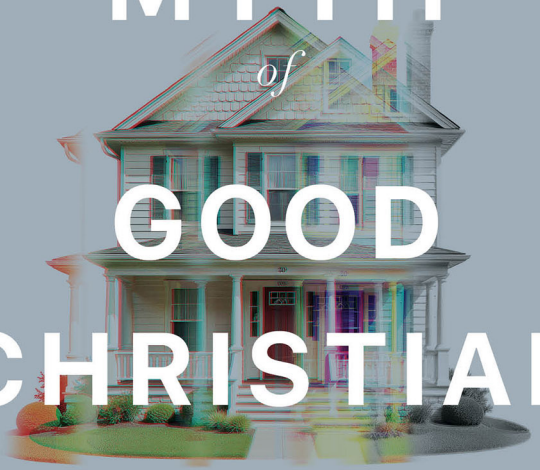
The

MYTH *of* GOOD CHRISTIAN PARENTING



HOW FALSE PROMISES BETRAYED A GENERATION OF EVANGELICAL FAMILIES

MARISSA FRANKS BURT *and*
KELSEY KRAMER McGINNIS

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INTRODUCTION

Pick up any Christian parenting book and you will likely find this verse from Proverbs prominently displayed: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (22:6 KJV). Many parents in the thick of raising young children read this passage as a command: "My job is to train up my child in a certain way." Devout parents of "prodigals" might see a sliver of hope that adult children who no longer espouse the Christian faith will someday return to the fold.

Christian parenting resources depend on promises made to parents: If you get it *right*, then there will be desired results—if not now, then somewhere down the road. The potent expectation for children to be discipled into right belief and right practice from infancy on up keeps families working hard, powered by everything from board books about systematic theology to prayer guides for grandparents.

Christian "experts"—often self-credentialed and self-platformed—explain how to bring meaning to the mundane, to wrangle the chaos of family life, to "do" parenting with excellence. The dedication in Justin Whitmel Earley's award-winning

book *Habits of the Household* sums up the logic here: "It is easier to raise strong children than to repair broken men and women."[1] This statement shows up in multiple parenting resources. It powerfully showcases the parental longing to protect children from grief and keep them "unbroken."

Echoes of this concern can be found in statements such as this: "I had grown up in such a chaotic and abusive household that when I became a Christian as an adult, I was desperate to know how to parent the Christian way. I knew I didn't want to repeat my own experience. A friend handed me *Dare to Discipline*."[2] Many Christian parents wanted to know: If there is a right way to go, how can I make sure my children and I are on it? Countless Christian pastor-teachers lined up to answer this question, building empires along the way.

Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, best known for their book *On Becoming Baby Wise* (1993) and their *Growing Kids God's Way* (1996) curriculum, demonstrate what it looks like to build a Christian parenting empire. Gary received an MA in ministry through Talbot School of Theology's program for adults without an undergraduate education, and Anne Marie had trained as a nurse. In 1984, they met "with a young couple with a three-month-old and a list of parenting questions."[3] As the Ezzos tell the story, they began to meet with other parents in their living room, and interest snowballed. They started teaching parenting classes at Grace Community Church (GCC), pastored by John MacArthur. The support of MacArthur's Grace to You ministry as well as access to GCC mailing lists and potential customers opened additional doors. At the peak of the Ezzos' influence (the early to mid-1990s), their programs were translated into seventeen languages and used in ninety-three countries, with seventy-thousand parents attending classes each week, and they now claim to have reached two million households.[4]

Numerous parenting books from this era include Gary Ezzo's coveted endorsement on the back cover, where his name

lent credibility. Yet since the late 1990s, the Ezzos' work has come under scrutiny, leading even MacArthur to distance himself from their program. Critics cite allegations of authoritarian and domineering leadership, dismissal from multiple churches,[5] reported estrangement from adult children,[6] and objections from external sources like the American Academy of Pediatrics.[7] Even so, a thirtieth anniversary edition of *Baby Wise* came out in 2020, and the Growing Families brand still reaches readers worldwide.

