

Teeth on Edge

“Johnny has his dad’s temper, and Mike is a stubborn Martin. They’ll never get along.”

We drop these half-serious observations about family traits, partly because they seem true, and partly because it’s easier than a serious engagement with Johnny’s failures. So we shrug and say, “The apple didn’t fall far from the tree,” as though inherited weakness is inevitable.

People have been talking like this for centuries. In Ezekiel’s day, the Israelites said, *The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge* (Eze 18:2).

God was not impressed. Through Ezekiel’s pen, he unloaded an entire chapter of fiery preaching to refute the error in their wisecrack. The message was both sobering and liberating. “Every person answers for his own sins--no blaming your parents or your children. You will not be condemned for the sins of generations before or after you.”

Do we suffer from the “sour grapes” syndrome in our own churches and families? This is a difficult inquiry, for more reasons than the warning in Ezekiel 18. For one thing, we tend to assess generational apostasy prematurely, since the outcome of a given child’s life is not evident until later in life. We also hesitate to discuss it too openly out of regard for the personal pain carried by parents of wayward children.

God said, *I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me* (Ex 20:5). Are my children doomed to repeat the sins I have committed? It’s easy to connect Absalom’s rebellion to David’s adultery. God had specifically told David his own family would shame him with worse sins than he committed.

Naturally, we dare not draw careless connections between the choices of fathers and sons. The father of the prodigal in Luke 15 seemed like the perfect father, yet both his sons shamed him by their choices. Many a Christian mother weeps quietly in her prayers for a wayward daughter. Many a conscientious father watches the road for the return of a rebellious son.

Absalom had the opportunity to grow into a “man after God’s own heart,” like his father. Yet we fathers often watch our sons imitate the attitudes and shortcomings that we regret in ourselves. My scorn, my temper, my mockery, my flippancy—we hear it rolling off the lips of our children at a shockingly young age.

Will they be permanently handicapped by my failures? Will they tell a counselor someday that the reason they have marriage problems is because of their “father wound”? We reject the teaching of generational sin, but we have all seen the tragic cases where the behavior of an ungodly father set the “teeth on edge” for the whole following generation.

What about the statistical trends of children leaving our churches with “teeth on edge”? Who bears the responsibility when our grown children seem to have a sour taste in their mouths for the values of structured Anabaptist brotherhoods?

We may look uneasily at the 85-90% retention rates of the Amish or the Old Order Mennonite groups and quickly dismiss the loyalty of their children as involuntary. We assume their children are held inside those groups by the sheer force of tradition and the stigma of defection. In contrast, we make a great effort to teach the Scriptures to our children and ensure they can explain why we believe and practice as we do so that they can base their life choices on Biblical knowledge and personal conviction.

However, historians such as Steven Nolt, Donald Kraybill, Edsel Burdge, and others have gathered and analyzed surprising data on statistical trends for decades, and the conclusions cannot be easily dodged. Across the spectrum of Anabaptist churches, the most culturally separated groups have grown phenomenally, while the less separated groups have declined. (See the research from the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College, for example.) Of course, one can make many qualifying objections to such data. The story of God’s Kingdom is much bigger than membership tallies. We can sow seeds of Gospel truth in New York City, Bangladesh, or Ukraine that bear fruit in unimaginable dimensions. But we should look humbly at our track record. The church directories of the conservative Anabaptist groups tell their own quiet story of how family faithfulness ebbs and flows.

The Religious Landscape Study of US Adults (Pew Research Center, 2024) found that among participants who were raised in a “very religious” home with weekly attendance at worship services, 74% of them retained the religious affiliation and practices of their parental home. Solomon knew this long before social science was invented. *Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it* (Prov 22:6).

We do not read Solomon’s proverb, nor the statistical studies of Mennonite historians, as deterministic. Jesus said, “Whosoever will” may follow Him. Every child around our dinner table may choose to embrace or reject the Good News. But it doesn’t take a research department to prove what we know deep in our parental hearts. If we eat the sour grapes of mockery for the values of the church we profess to support, we can expect that our children will carry the distaste into action. There’s more than a grain of wisdom in the scratchy old chestnut: “If you want to know what I believe, watch what my children do.”

~James Martin