

# Created for Relationship

A summary of *Hardwired to Connect:  
The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*

With additional material to help congregations apply  
this information to their ministries



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CCFH Ministries wants to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities, and the needs of their families. One of the ways we seek to accomplish this is by providing booklets like this one. Because so much of this report is quoted from *Hardwired to Connect*, we cannot grant permission to reproduce any portion of this booklet.

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## Introduction

A report from the scientific community gives God's people great reason to rejoice. From a respected secular source comes exciting validation of God's Word, and material Christians can use to recharge our mission to spread that Good News! Diane Sawyer said on *Good Morning America* that it is "A real wake-up call for America's parents."

*Hardwired to Connect* is the name of a report to the nation issued by the Commission on Children at Risk and published by the Institute for American Values. This commission is composed of 33 children's doctors, research scientists, mental health and youth service professionals. YMCA of the USA, Dartmouth Medical School, and the Institute for American Values jointly sponsored the study. The principal investigator was Dr. Kathleen Kovner Kline of Dartmouth Medical School. School Ministries, Inc. conceived the project.

School Ministries, Inc. is a South Carolina-based organization whose vision is "to make the Good News of Jesus Christ known to public students K-12 and their families. Read more about them at [www.schoolministries.org](http://www.schoolministries.org).

Although the Institute for American Values has been extremely generous with permission allowing us to quote from the report, to make full use of our booklet, you need to order a copy of the report. Copies of *Hardwired to Connect* may be obtained for \$7 at [www.americanvalues.org](http://www.americanvalues.org). Their report sets forth ten planks regarding what individuals need to develop into mature and functioning adults, and cites the scientific studies supporting their conclusions. Our report (this booklet) is aimed at helping you take that information and implement it in the church.

*Hardwired to Connect* first states the problems; ones that we are all too familiar with:

- High and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, thoughts of suicide, and



*Why is CCFH Ministries distributing this book?*

*Because the two goals of our ministry are helping those who have disabilities reach their highest potential, and enabling congregations to help in the same way.*

*Serious mental, emotional, and behavioral problems are as debilitating as any disability that affects the body. Learning (again) that the church can bring healing for these conditions is exciting, challenging, and invigorating!*



other serious mental, emotional, and behavioral problems

- From 1950-1999, for persons 1 to 24 years of age:
  - deaths due to unintentional injuries fell by 47 percent
  - deaths due to cancer fell by 60 percent
  - deaths due to heart disease fell by 59 percent
  - overall death rates fell by 53 percent
  - deaths due to homicide rose by 133 percent
  - deaths due to suicide increased by 137 percent
- A study of 878 children who attended a counseling clinic between 1988 and 1998 showed that the percent of children who displayed assaultive behavior rose from 17 to 45 percent.
- The most common diagnoses within this group were ADHD, Oppositional Disorder, Dysthymic Disorder (mental depression; melancholy), anxiety states, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, parent-child problems, and Conduct Disorder.
- Similarly, among 13,257 clients of a large Midwestern university's counseling center, rates of anxiety and suicidality almost doubled, depression doubled, and personality disorders nearly doubled between 1989 and 2001.
- In addition, a growing body of literature shows that children entering out-of-home care for mental and developmental problems are more disturbed than in the past.

## More Disturbing Statistics

- In 2002, scholars at the National Research Council estimated that at least one of every four adolescents in the U.S. is at serious risk of not achieving productive adulthood.
- About 21 percent of U.S. children ages nine to 17 have a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder. The report states that society has been approaching this problem through
  - Medications and psychotherapies

- Designing more and more special programs for at risk children.

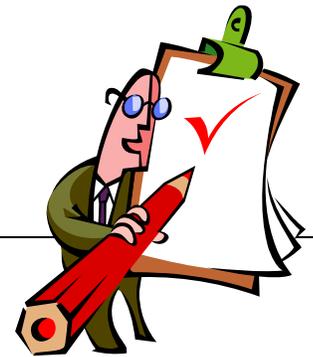
The commission notes that while these approaches are useful, they are inadequate because they can prevent us from recognizing the broad environmental conditions that are contributing to this growing problem. This is just one of the many doors opened to the church by this report; if medications, psychotherapy, and programs designed for children at risk are not solving the problem, what will? According to the study, "Authoritative Communities" are the answer. Read on.