Social media has allowed marketing-savvy Christian writers and communicators to capitalize on smaller built-in audiences. For example, the 2024 Fight, Laugh, Feast[8] family-life conference sold endorsement opportunities for anywhere from $500 to $5,000 in addition to tiered streaming and merchandise. For a price, anyone could have their logo displayed near the beverage station or have their organization boosted from the stage and so gain credibility with attendees. The most successful empires present themselves as an in-house, trusted, one-stop shop for every member of the family. Fight, Laugh, Feast is affiliated with Canon Press, the global media arm of pastor Douglas Wilson's empire, which includes a K–12 school, a classical education curriculum press, a university, a publishing house, and all the resulting revenue.

Some empire builders have more substantive credentials than others, but that is almost always inconsequential. James Dobson may have started his career by highlighting the "Dr." before his name, but his organization, Focus on the Family, grew into an empire in large part because of his strategic marketing and winsome persona. The Ezzos have no relevant credentials, but their endorsements were still welcome because they successfully sold books and became household names in Christian circles. We also see this in the desire of some parents to know what Christian celebrities have to say about any given topic. Well-known pastors like MacArthur can produce a parenting

book, regardless of knowledge about parenting philosophies or evidence-based approaches.

Many Christian parenting experts assume that successful families all look the same. Resources presume a nuclear family with two married parents, so there is rarely mention of single, divorced, or widowed parents—or extended family members taking on parental roles. Most authors don't address neurodivergence or disability, even adjusting for awareness at the time of writing. The majority of the most influential evangelical parenting experts are White; this was the case when Christian parenting empires began forming in the 1970s, and it is still true today. The relative racial homogeneity of both the publishing industry and American evangelical institutions and organizations shows up in the Christian parenting book market, which has largely been dominated by White evangelical men.[9] Since the turn of the century, an increasing share of parenting content has been created by women, who have been able to leverage success on online platforms like Instagram to secure book deals, but there remains little racial diversity in the sector when it comes to traditional Christian publishing. While many of the authors in this niche would likely say that their advice is "biblical" and thus applicable across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic boundaries, as we will see, each author's background, experience, ideologies, and assumptions shape their parenting advice.

As the two of us examined over a hundred resources that spanned decades, we noticed that many of their marketing pitches hit the same notes. One after another, we found what we call "prosperity gospel parenting promises." These are claims that suggest that if parents approach parenting the right way, God will bless their efforts and obedience with happy, healthy, godly children who will testify to both parental faithfulness and the Christian way of life. This myth—that God provides a formula for "good Christian parenting"—permeates these

resources, presenting an aspirational goal while also motivating parents with high eternal stakes.

We will examine various elements of these myths throughout this book, but for now we want to underscore that empire builders boosted their credibility with claims to teach the simple truths of the Bible. Many evangelicals trust a spiritual leader's authoritative teaching on every topic, especially when it comes with warnings like this one from *Growing Kids God's Way*: "God pre-programmed all factors for success into His divine plan. As with all matters discussed in Scripture, if you violate the principles, you forfeit the blessings. When you embrace His commandments, the blessings of joy and fulfillment will be yours."[10]

What parent wants to forfeit God's blessings or risk fearful outcomes? Spiritual goals can put anxious parents on an endless treadmill of introspection, leaving them wondering, "If Christ really changes everything, how does he change potty training? What does the gospel have to say about this?"[11] Because if the gospel has something specific to "say" about every area of life, then people must figure out what it is and do it.

When promised everything from godly children to a happy home, evangelical parents had a choice: trustingly comply or risk their children's spiritual well-being. And because much of the teaching relied on theological claims, it came with stowaway doctrines that shaped people's perspectives about the nature and character of God. This impacted individuals' spiritual formation, and it also intersected with the cultures of Christian communities and church families. The effects were both far-reaching and intensely personal. We recognize that for many readers our undertaking is no theoretical enterprise and speaks to the tenderest of places.

With that in mind, we have organized this book in such a way that it gives the reader a comprehensive understanding of the historical, sociological, and theological influences that

undergird Christian parenting teaching. We recommend reading the chapters sequentially, but they are also accessible topically should you find yourself drawn to certain elements that align with your own experience.

