

Grand Parenting

**Strengthening Your Family
and Passing on Your Faith**

DR. JOSH MULVIHILL



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FOREWORD

It is a rare grandparent I encounter today who didn't fully delight in the day the first grandchild arrived. Yet when asked what being a grandparent means, they reveal that much of what they believe is rooted more in culture than in Scripture.

What do today's cultural messages, formed mostly in narcissism and materialism, reflect about your view of grandparenting, and how does that compare with what God says in the Bible?

I received a T-shirt not long after becoming a grandparent for the first time. It read,

GRANDPA'S TO-DO LIST

1. Spoil 'em
2. Fill 'em up with sugar
3. Send 'em home

I suspect you might have smiled when you read that, partly because you identify with this fiendish cultural view of grandparenting. Still, deep inside, does it unsettle you because you sense there must be something more to grandparenting? If it does, you would be right. Being a “good” grandparent who enjoys your

grandchildren and loves making them feel good is not enough. Because God has something more to say about it.

That's what this book is about.

I have met few people in my travels who have a more profound grasp of the biblical role of grandparenting than Josh Mulvihill does. His wisdom is certainly molded by his own experiences as a pastor in children's and family ministry, and as a father, son, and grandson. It is also rooted in a vigorous commitment to study and research. But mostly, it is born of wisdom shaped by a commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is driven by his desire to help grandparents like you and me put into practice what God says in the Bible about grandparenting.

Believe it or not, the notion that grandparents play a strategic role in the character and faith development of a child is rare. It is not even on the radar screen of most grandparents I have met over the past two decades. Fortunately, because of people like Josh—a dear friend and colleague—that is beginning to change.

Josh takes on the undercurrent of cultural lies that have swept many of us up in their wake. He does it not to chastise us (though God knows we need it), but to reshape our thinking about God's design for family and family discipleship as defined by Scripture. The cultural message of "spoil 'em and enjoy 'em" is only one of the lies that must be called out and replaced with God's truth. You will learn how to do just that if you read and take to heart what Josh has written in this book.

Because you are reading this, I assume you have a desire to be the kind of intentional grandparent God wants you to be, rather than to settle for misguided cultural norms. Josh will guide you to make much of Christ so you can lay the foundation for another generation to know and follow Him. You will be challenged to courageously swim upstream against the culture.

It will require intentionality and commitment to absorb and put into practice what you are about to learn for the sake of your grandchildren. The good news is that God's divine power has

already given you everything you need *through Him who has called you by His own glory and goodness* (2 Peter 1:3).

Those of us who are grandparents know there is no greater joy than to see our grandchildren (and children) walking in the truth. Josh is about to lead you on a journey of discovery and faith that can lead to such joy. It is a journey that will empower you to build a legacy that is truly worth outliving you—one for which your children and grandchildren will call you “blessed,” and the Father will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21).

When your grandchildren come to your funeral, will they only remember the good times they had with you? Or will they praise God because your life smelled of the fragrance of Jesus and the all-satisfying delight of knowing Him?

Your legacy matters only when the truth of the Gospel is what matters first and foremost.

Josh is right: “Grandparenting exists to deliver the Gospel to future generations.”

—Cavin T. Harper
Founder and President,
Christian Grandparenting Network

INTRODUCTION

God designed grandparents to be disciple-makers who pass on a rich heritage of faith in Christ to future generations. Grandparenting is God's idea. He created it, which means grandparenting has an important purpose and a vital function. But if there is one word that summarizes how many people feel about grandparenting, it's *help!*

Grandparenting is filled with many joys, but it also comes with many challenges. Family dynamics are complex, technology is always changing, and children are busy. Broken families, fractured relationships, and prodigal children cause the heart to ache. In the midst of all these challenges, grandparents have to figure out how to navigate unstated family expectations and the unexpected state of the family.

In addition, grandparents have been marginalized by society and ignored by churches. Churches undervalue, under-resource, and underutilize grandparents. And the result? Many Christian grandparents are unclear what the Bible teaches on the subject, and often live lives that are emotionally distant and disengaged from their families.

God is at work awakening the church and families to the important role grandparents have in passing on the Gospel to future generations. Grandparents have the opportunity to shape the beliefs of future generations, strengthen the family, build the church, and transform the nation. Imagine the impact of millions of Christian grandparents intentionally making disciples of children and grandchildren.