Coming from a non-religious group, the two-part conclusion of the report is heartening for the church. The first conclusion is, "What's causing this crisis of American Childhood is a lack of connectedness—close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning."

The second conclusion is that "the human child is hard-wired to connect." We are designed to need other people, to have moral meaning, and to be open to the transcendent. Furthermore, "Meeting these basic needs for connections is essential to health and to human flourishing."

These conclusions come as no surprise to Christians. We understand from God's Word that the primary purpose for our existence is to be in a relationship with Him, through Jesus Christ. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him" (Colossians 1: 15, 16). We know also that we are to reflect His nature by being in relationship with others. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2: 10).

## Observations



*"We are hard-wired to need other people, to have moral meaning, and to be open to the transcendent."*

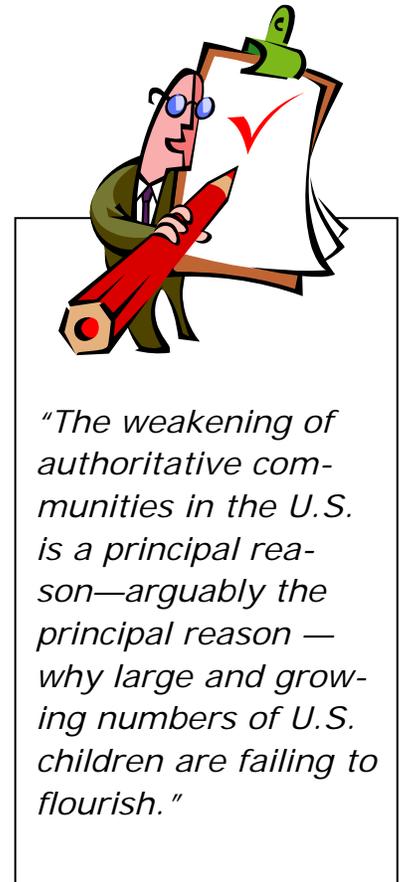
## The Language of the Report

According to the report, the social institutions that provide the opportunities for connectedness are “groups of people organized around certain purposes.” (Each group would define its own purposes.) The commission developed the term “authoritative communities” to identify these social institutions. Here’s how they are defined: “They are groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life.” The government does not run these groups, although programs like Big Sister, Big Brother, and others, do receive some government funding. Authoritative communities can range from a loosely structured neighborhood after-school program to the highly organized Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts of America. As Christians, we recognize that the church can easily fit within this definition, as can families. Our goal, perhaps, should be to *make sure* that the church fits within this definition! However, churches are not the only authoritative communities who should take notice of this report, and implement the proposals given. Any community group, para-church organization, or individual interested in improving the lives of children and adolescents will find encouragement and inspiration from *Hardwired to Connect*.

When the writers refer to people being “hardwired” for this or that, we understand this to be a non-religious way of saying that we are created with this need, or designed for that purpose.

The commission makes a very clear case for addressing the environmental causes of this crisis as opposed to treating (or blaming) individual children who are suffering. The writers, many of them educators, pediatricians, and children’s counselors, recognize the role of their peer professionals in addressing these problems. They also recognize the need for a greater societal involvement by groups ranging from families to “the role of local, voluntary civic and religious institutions in improving children’s lives.” Again, an open door for the church.

The commission states that “Meeting this need for connectedness is primarily the task of what we are calling authoritative communities—groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life. The weakening of authoritative communities in the U.S. is a principal reason—arguably *the* principal reason—why large and growing numbers of U.S. children are failing to flourish. As a result, strengthening these communities is likely to be our best strategy for improving the lives of our children.” So, here we have a scientific report stating that an organization such as the church may be the best place to improve the lives of children. To paraphrase Tevye and Golde in “Fiddler On the Roof, “It doesn’t change a thing, but even so, after two thousand years, it’s nice to know.”