We hope that this book will be a resource that equips readers who are actively parenting to weave together their own beliefs and personality with the individual needs and desires of the children who have been entrusted to their care. For parents who want to chart a new way forward through the ocean of Christian parenting resources, part 3 and the appendix offer suggestions for evaluating resources to determine whether they might serve your family well.

For those who come to this book wondering if we seek to tear down the church or to attack Christians, we invite you to give us an open-eyed read. It is our love for the church and for the truth that motivates us to scrutinize the biblical and theological underpinnings (or their lack thereof) in these resources. Because Christian parenting advice was often paired with spiritual authority language, claims were made *for* and *about* God. Families weren't just given advice; they were told God wanted them to do various things, and we believe it's important to question problematic Christian teaching. We have worked hard to do so with truthfulness, charity, and a desire to evaluate content using the metric of the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus.

For those who come to this book as adult children or parents seeking to understand painful dynamics within their own lives, we see you. A difficult piece of this work is recognizing that many of these teachings betrayed entire families, resulting in anger, grief, and lament. There is no recouping the cost, and there is no way to go back and reclaim what might have been. But there is a way to restore agency to people who are attempting to navigate what is, and we hope that our work will help you as you travel along that path.

For those who come to this book after loss of faith, who are doing the difficult and painful work of deconstruction and detangling, or who may just be holding on to the last shred of hope, we see you too. Many Christian parenting resources position parents and other authority figures as mediators between children and God. We won't be doing that here; we entrust you to the God we believe relates to people directly, personally, and in ways where people are found and fully known.

For all others who come with tender memories, with the things that happened behind closed doors, with the grief and joys known only to their own hearts, know that you are beloved and dear children of God. Thank you for joining us here in these pages.

Part 1

How Did We Get Here?

The Builders of the Christian Parenting Empire

1

THE RIGHT KIND OF PARENTS

Creating the Christian Parenting Resource Market

Professor Harold Hill had to create a problem in order to sell a solution. The shifty protagonist of the musical comedy *The Music Man* knew it had to be a problem that the parents of River City would care about. They had to care enough not only to listen but also to trust and invest their time and money in the absurd solution he was about to propose: a boys' marching band.

"We got *trouble*, right here in River City!" he cried, pointing to the billiard parlor, where a newly installed pool table threatened to send young boys down the path of crude language, beer, and ragtime.

Hill's rousing appeal to unwitting customers was that the boys were at risk of becoming hooligans, and he had the perfect solution. After he established the enemy (the new pool table)

and the danger (hooliganism), he turned to the crowd of mothers and fathers and said earnestly, "Now I know you folks are the right kind of parents . . ."[1]

The right kind of parents. Almost every parent wants to be the right kind of parent. Not just a good parent but the best parent they can be. And every parent can relate to the feeling of taking an infant home and sensing the crushing weight of responsibility that accompanies their joy and excitement. This unrelenting pressure sends parents to books, podcasts, blogs, and influencers. To be sure, not every parenting expert is a crook or scam artist, but even the most well-meaning self-appointed writers, coaches, and teachers sometimes exploit parental fears.

Many parents feel there is trouble lurking everywhere, that every day with their new baby is an opportunity either to get it right or to fail. They feel constantly at risk of being too permissive, too authoritarian, too involved, too hands-off. And many experts, both Christian and not, convince readers that parents are tragically underprepared for what lies ahead.

The stakes feel especially high for Christian parents. They may not be explicitly taught that children—their behavior, health, or salvation—directly reflect a parent's own spiritual goodness, but some come to believe it. Fear and the fervent desire to be the right kind of parents makes people desperate for answers, promises, and a guarantee that their kids will be okay.

