Scripture is for children of all ages to be taught the core truths of the Bible so that they will be firmly rooted in Christ and established in their faith (Col. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:5).

The overall aim of grandparenting is the salvation and sanctification of children and grandchildren. Psalm 78:7 speaks about this goal, “so that they place their hope in God and obey his commands.” God provides three methods to reach that goal: a multi-generational vision, telling His work through your testimony, and teaching obedience to God’s commands based on the Bible.

Society communicates a powerful message that grandparents are extras, not essential to the family. Nothing could be further from the truth. If the history of Israel teaches us anything, it is that grandparents are critical figures in the faith formation of the young.

I want to encourage you to take your cues regarding the role of grandparenthood from the Bible and not from culture. A grandparent’s main role is not to spoil a grandchild or be his or her companion. A grandparent’s purpose is not to indulge themselves during the last third of their life. God designed grandparents as disciple-makers for the purpose of passing on a heritage of faith to future generations. May you pursue this task with much delight!

Grandparenting Resource:

Grandparenting: Strengthening Your Family and Passing on Your Faith by Dr. Josh Mulvihill

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FUNNIES

A man walked into a lawyer’s office and inquired about the lawyer’s rates. “Fifty dollars for three questions,” replied the lawyer.

“Isn’t that awfully steep?” asked the man.

“Yes,” the lawyer replied, “and what was your third question?”

“Rebate, R-E-B-A-T-E,” spelled the student. “That’s correct,” said the teacher. “What does it mean?”

“That’s when you have to put a new worm on your fishhook.”

Mother: “Well son, were you a good boy in school today?”

Son: “Sure. How much trouble can you get into standing in a corner all day?”

A woman walks into a bank to cash a check. The teller says, “You’ll have to identify yourself.” She looks into the mirror and nods, “It’s me, all right!”

A man went if for an eye examination. The ophthalmologist point to his chart and asked the man to read the third row from the bottom—XDRGHFUGQ. “Read that.” he said.

The man gulped and said, “Can you give me a clue? What language is it?”

Back during the Cold War, a Russian was about to be sentenced to Siberia. He addressed the court and said, “If the United States is such a terrible place, why not send me there instead of sending me to Siberia?”

A fire had broken out. The neighborhood kids watched as the fire truck pulled up. High on his usual perch sat the station mascot, a Dalmatian. The youngsters wondered about the dog’s function.

One said, “He brings the firemen good luck.”

A second said, “He keeps the people away so they can work.”

The third kid said, “You guys don’t know anything. They use the dog to find the fire hydrant.”

There are only two kinds of roads in this country—those that are under construction, and those that are under repair.

The grownups thought that little Philip was cute but dumb. People would offer him the choice of a nickel or a dime. He always took the nickel. Another boy asked him one day, “Don’t you know a dime’s worth more than a nickel?” Phil said, “Yup, but if I took a dime, grownups wouldn’t keep making the offer!”