### **What is an authoritative community?**

1. It is a social institution that includes children and youth.
2. It treats children as ends in themselves. (As opposed to treating them as a means to an end; winning a trophy for the school having the best or biggest group, selling the most, etc. An authoritative community relates to the child as a person and cares about the child for his or her own sake.)
3. It is warm and nurturing.
4. It establishes clear limits and expectations.
5. The core of its work is performed largely by non-specialists
6. It is multi-generational.
7. It has a long-term focus.
8. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
9. It encourages spiritual and religious development.
10. It is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.

It is clear to see that if the church does not already meet these qualifications, it should strive to meet them. Because the report is written in a non-religious setting, the authors avoid most opportunities to refer to God. Even so, as the report progresses, it becomes clear that a relationship with God (sometimes referred to as “the transcendent”) is pivotal to a mentally healthy, well-functioning adult.

## The Ten Planks

The body of *Hardwired to Connect* consists of ten planks (positions/statements), that the commission has agreed upon. They are:

1. The mechanisms by which we become and stay attached to others are biologically primed and increasingly discernible in the basic structure of the brain.
2. Nurturing environments, or the lack of them, affect gene transcription\* and the development of brain circuitry. (*\*The process of forming a nucleic acid molecule by using a template of another molecule.*)
3. The old “nature versus nurture” debate — focusing on whether heredity or environment is the main determinant of human conduct — is no longer relevant to serious discussions of child well-being and youth programming.
4. Adolescent risk-taking and novelty-seeking are connected to changes in brain structure and function.
5. Assigning meaning to gender in childhood and adolescence is a human universal that deeply influences well-being.
6. The beginning of morality is the biologically primed moralization of attachment.

7. The ongoing development of morality in later childhood and adolescence involves the human capacity to idealize individuals and ideas.
8. Primary nurturing relationships influence early spiritual development —call it the spiritualization of attachment — and spiritual development can influence us biologically in the same ways that primary nurturing relationships do.
9. Religiosity and spirituality significantly influence well-being.
10. The human brain appears to be organized to ask ultimate questions and seek ultimate answers.

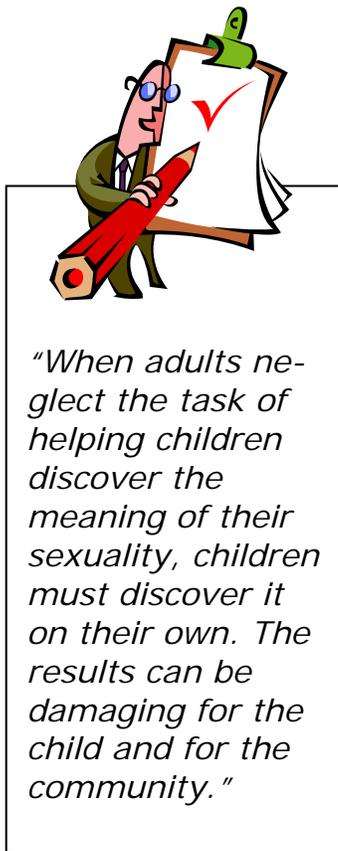
The report cites the scientific studies that support each of these planks. The evidence is fascinating and lends itself to many sermon illustrations. Youth and children's workers will also be stimulated into thinking of new ways to minister to the younger members of the body, and will be grateful for the new level of understanding about their behavior.

## **Our Purpose**

CCFH Ministries believes that the conclusions presented in these ten planks are extremely valuable to the church. The conclusions are not new to God's people; a Scriptural principle if not actual verses can be assigned to each plank. Christians know that God's Word is true and has always been true, and don't need such a report to validate it. The value of this report comes in reaching those who think that Scripture is irrelevant today, or who doubt its truthfulness. The purpose of our booklet, then, is to direct your thinking to ways in which you and your congregation can use this material to draw people into Christ, who will not only save their souls, but also salvage their lives.