Due to longer life expectancy, the opportunity for grandparents to spiritually invest in their grandchildren's lives has never been greater. Despite the opportunity, the impact of grandparent investments may have never been smaller than it is today. It's time we changed that for the glory of God and the good of our family.

After reading this book you should

- recognize and reject the powerful cultural messages about grandparenting;
- understand the biblical role of a grandparent;
- learn how to disciple children and grandchildren by practicing eight biblical methods of discipleship; and
- strengthen family relationships by looking to the Gospel to shape practices and solve problems.

The Need

A number of years ago, when I began a PhD program in family ministry, my initial discoveries about the lack of resources for Christian grandparenting were shocking. I found

- zero in-depth biblical studies on grandparenting;
- one ministry to equip Christian grandparents (the Christian Grandparent Network led by Cavin Harper);
- one small-group or Sunday school DVD series on grandparenting;

- seven books on grandparenting published in the past fifteen years (not counting gift books or grandparenting journals).

I discovered that there are millions of Christian grandparents with limited training and resources. Everywhere I looked I saw a huge need.

I also saw the potential influence that millions of equipped grandparents could have in the lives of children, families, churches, and society for the sake of Christ.

As a pastor, my vision was to help my local church minister more effectively to families. God had bigger plans than one local church and connected me with Cavin Harper and Larry Fowler. Together, with a team of wonderful friends, we have launched the national grandparenting ministry the Legacy Coalition, published a growing number of resources on grandparenting, and started grandparenting ministries in churches all over the country. If you would like to read the results of my research, they are available in the book *Biblical Grandparenting*, and additional family discipleship resources are available at gospelshapedfamily.com.

The content of this book is the culmination of my PhD research, a full year of studying the Bible from cover to cover to learn what it had to say about grandparenting, and interviews with grandparents from all over the country.

By God's grace, grandparents are being awakened to their God-designed role, church leaders are beginning to understand the value of grandparents in the spiritual lives of children, and children have another influence to help them know Christ and grow in spiritual maturity.

The Sufficiency of Scripture for Grandparenting

If you search the market, you will find a growing number of books on grandparenting, but you will have a difficult time finding one that teaches you how to be a grandparent based on the Bible. That's

what makes this book different from the rest. My goal is to help you understand and apply what the Bible says about grandparenting.

The Bible is sufficient for all of life, including grandparenting. To call the Bible sufficient means that if all we had was the Bible, it would be enough on its own to teach us how to grandparent. It means that the Bible is the primary source and authority for grandparenting and that other sources are secondary and supplementary.

The Bible has a lot to say about grandparenting.¹ God defines the role of grandparents and He describes the methods to pass faith to future generations. God didn't call grandparents to a task without telling them how to accomplish it. We will explore that in this book.

Grandparents Matter

I find that many grandparents underestimate the impact of their life on grandchildren. I want you to reject the lie that claims your best days are behind you and your greatest value is to dispense large amounts of sugar to grandchildren. By God's design, your influence is powerful and your presence matters.

I can speak to the value of grandparents because I have experienced what it is like to not have a grandmother's Gospel-rich influence on my children. My mother died from ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) when my oldest child was one, and a few years later my mother-in-law died from brain cancer. Do grandparents matter? Absolutely. Their deaths and absence made parenting more difficult.

God blessed the Mulvihill family and gave my children a new grandmother, whom we call Grammie Pammie. Pam has been God's gift to our family, and a wonderful grandmother. One of the unexpected joys of my life was officiating my dad and Pam's wedding. How many sons get to officiate their dad's wedding?! My dad and Pam are intentional grandparents who teach the truths of God's Word, woven in and out of the times they spend with

grandchildren. I can also say that grandparents matter because I watch my children's personalities, preferences, and passions in life being shaped by their grandparents.

Overview of the Book

This book contains four sections: Cultural Messages, God's Design, Discipleship Practices, and Strengthening Relationships. We will explore the strong but subtle messages culture communicates that threaten to neutralize your spiritual influence. We will also study what the Bible says about the role of grandparents and examine the methods God created to disciple future generations so that you are equipped to pass on a rich heritage of faith in Christ. We conclude with a section to help you strengthen relationships with your family.

Each section ends with a chapter from grandparents that I admire and encourage you to emulate—Valerie Bell, CEO of Awana; Cavin Harper, president of the Christian Grandparent Network; and my dad and Pam, grandparents of sixteen grandchildren. Each story is unique, but there are common threads running through them. You will notice that each of them recognized and rejected cultural messages, made a commitment to be a disciple-maker who passes on a heritage of faith, and intentionally invested in the lives of their grandchildren. I want you to be encouraged by their examples and inspired to be a biblical grandparent. The book closes with a Grandparent Declaration written by Larry Fowler, founder of the Legacy Coalition, and you will have the opportunity to commit to being an intentional, disciple-making grandparent.