The Discovery of Childhood: Parenting Advice in Nineteenth-Century America

Parental anxiety is nothing new. Every generation of parents and grandparents looks at the children around them and may be tempted to think, *What's wrong with the kids these days?* In Christian contexts, this concern can take on a panicked tone, often instigated by pastors writing about the nature of the

parent-child relationship. A diverse library of historical texts, written across centuries and traditions, shapes the theological beliefs we have about children and families today.[2] Augustine of Hippo, writing in the late fourth century, imagined the jealous nature of babies based on his observations of nursing infants.[3] Puritan minister Cotton Mather wrote about the spiritual and practical duties of parents in *Cares About the Nursery* (1702).[4] Eighteenth-century revivalist and founder of Methodism John Wesley wrote and preached about child-rearing and published his mother's letter on the subject.[5] Christian thinkers discuss everything from the salvation of children to the development of self-control by a strictly regimented feeding schedule. Their concerns reflect the realities of daily life in their particular context.

In the 1800s, American Protestants played a central role in growing the publishing industry. During the first half of the century, evangelical publishers[6] "pioneered advances in papermaking, power printing, mass production, and corporate communication," and by 1855 they accounted for 16 percent of all books published in the United States.[7] The market was somewhat divided by various denominational publishers; even still, the "evangelical ecumenism" of figures like Dwight L. Moody won out as "the heart of a commercialism that became the operating logic for a new evangelical book industry."[8]

In nineteenth-century America, the Sunday school movement[9] and revivalism spurred interest in family-life teaching. Ministers were still the most trusted figures when it came to parenting advice, but their position in American society was shifting, as was the tone of their messages. Children spent most of their time in the home, and so the "little church" of the domestic sphere was seen as the primary locus for spiritual formation. Henry Clay Trumbull, editor of *The Sunday-School Times* and a missionary for the Sunday and Adult School Union (and great-grandfather of Elisabeth Elliot, a notable author in

her own right), wrote *Hints on Child Training* in 1890, recognizing that many American parents considered raising children to be a spiritual duty.

One serial publication contained essays from clergy offering parenting advice, with titles like "Parental Duties." In one issue, the editor included a call for guest essays from "successful" parents. It's an early example of interest in Christian parenting advice from people whose only authority was their record of raising good Christian children: "We respectfully solicit communications for publication in this work, from those parents who have been successful in the moral and religious training of their children, detailing with some particularity, the course pursued. This publication will afford such parents an opportunity to speak to *twenty-five or thirty thousand* persons."[10] Parenting experience alone could draw a large, diverse crowd.

On the next page of the publication, the Reverend Jacob Abbott entreated parents to develop character and a tender conscience in their children, so that they might eventually become sensitive to the Holy Spirit.[11] Abbott warned readers that *too much* religious instruction might alienate children and reminded parents that coldness, harsh words, or impatience would negatively impact their children more than any lecture. Abbott's essay and other instructions of the time assume that a respectable American parent was a *Christian* parent, eager to see their children grow into God-fearing citizens.

The turn of the twentieth century brought what historians refer to as a "discovery" of childhood.[12] When *Children: The Magazine for Parents* (later retitled *Parents Magazine*) launched in 1926, its editors assured parents that they could help them navigate the modern world, covering topics from psychology to nutrition. In the premier issue, the editors announced that their aim was "to bring you who are out on the firing-line, the scientific findings of specialists concerning the child's needs of mind, body, and spirit from birth to the twenty-first year.

We hope to set them before you with simplicity and sympathy, with humor and understanding. . . . It is a new world of loving understanding, wise tolerance and humility into which today's pioneers in child study lead us."[13]

In the seventy-five years between Abbott's essay and the first issue of *Children*, American life had evolved on all fronts. The nation had weathered a civil war, the Industrial Revolution, and World War I. Women had won the vote. The temperance movement was in full swing. In 1849, elementary schooling was not compulsory in any of the states; by 1917, it was universally required. In the twentieth century, children were spending more time away from their homes than ever before. Interest in education research and child psychology had grown, due in part to figures like John Dewey and Sigmund Freud. The early twentieth century also saw new research on child development, psychology, and sociology, which promised professionals and parents new best practices for child-rearing and care. Parents increasingly looked to this new army of experts rather than religious leaders to know how best to mold their children.