There may be some Christians who doubt that the church is responsible for teaching such “secular” subjects as parenting skills, sex education, family roles and lifestyles. “Such things should be taught by the family,” they may argue.

Certainly this was God’s plan. But the family unit in the United States and in most developed countries has pretty much collapsed. Only in small pockets of rural communities, and in the so-called “underdeveloped” countries do you still find generation after generation of families living together, with the older generations teaching marriage and parenting skills to the younger. Marriages (between a man and a woman) that last a lifetime are rare and getting rarer. What used to be called “broken homes” are now called “blended families.” While this may be a kinder approach, the consequences of divorce and remarriage are still very much in effect—and must be dealt with.



Furthermore, we are the family of God. If the church is not going to step up to the plate and teach the moral values that used to be taught in homes, who is? To quote from page 25 of *Hardwired to Connect* (Plank 5), “when adults choose largely to neglect the critical task of sexually enculturating the young, they are left essentially on their own—perhaps with some help from Hollywood and Madison Avenue—to discover the social meaning of their sexuality. The resulting, largely adolescent-created rituals of transition are far less likely to be pro-social in their meaning and outcomes.”

We believe it is the responsibility of the church to teach God’s perspective on social issues. The evidence of our society is that children, young people, and adults desperately need this instruction. The value of a report like *Hardwired to Connect* is simply to give the church some new ammunition in the age-old battle.

## Plank by Plank

We have tried to summarize the points that follow each plank of *Hardwired to Connect*. Because the points are summarized however, you may not always see the connection to the wording of the plank. To reproduce the full explanation of each plank would have made this report considerably longer. To get the full impact of *Hardwired to Connect*, we urge you to purchase your own copy. Two more good reasons for having the entire text:

- Having access to all the footnotes referenced in the planks
- Having the remaining nineteen pages of material defining authoritative communities and how they can provide the types of connectedness that our children are lacking. These pages include three big goals and 18 recommendations for renewing and building authoritative communities (the church)!

### **Plank One: The mechanisms by which we become and stay attached to others are biologically primed and increasingly discernible in the basic structure of the brain.**

In the language of the report, this means that we are “hardwired to connect” with other human beings. First, a baby’s brain develops “in tandem” with another brain, “through emotional communication.” Without a nurturing human willing to bond with the baby, the child may develop a “vulnerability to later forming psychiatric disorders.”

Furthermore, the hormones released during sexual activity cause men and women to bond biochemically with one another; the report says they actually “become addicted to one another.” These “attachment hormones” cause males to bond with their offspring and become better fathers. The lower testosterone levels resulting from this bonding reduce sexual promiscuity and infidelity, and cause men to become less violent (again, better fathers).

Similarly, the hormone oxytocin in women promotes emotional intimacy and bonding (which the report says is “also called love”), both between her male partner, and her baby.

The report cites numerous studies that “link relationship intimacy to better health, including stronger immune systems. Conversely, high-conflict (anti-intimate) relationships appear to weaken the immune system and increase vulnerability to disease, especially among women, including worsening the body’s response to proven vaccines and lengthening the amount of time required for physical wounds to heal.”

So, we are “hardwired” (created) to form a close sexual relationship with one partner, and remain with that partner. The benefits are physical, emotional, and spiritual.

## **How can the church use this?**

The many opportunities for the church to use this information include pre- and post-natal parenting classes, sexual education classes for pre-teens and teens, and during pre-marital counseling and marriage counseling.

Use the facts cited about the development of the brain to help parents-to-be and new parents understand the vital importance of bonding, both between the couple, and between the couple and their baby. Bonding is not simply a matter of having a happy child and home, but insurance against the child “later forming psychiatric disorders.”

Explain the effects of a close sexual relationship on the immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular systems. Teach that God’s way is perfect. Sexual fidelity is not only morally beneficial; it keeps us healthy! As the scientific evidence illustrates, men and woman are chemically designed for monogamous and faithful relationships, and when we fulfill this role, we become better husbands and wives, and better fathers and mothers—we become better humans by listening to and obeying God’s plan.