Let me ask you a weighty question: Would it make any *spiritual* difference to your children and grandchildren if you were no longer alive?

Death has a way of clarifying what matters most and helps to eliminate the vanities from life. The thought of our own death reminds us what is most important and encourages us to make the

most of the time we have. One of the good things that came from the death of my mom and mother-in-law was a heightened awareness of the spiritual value of grandparents in my children's lives.

If you are a grandparent who is living for something other than Jesus Christ, then let this be your invitation to use the final third of your life to make an eternal impact for the Gospel. It is never too late, and you are never too old.

If you feel like you've blown it, this book will help.

If you need practical ideas, you will find them in these pages.

If you don't know how to rebuild a relationship with an adult child, I will point you to Jesus, the only person who can restore relationships.

If you want to see your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren walking with Christ, I will teach you the biblical principles God has given for this purpose.

PART 1

CULTURAL MESSAGES

1

Influencing Grandchildren for Christ

A Life That Reflects Christ in Every Way

Patt's seventeen-year-old granddaughter was struggling with her faith, so Patt planned an outing that centered around three spiritual lessons in hopes of strengthening her granddaughter's faith in Christ. Many months after that outing, Patt received the following text from her granddaughter:

I have learned more about how to be a Christian by watching how you live your life. The way you pursue a life that reflects Him in every way, whether that be through your marriage or simply talking to a man in a restaurant. For seventeen years I have watched you share the gospel shamelessly and point our family toward Him. In every situation good and bad I have ever been in, you have reminded me that it is not about me and that I serve a God that has a plan for me that ultimately leads to Him. The day we spent going around to different landmarks reading that book is what I attribute the beginning of my spiritual journey to. You showed me that following Him is all that matters.

A life that reflects Christ in every way. What a powerful testimony and an aim for each of us. Praise God for grandparents like

Patt. God used Patt to draw her grandchild to Christ and pass faith to future generations. What if Patt had not purposefully nurtured her granddaughter's faith? What path might her granddaughter have taken in life?

Patt is an example of a spiritually influential grandparent because she did two things: She lived a Christlike life worthy of imitation, and she was intentional. Notice how Patt's granddaughter watched her grandmother and was deeply impacted by a sincere faith consistently lived out over time. Patt was attuned to her granddaughter's spiritual state, recognized she was struggling with doubts, and purposefully invested in her granddaughter's spiritual life.

If this were your granddaughter, would you recognize her spiritual struggle? Equally important, how would you respond? Think for a moment about your grandchildren. Do you know how they are doing spiritually? Has your grandchild placed faith in Jesus? Is your grandchild growing spiritually, or is he or she stagnant? What are the trials and temptations your grandchild is facing?

I've never met a Christian grandparent who doesn't want their grandchildren to love Jesus, but I've met plenty of grandparents who lack a biblical focus and the proactive intentionality to encourage that result.

After talking with hundreds of grandparents, I am convinced that the majority of Christian grandparents would benefit from a clear understanding of their role as well as a big-picture biblical vision that guides what they do with children and grandchildren on a daily basis. If you've never thought deeply about the role you play in a grandchild's life, this book will help you understand the why, what, and how of grandparenting according to the Bible.

Identifying the Source

What is the source of your understanding of the role of a grandparent? While there are likely many, the three most common sources I have observed are:

- *Grandparents.* Your own grandparents' lives were powerful. They shaped you. From their positive or negative impact you formed ideas about the role of a grandparent. Your beliefs may or may not be correct. I have found that many individuals have not thought critically about their beliefs or compared them with the Bible's teaching on grandparents. Often, Christian grandparenting practices are a replication or rejection of a person's experience with grandparents. Your grandparents' success or failure should not be the benchmark for your understanding of grandparenting.
- *Culture.* Many Christian grandparents have been significantly impacted by a cultural view of grandparenting. Christian grandparents have integrated portions of society's views, even while attempting to follow Christ. The result is that grandparents have been extra, nonessential members of the family with a minimal role spiritually.
- *The Bible.* It has a lot to say about grandparenting, and God's Word is clear and compelling. Intentionality and conviction will come as we take our cues about grandparenting from the Bible. Before picking up other books on grandparenting, pick up the Bible and learn what God has to say about the topic.