The Parenting Book Boom

Historian Peter Stearns identifies the launch of *Children*, as well as the growing popularity of child-rearing books in the 1920s, as the beginning of the parenting book boom. He links this to the increase in polling in the 1930s, which made it possible to measure public opinion and attitudes—including parental concerns. This also raised social awareness of *hypothetical* concerns, hinting to parents that, if they weren't already, they *should* be worried about things like too much television, too much physical exercise or not enough, or whether children were drinking enough milk.[14] Just as concerns about children's welfare were on the rise (with protection from labor abuses,

increased vaccination and better health care, and accessible education), so were parents' anxieties.[15]

The wide-ranging genre of books known as "self-help" had gained widespread traction since the mid-nineteenth century due to the public fascination with millionaires and the "secrets" they must have known in order to amass their fortunes. Most early self-help books were about how to get rich. In 1913, G. K. Chesterton bemoaned the popularity of the growing genre in an essay titled "The Fallacy of Success." Chesterton wryly observed, "That a thing is successful merely means that it is; a millionaire is successful in being a millionaire and a donkey in being a donkey."[16] The only thing we can know about a millionaire's success, he insisted, is that he *is* a millionaire. Offering secret knowledge about how to become successful, Chesterton wrote, "is not mere business; it is not even mere cynicism. It is mysticism."[17] "Mysticism" here is what modern readers might recognize as *manifesting*, which is the idea that someone can wish something into being or look to the universe to offer it to them. This magical thinking still characterizes many self-help books that promise quick fixes, hacks, secret knowledge, and "one weird trick" related to anything from weight loss to dating.

It makes perfect sense that the self-help genre would eventually encompass parenting resources. Parenting can be hard, unpredictable, and isolating, and self-help books offer an abstract community and the feeling of being seen.[18] A mother with a newborn might feel understood and affirmed when she reads a book about breastfeeding or infant care. A book about discipline or "strong-willed" children might encourage a father, isolated in his struggle with anger at his toddler's erratic behavior. Desperate parents of teenagers might want help navigating their teen's social-media obsession. Parents often struggle with shame and difficulty admitting their shortcomings. Experiencing anger or resentment as a parent can feel like utter failure, and parenting books offer solutions to parents who are having

a hard time and don't have a safe place to ask questions or talk openly about their problems.

Many parents would rather order a book online than admit to someone in their family or inner circle that they feel like they are failing with their child. A parent who follows an influencer might find comfort in getting advice from a faraway, seemingly put-together figure who can't judge or question their private choices. But the rise in available resources has arguably driven *more* anxiety, not less.

Historian Ann Hulbert notes in her book *Raising America* that five times as many parenting books were published in 1997 than in 1975.[19] The baby boom, economic growth and prosperity, and an increase in research and information about child development meant that parents had more money and time to spend learning about the best practices of child-rearing, according to the most cutting-edge research. Parents who felt that they may have been raised with outdated and potentially harmful methods could find new resources and products that would help them to do it better, to get it *right*.

Parents looking to give their kids a head start in the late 1990s and early 2000s flocked to Baby Einstein products. The brand grew from a homemade video made by Julie Aigner-Clark in 1996 to a company purchased by Disney for $25 million five years later.[20] Baby Einstein marketers claimed their toys, books, and DVDs stimulated babies' brains, made them smarter, and set them on an early path to literacy. It didn't take long for the shine to wear off as consumers learned how little research supported their claims and how overuse of the products might have adverse effects.[21] A chorus of concerns quickly grew loud enough to force refunds and lawsuits, but not before Baby Einstein earned millions of dollars and made up almost 90 percent of the baby media market.

Marketing to parents almost always includes promises. Any list of best-selling parenting books reveals the top-of-mind

parental concerns of the day: baby brain development, helping children become resilient, kids and diet culture, working during pregnancy, sleep difficulties, or dealing with screen time and mental health. Christian families add their child's salvation and spiritual health to the list. Many Christian parenting books heightened parental anxiety by suggesting that parents could not trust their own instincts and needed to carefully navigate an ocean of information to find the *right* formula for success.

Parenting experts in the Christian niche and in the mainstream have convinced generations of parents that they should be constantly improving and that they need *lots* of help. Insecure parents are also willing to *buy* things, and in so doing help launch the careers and platforms of those with a compelling message.

Daring Disciplinarians

The modern market for Christian parenting resources was born when one expert dared to answer a perennial parenting question, "More discipline or more nurture?" with a resounding *more discipline*!