The facts on the effect of marriage on the male's level of testosterone are useful 1) when teaching teens 2) in pre-marital counseling, 3) to promote fidelity. Motivate young men to sexual purity by showing them what God has designed them to be.

One sexual abstinence program for teens uses two pieces of paper and some glue to illustrate the harmful effects of multiple sexual partners. By gluing the two pieces of paper together and then pulling them apart, the teacher illustrates that we cannot become intimately bonded with someone else—and then leave—without tearing ourselves up. Pieces of our heart, our mind, our self-esteem are torn, and left behind—and sometimes, we are left with irreparable holes in our lives. In the language of *Hardwired to Connect*, "social bonding manifests itself biochemically . . . pair-bonded couples can be described as being 'addicted' to one another." Obviously, addictions are hard to break, breaking them causes physical and emotional problems, and breaking them leaves us weaker in the long run. Multiple addictions are even more damaging. But becoming "addicted" to one person, and staying with that person for life, has just the opposite physical and emotional effects; "Researchers report growing evidence linking relationship intimacy to better health, including stronger immune systems and physical wounds taking less time to heal . . . the biochemistry of connection."

Church leaders (including youth leaders) can use these facts as a starting point for a number of valuable lessons. God's Word is true and His way is right. When we bond with our mates and our children, when we live sexually moral lives, and when we stay married, we reap many rewards.



*"Hormones released during sexual activity cause men to bond with their mate and with their offspring. As a result, lower testosterone levels reduce sexual promiscuity and infidelity, and cause men to become less violent."*



## Sermon Topic: In His Image

*Thesis: "We understand . . . the primary purpose of our existence is to be in relationship with God."*

David: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:1, 2).

Solomon: "Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear [revere] God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

St. Augustine: "Thou made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee" (*Confessions, First Book*).

Sermon Text: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

### I What is the nature of God?

- Usually defined by three words: Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient.
- But these three general terms comprehend numerous specific qualities: God is Eternal, God is immortal, God is majestic, God is holy, God is spirit, God is truth, God is justice, God is love—and literally scores of other characteristics or qualities are listed in the Bible.
- These character qualities may be reflected, to more or less degree in the life of the wholly committed person. It has been said, "It yet remains to be seen what God can do with a wholly committed life."

### II. How are we "in His image"?

- Not in our physical form or being. God is not a material or physical being, but is the ultimate of Being in nonphysical and eternal qualities.
- Man has, by his created nature, the intellectual, moral, and spiritual endowment to recognize and emulate these divine attributes, and he is "hardwired" to seek and conform.

"Ye will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

"I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy; the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

—C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

## **Plank Two: Nurturing environments, or the lack of them, affect gene transcription and the development of brain circuitry.**

Nurturing relationships have a “powerful effect” on a child’s later ability to react to events, and also produce “permanent changes in behavioral responses to stressful situations.” In other words, a child who is loved and well cared for becomes healthier and more capable. “Even as children grow into adolescence, parental presence can have an impact on their biology.” This is not just touchy-feely stuff; the presence of a male parent affects “the age at which adolescent girls reach sexual puberty.” Furthermore, studies with rats show that when emotionally deprived pups are placed in the care of nurturing “foster mothers” the pup’s emotional and physiological resilience is not only measurably enhanced, *but the pup can pass on those improved traits to future generations.* Can these results be expected in humans? The researchers found that “the presence in humans of many of these same hormones connected to sexual bonding, birth, and lactation suggests that they may also be relevant to human behavior and relationships. Available human data,<sup>46</sup> as well as these and other similar findings from animal studies,<sup>47</sup> suggest that our deep need for attachment and connectedness to others can be traced back to the brain’s deepest centers of reward and gratification.”