We each look to an authority on grandparenting. The authority we choose determines what we believe and how we operate as grandparents. Maybe you picked up this book for grandparenting guidance and, if so, I'm glad you did. My job is to explain what God says about grandparenting in the Bible. God's ways are always the best ways and lead to the best results.

Four Roles Christian Grandparents Embrace

One of the primary barriers that limits a grandparent's spiritual impact with grandchildren is uncertainty about the role of a

grandparent. This section will help you understand the four most common roles Christian grandparents embrace, and encourage you to move from aimless activity to purposeful grandparenting so that you can seize teachable moments, capture lost opportunities, and pass on a rich heritage in Christ to future generations.

My goal is to equip you to be an intentional grandparent who raises children and grandchildren who treasure Jesus. In order to do that, you need to assess your personal beliefs about the role of a grandparent. I have asked grandparents what they understand their role to be, and I summarize the responses in these four categories:¹

Encouraging Voice: A cheerleader who loves grandchildren for who they are and the unique giftings they possess. This grandparent sees the positives, and desires to bring out the potential in their grandchildren. Seeks to help grandchildren accomplish goals and has a tendency to ask questions and listen. If this role were summarized as a book title, it would be *The Power of a Positive Grandparent: Helping Your Grandchildren Reach Their Full Potential*.

Supportive Partner: A helping hand with the day-to-day tasks of parenting. This grandparent operates as a co-laborer who comes alongside their adult children in a variety of ways. Oriented toward seeing and meeting a need. An agreeable grandparent who reinforces their children's parenting practices and philosophies without interfering. If this role were a book title, it would be *101 Ways You Can Help Your Adult Children*.

Loving Friend: A companion whose focus is building a strong relationship with grandchildren and having fun together. Often avoids difficult conversations or disciplinary matters. An activity-oriented grandparent who likes to create memories, communicate affection, and occasionally spoil grandchildren. If this role were a book title, it might be *Fun! The Key to Your Grandchild's Heart and Happiness*.

Disciple-Maker: A mentor who intentionally attempts to pass faith in Christ to future generations. Desires to see their grandchild know Christ and grow in Christ. Seeks to live as a Christlike example and share godly wisdom with grandchildren. If this role were a book title, it would be *How to Help Your Grandchild Know, Love, and Serve Jesus*.

Which of the four roles best describes you as a grandparent? If you had to choose only one, which would it be? Your personality, preference, and family situation will likely impact how you engage as a grandparent, so this may change over time. You may find that with some grandchildren you operate as a helping hand, and with others you are a cheerleader. My hope is that you begin to see your patterns and tendencies as a grandparent and, as we get further into the book, you will be able to compare your understanding and actions with the biblical role of grandparents.

Grandparents often comment that all four categories are important. That is true. However, there is a difference between primary and secondary importance. Some grandparent functions, while important, are support roles that enable a grandparent to accomplish the primary responsibility God has given them. Love, support, and encouragement are important but they are not the end goal of grandparenting. They exist for the greater purpose of passing on faith to future generations.

If you are like three out of four Christian grandparents and your primary role is one of the first three, then there are three things I want you to consider:

1. ***You should evaluate your grandparenting goals.*** For many Christian grandparents, encouragement, support, or love are the end goal rather than a means to intentionally helping grandchildren mature in faith. Supporting adult children is important. Encouraging grandchildren is valuable. There is a place for fun activities. But if these actions don't have a

greater purpose and encourage grandchildren to treasure Christ, then they fall short of God's purpose for us as grandparents. What is success for you as a grandparent? What are you hoping to accomplish in the life of your grandchildren?

2. ***You should recognize the difference between spiritual intent and spiritual impact.*** I've interacted with many Christian grandparents who fall into one of the first three categories and speak about the importance of a grandchild's spiritual growth, but do not grandparent in a way that prioritizes the spiritual growth of the grandchild. On a day-to-day basis, many Christian grandparents are reactive, not proactive. They are fun-centric, not discipleship-oriented. What do your daily grandparenting actions reveal about your grandparenting priority? How have you invested your time as a grandparent over the past month, and what does that suggest about what is most important to you as a grandparent?
3. ***You can increase your spiritual influence.*** The good news is that you can have a deeper, more substantial spiritual impact on your children and grandchildren. The bad news is that grandparents who operate as encouraging voices, supportive partners, or loving friends typically don't have as significant a spiritual impact as they desire or think they are having. Are you grandparenting in a way that encourages your grandchildren to know, love, and serve Jesus? On a scale of one to ten, how do you rate the spiritual influence you have on your grandchildren?