James Dobson insisted that the mainstream advice of the previous two decades from figures like Dr. Benjamin Spock—whose adage was "trust yourself, you know more than you think you do"—was not only inadequate but also wreaking havoc on American families. Dobson's 1970 best-selling book *Dare to Discipline* was the first of many books on parenting, family life, and the moral crisis in America. With a PhD in psychology, Dobson positioned himself as a prophetic outsider, standing up to his mainstream contemporaries in order to put families back on track. He gestured to the social and political turmoil of the 1960s and '70s and issued warnings to parents to look at what decades of foolish parenting advice had brought about.

Dobson offered solutions in the form of "biblical" guidance. As he said in one interview, "I'm drawing on Somebody else's ideas and that Somebody doesn't make mistakes."[22] Setting the stage for omnicompetent evangelical pastor-teachers of the coming decades, Dobson presented himself as someone who could correctly interpret the Bible and the state of the world and in turn communicate God's ideas about parenting and family life.

"The institutions of marriage and parenthood were not the inventions of mere men and women," Dobson wrote in his 1976 book *Family Under Fire*. Rather, marriage and the family unit were "created and sanctioned by God Almighty," he continued, before warning, "If we deviate from His plan . . . we will witness (I believe) the disintegration of everything of value and meaning. . . . To tamper with the ground floor is to threaten the entire superstructure!"[23] For Christian parents, being the right kind of parent included accountability to God for their parenting decisions. Dobson raised the stakes of being an obedient Christian parent: Civilization would crumble if they didn't course-correct.

Dobson opened the first chapter of *Dare to Discipline* with an anecdote about Mrs. Nichols and her three-year-old daughter, Sandy, whom he described as "defiant," "a tyrant and a dictator," and "not accustomed to doing anything she doesn't want to do," because she had a meltdown over a glass of water. Dobson concluded that both the parent and the child were "among the many casualties of an unworkable, illogical philosophy of child management" that "dominated" the recent literature on the subject.[24]

Dobson was certainly not the first to suggest that kids these days have no discipline and no respect for authority, but his message found an eager and anxious audience. Christian parents, alongside their secular peers, were disturbed by images of campus protests, draft-card burnings, and Woodstock. They

were desperate for advice about raising well-behaved citizens and wanted to keep their children safe in a dangerous world.

Benjamin Spock, the famous child-rearing expert of the mid-twentieth century, advocated flexibility and a "connected" approach to raising children. But by today's standards, his teachings on discipline read as rather strict. He taught the value of consistent discipline, saying that spanking was "less poisonous than lengthy disapproval, because it clears the air, for parent and child."[25] Spanking was still common in the majority of American families in the 1960s and '70s, yet Dobson was convinced that American parents were too heavy on love and too light on discipline.[26]

Dobson claimed that the movement away from discipline disempowered parents, who had regrettably learned that "all forms of punishment were harmful and unfair." He bemoaned the "unfortunate imbalance" in homes where the "happy theory of 'permissive democracy'" had taken over. "We have sacrificed this generation on the altar of overindulgence, permissiveness, and smother-love," he concluded.[27]

Dobson's diagnosis failed to acknowledge key shifts in American families following World War II. For example, he doesn't discuss the new freedoms of the 1940s, when teenagers had unprecedented levels of independence as they entered the workforce alongside many of their mothers. The war created a labor force that granted many women and teens autonomy and purchasing power outside the home. During the 1940s, "whether in response to the threats of the adult world's war or the stress of family disruption, adolescents took on a new and distinctive social identity, independent of their parents," and "parents grew more conscious than ever before that teenagers had been liberated from adult control."[28]

Dobson glosses over the intense upheaval of the twentieth century. After the war, American life became more family-centric as the baby boom and economic prosperity reshaped

the way US citizens expected to live, play, and work. But rather than consider how the social, economic, and political changes of the previous decade affected family life, Dobson zeroed in on the need for more discipline. This included discipline in the schools. *Dare to Discipline* devotes several chapters to empowering teachers to properly maintain order in the classroom.