### **Intervention Nurturing**

The strong evidence of the need for maternal attention/early nurturing experiences/good mothering is astonishing. A nurturing mother creates “healthier and more capable” children, who are “emotionally and physiologically resilient.” More astonishing is the fact that these good qualities, once established, can be passed genetically to future generations. So the church must teach good parenting skills. Perhaps the most astonishing fact however, is that these good qualities can be instilled in a child by some nurturing person other than his mother! The implications here are mind-boggling. If ever Sunday schoolteachers needed a reason for staying with

the program, this is it. And not only teachers, but grandparents, older siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles, next-door neighbors, a friend in the park! Obviously, because of the close and constant contact a mother usually has with her child, she is the best person to deliver this life-enhancing nurture, but if for whatever reason the mother is unable or unwilling to nurture her child, the love of any human being will mold the life of this child.



*"Girls who live in close proximity to men who are not their biological fathers enter puberty earlier than their age mates who live with their biological fathers."*

Challenge the members of your congregation to consider the implications of this truth: Nursery workers who simply hold and coo and sing to a baby can have a life-changing impact. Teachers and other adults who look for opportunities to praise a child and encourage him can turn his life around. Look especially for children who do not come from good homes. They are the ones most in need of intervention nurturing. Conversely, realize the horrific results of criticism and cruelty. The human psyche may be at the same time the most resilient and the most fragile of all things. Treat it accordingly.

The second powerful fact from plank two is that parental presence can have an impact on the sexual development of an adolescent girl. The study shows that girls who live in close proximity to men who are not their biological fathers (stepfathers, mother's boyfriend) enter puberty earlier than their age mates who live with their biological fathers. Mothers and fathers need to know this. This is another, very good reason why divorced parents need to share custodial care of their children. Surely there is a time in a women's Bible study group, or a men's support group to discuss this fact.



## **Sermon Topic: The Transforming Power of Nurturing**

Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Psalm 78:5-7; 2 Timothy 1:5

*Thesis: "Nurturing environments . . . affect gene transcription and the development of brain circuitry."*

### **I. Amazing Scientific Conclusions:**

- "Good nurturing creates healthier and more capable children who are emotionally and psychologically resilient (a truth long held by the theistic community).
- More surprising, "These good qualities, once established, can be passed genetically to future generations"!
- This power resides in all people of good will: "these good qualities can be instilled in a child by some nurturing person other than his mother."

### **II. Revelation Augmented by Modern Science**

- Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are filled with admonitions and encouragements to sound teaching. This responsibility is laid upon both the home and the covenant community. Its effect is obvious in every culture where this practice is genuine.
- The apostle Paul likens this change to a glorious transformation (2 Corinthians 3:18). He affirms this encouraging word: "And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven (1 Corinthians 15:49).

### **III. The Influence of this Nurturing is Transmissible**

- The scientific claim is that these positive traits become biologically patterned in the offspring of rats, and "that they are predisposed at the cellular level to pass on this good nurturing and physiological resilience to the next generation."
- While the Christian does not need scientific support for this thesis, still it can be received and used with gratitude.

"The more true science advances, the more it discovers God, almost as though He were standing vigilant behind every door which science opens." Pope Pius XII

**Plank Three: The old “nature verses nurture” debate—focusing on whether heredity or environment is the main determinant of human conduct—is no longer relevant to serious discussion of child well-being and youth programming.**

Nature and nurture “interact—not like boxers, with each one trying to knock the other out, but more like dancers, with each subtle move producing a reciprocating move.” What this means is that “the various social environments that we create or fail to create for our children matter a great deal, for both good and ill. . . . The environments we create influence our children’s genetic expression.”

The research supporting this plank shows that when children with at risk genetic tendencies are raised in a supportive environment, their harmful behavior not only disappears, it becomes a “positive behavioral asset.” This is exciting news for parents and educators, and all who love children. The social environments that we create for children can actually redraw their genetic blueprints, transform risky behavior into achieving behavior, and increase their intelligence.

**What does this mean to the church?**

The opening statement of this plank, “Social contexts can alter genetic expression,” is again a great reason for the body of Christ to have confidence in the ministry of the church. As the commission puts it, “the various social environment that we create or fail to create for our children matter a great deal, for both good and ill.” They matter not only for the good of the child in the here and now, but also for the sake of that child’s genetic expression. As the commission says, “This is sobering news.”