I urge every grandparent who primarily operates as an encourager, support, or companion to act with greater purpose and more intentionality to pass faith in Christ to future generations. It is no accident that you are a grandparent. God believed you were the right grandparent for the job and has uniquely equipped you to influence your children and grandchildren for Christ. One of the

first steps to helping your grandchildren know, love, and serve Jesus is to understand the potential influence you can have in their lives.

Grandparents Are Influential

Who are the most influential people in a young person's life? A Barna study wanted to know the answer to a similar question and asked 602 teenagers, "Who, besides your parents, do you admire most as a role model?"² According to Barna, the top five influences in the life of young people are (1) parents, (2) other family members, typically grandparents, (3) teachers and coaches, (4) friends, and (5) pastors or religious leaders.

After parents, grandparents are the greatest potential influence in the life of a child—not a peer, not a pastor, and not a teacher. When teenagers were asked why they named a particular person as influential, teens provided the following reasons: The person was worthy of imitation; they wanted to follow in the footsteps of the chosen person; they were there for the teenager; and they were interested in the teenager's future. For better or worse, young people are imitating the people they know best and who care for them.

It may sound simplistic, but the greatest influencers of young people are typically those who invest the greatest amount of time into their lives. The key for grandparents to understand is that the more time you invest into a grandchild's life, the greater the potential influence will be. When I look at Barna's top five influences it follows that logic: The five greatest influencers are the people who spend the most time with young people over the course of their life.

If you want to influence your grandchildren to love Jesus, then it makes sense that you must have an active presence in their lives. If you do not, then other influences such as peers or media fill the void. Take a moment and reflect on two areas of your life:

First, add up the numbers of hours you invest monthly in your grandchildren.

- How much of that time is face-to-face interaction (in person or through technology)?
- How many hours per month do you invest indirectly in your grandchildren's parents, praying for grandchildren, preparing for gatherings, activities, or other family-related things?
- What is your total number of hours?

Many grandparents are surprised to see how few or how many hours they actually spend on their grandchildren.

Second, take a moment and think about your own grandparents.

- What impact did your grandparents have on your life?
- Were your grandparents active in your life and did they regularly invest in you?
- Did your grandparents shape your personality, preferences, or faith in any way, or were your grandparents emotionally distant, primarily living an autonomous life?

Whether the impact was significant or lacking, it reminds us that grandparents matter, and rarely do they have no influence on us. If you ask your grandchildren how you influence their life, what do you think they would say? The goal is not simply to be a positive influence with a strong relationship, but to use our influence to point grandchildren to Christ.

An Abundance of Counselors

Young people need an abundance of counselors. The Bible teaches, "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14). This is true for your grandchildren. God created parents as the first and primary disciple-makers, and grandparents are second. Your grandchildren

need as many godly counselors in their life as possible, and God is calling you to actively step into this role.

One of the enemy's tactics is to isolate Christians from one another so they are vulnerable to discouragement and deception. This is true of families today who strongly value the American ideal of individualism. One of the major problems that must be addressed is the underlying belief that immediate family and extended family are two individual entities best kept separate. We'll explore the individualistic mindset and where that came from in the next chapter, but for now I simply want to draw your attention to it.

Young people mature best in Christian community where they are doing life with wise and seasoned Christians. It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. According to God, it takes a family to raise a child, which includes parents and grandparents. God created the home as the first Christian community for the purpose of nurturing the faith of future generations. Disrupt or destroy the home and it directly impacts the passing of the Gospel to future generations.

Grandparents are one more voice, one more example, one more influence to raise children to treasure Jesus, and it is my hope that you embrace your God-designed role with Gospel-intentionality and a Christlike influence. How do you do that? That is what we will explore in the second section of this book. But first, it is important to understand the cultural messages that limit a grandparent's spiritual influence.

Grand Chat

1. Of the four roles mentioned, which role best describes you? Why?
2. Many grandparents identify with two of the four roles and of those, one is primary and one is secondary. Which role describes you in a secondary way?

3. Which role least describes you?
4. How do you define success as a grandparent? What are you hoping to accomplish in the life of your grandchildren?
5. How have you invested your time as a grandparent over the past month, and what does that suggest about what is most important to you as a grandparent?