It is worth highlighting that Dobson's own parenting experiences feature prominently in his later books, yet at the time he was forming his viewpoints he was a brand-new father. Dobson wrote *Dare to Discipline* soon after finishing his doctoral studies, while working as a youth counselor to "450 disrespectful, haughty ninth graders," whom he described as "the forerunners of the hostile, aggressive, drug-using teen-agers seen in many high schools today."[29]

Dobson also worked under Paul Popenoe, one of the first figures in the field of marriage counseling to attempt a scientific approach to helping families ensure successful marriages and family life. Popenoe, who wrote *Modern Marriage: A Handbook* (1925) and *Can This Marriage Be Saved?* (1960), was an atheist and a eugenicist who founded the American Institute of Family Relations in part to "remove what he thought to be obstacles to white reproduction."[30] Popenoe wanted to build up the nuclear family as a means of restoring social order,[31] and in the foreword he wrote for the first edition of *Dare to Discipline*, he reassured parents that "readers who follow [Dobson] will find that they get the results they want."[32]

At the foundation of Dobson's successful empire is this imperative: Parents must exercise and protect their authority, and children must obey. Without both parents and children playing their rightful part, society would crumble. Dobson was convinced that the practices of parents in the 1950s had produced the generation that protested the Vietnam War, experimented with drugs, and had premarital sex. Dobson's message was

timely. It spoke to terrified parents who worried about what they saw in the news and in the entertainment media enjoyed by their children.

Dare to Discipline sold more than two million copies in its first seven years on the market. The book was not particularly focused on the Christian faith (although a chapter titled "A Moment for Mom" does offer a two-page discussion of "the rod" in Proverbs), but Dobson, as the son and grandson of Church of the Nazarene preachers, showed an innate ability to gain the trust of his audience. He went on to hone his skills on the speaking circuit, both in auditoriums and over the airwaves. In 1978, Dobson released the video series Building a Family Legacy, which was reportedly viewed by over one hundred million people in the following decade.[33] Dobson's knack for public speaking and capturing an audience, combined with an ambitious media output, soon made him a respected voice on family life among American evangelicals.

A contrasting Christian public figure whose communication skills made him a household name among families was Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister who created the television program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, which aired on public television from 1968 until 2001. Rogers responded to the social upheaval of the time by addressing children directly and emphasizing the importance of community relationships rather than focusing on the primacy of the nuclear family unit, as Dobson did.

Dobson founded Focus on the Family in 1977. Over the next two decades, this organization grew into a politically powerful institution. When it opened its Colorado Springs headquarters in 1994, it was given its own postal code due to the thousands of letters that poured in from Christians looking for biblical advice on family life.[34] In 1999, Focus on the Family executives reported that twelve thousand people a day called or wrote to the organization asking for guidance and resources, and they

claimed that its radio broadcasts reached "easily a billion" listeners worldwide (including six hundred million in China).[35] At the dawn of the new millennium, secular broadcasters like ABC were courting Dobson for a short radio spot. He had secured an audience well beyond evangelicals and conservative Christians.

Before Dobson, Christian pastors and counselors wrote books about children and parenting—Clyde Narramore's *Discipline in the Christian Home* (1961) and David and Virginia Edens' *Why God Gave Children Parents* (1966) are two examples—but none had managed to leverage their persona and message to build a media empire. Like Billy Graham did with his evangelistic crusades, Dobson understood how to package his message to captivate the hearts of Christians and spiritually curious listeners and viewers from a variety of backgrounds. The two men came to occupy a tier of White American evangelical leadership that few after them would reach. Graham preached salvation for the individual. Dobson preached salvation for the family.

Today's landscape of Christian parenting books and media is far more diffuse than it was fifty years ago, but its writers and teachers preach a familiar message. It's a message about *biblical* parenting and so benefits from the appearance of timelessness. But no Christian parenting expert writes in a vacuum. Labeling parenting advice "Christian" or "biblical" may help sell books, but it also obscures the social and political forces that motivated their authors. The Christian parenting book market grew alongside the coalition of the Religious Right, something we need to explore in order to understand how reactionary politics and biblical parenting continue to shape American evangelical families.