In the previous plank we saw that genetically unrelated people can have great (or disastrous) influence on the development of brain circuitry. In this plank we see that positive social environments can have great effects on behavior associated with genetic material. This fact explains the success of programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, and Prison Fellowship Ministries. People may be genetically disposed to alcoholism,

or overeating, or be predisposed to a life of crime. But, with intervention from a group of caring individuals, they can overcome their predispositions and change the outcome of their lives.

A positive, encouraging, supportive environment can, not only help people stop their negative behavior, it can also change the negative behavior into some desirable characteristic. The “harmfully aggressive” monkeys (discussed in the explanation of plank three) became “especially successful in making their way to or near the top of the rhesus monkey social hierarchy.” These statements have huge implications for all parents, educators, and people interested in helping others. The church is the ultimate “group of caring individuals,” and can furthermore introduce people to the One with the ultimate power to change lives.

Again, the change is not only for the good of the individual, but also for his succeeding generations. And, the change affects not only behavior, but also physiological health. As the report says, a person’s blood pressure can respond in a positive or negative manner to social effects.

Jesus is in the salvaging business. He rescues sinners, turns their lives around, and restores them to a full and functional life. Christians are privileged to be co-workers with Christ, yet we are often discouraged by the seemingly endless task before us. How encouraging is it to learn of scientific evidence that “An improved social environment has changed a heritable vulnerability into a positive behavioral asset”? Does it give new meaning to your work to realize the “Human gene expression, as well as brain growth and structure at the neuronal level, can apparently be altered [by] experience”? Again, Christians are familiar with the process defined by these last two statements. We know the transformation as “conversion” and “restoration.” Church leaders need to share this valuable information with their staff, with parents, and with classroom teachers.



*“Intervention from a group of caring individuals can overcome genetic predispositions and change the outcome of a person’s life.”*



## Sermon Topic: An Obsolete Dichotomy

**Thesis:** "Nature versus Nurture" Becomes "Nature and Nurture"

A percentage of rhesus monkeys appear to carry the heritable trait of anxiety. But when these "at risk" infant monkeys are placed under the care of a nurturing mother (whether she be their own or a substitute mother), the tendencies toward anxiety and timidity disappear. Furthermore, the trait of anxiety becomes one of strength, allowing the monkey to go to the head of his social hierarchy. Apparently, an improved social environment can change a heritable vulnerability.

Such studies tend to invalidate the age-old contention between nature and nurture. It is no longer a matter of *either*, but of *both*.

**I. The bearing of Scripture;** 1 Timothy 4:12, 13; Titus 2:7; 3:3, 4; Ezekiel 36:26; John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17, etc.

- These passages, along with many others, indicate that unregenerate man is incomplete—that he is susceptible to change—that such change comes through doctrine and example.

**II. What are the endowments of nature and nurture?**

- Nature: Life, Health, Intelligence, Moral Propensities, etc.
- Nurture: Education, Inspiration, Culture, etc.

**III. Nature and nurture compliment each other.**

- Just as two legs are essential to normal walking, so both sides of this equation are necessary to a normal human being.

## **Plank Four: Adolescent risk-taking and novelty-seeking are connected to changes in brain structure and function.**

Far from being willfully disobedient, much adolescent behavior can be attributed to “changes in the prefrontal cortex and related brain region that are critical for cognitive functions such as judgment and insight,” “a decline in the connections to some regions of the brain,” and a tendency to “suffer the consequences of risk-taking more intensely than do adults.” In other words, teenagers’ brain functions have not developed to the point that they are able to make wise decisions. They will also suffer disproportionately from unhappiness, and may have a stronger reaction to drugs or alcohol than do adults.

This means “adolescence is a biological as well as a social phenomenon.” And again, “The social environments that we create, or fail to create for adolescents” have a profound impact on them. “Social context can alter genetic expression and impact neurocircuitry itself.”

The commission writes, “We as a society are doing a remarkably poor job of addressing our adolescents’ partly hardwired needs for risk, novelty, excitement, and peer affiliation. Wishing that teenagers were different won’t make them so. Treating immaturity as pathology (disease) will cure very little. Pressuring young people to focus on other priorities will only go so far. Worst of all, leaving them largely to their own devices, with one another as their main sources of wisdom regarding how to take risks and pursue novelty, has shortcomings which those of us in the mental health field see every day.

“Meeting the challenge of this special period of life requires a society-wide mobilization of a particular kind—one that understands and embraces, rather than denies or walks away from, what is distinctive about adolescence, and one that carefully guides the adolescent need for risk, novelty, excitement, and peer approval toward authentic fulfillment, leading toward maturity.”

## What does this mean for the church?

Cultures around the world have marked adolescence as the transition between childhood and adulthood. According to *Hardwired to Connect*, we may be jumping the gun. If "significant brain growth, maturation, and remodeling extend into the third decade of human life," teenagers are only halfway there. In fact, according to the report, the alteration in brain structure that occurs during the teen years may cause the decline in the connections that control cognitive functions such as judgment and insight. The fact that teens want to assert their independence does not necessarily mean that they should be allowed to. After all, a two-year-old also asserts his independence quite vigorously!



*"The teenage brain processes the rewards and consequences of dangerous or risky behavior in a far different manner than does the adult brain."*

Why do teens take the outrageous risks that leave their parents shaking with fear? Not out of willful disobedience, or lack of regard for their own lives, but because their brains process the rewards and the consequences of such behavior in a far different manner than do adults. Understanding this biological fact should help teens understand themselves, and should help any adult wanting to care for them and work with them. Teens need guidance! They are not yet emotionally capable of making wise decisions.

In reviewing current scientific studies, the commission concludes that at the very time when teenagers most need assistance in making decisions, our society is "doing a remarkably poor job of addressing [their] . . . needs." Isn't this particularly true in the church? The report refers to our tendency to "wish that teenagers were different" and to deny or walk away from the challenges of adolescence. Because so much of teenage dress, speech, and behavior

tends to revolve around their emerging sexual identities, many in the church are uncomfortable being around teens and/or strongly disapprove of their behavior. The kids know this. How can we expect them to respect adults and turn to us for guidance when they know that adults don't respect them?

If we can wrap our brains around the idea that teenagers do not behave the way they do out of rebellion or meanness, but because they are actually undergoing a major physical change in brain structure and function, that understanding ought to affect the way we approach them.

## **Practical Applications**

The church youth program needs to include a time for serious discussion of these facts. If teens know that their brains are not yet fully wired to help them make good decisions on matters of risk-taking, perhaps they will be more willing to slow down and seek advice. It is often said that, "knowledge is power." We can help young people be better prepared to handle a difficult situation by letting them know in advance that their own power of discernment may fail them at a critical time. This is why it is so important to discuss difficult choices ahead of time. Let kids think about and role play and consider the consequences of certain behaviors before they get into the situation. Help them to make their decisions with a cool head.

Simultaneously, the church needs to be teaching this material to parents, preferably before their kids reach adolescence. Parents will be relieved to know that the mind-blowing choices their kids make are not really indicative of their intellect, but just a biological state of brain immaturity.



**Sermon Topic:**  
“Help! My Child’s a Teenager!”

**Thesis:** *Parents must understand the dynamics of adolescent maturation—spiritual, emotional, and physical.*

**The Need:** As the minister looks out upon his congregation, he views a battlefield with the wounded scattered through the pews. Sally is divorced, and raising two teenagers on her own. John’s a widower trying to raise a boy and two girls. He has just discovered that his sixteen-year-old daughter is pregnant. Kaitlyn, fifteen, smokes marijuana almost daily; her parents have no idea.

**The Focus Question:** How do parents raise mature, committed children in the midst of a pagan culture?

**Parents must be willing . . .**

**I. Willing to Lead**

- Hardly anything is more damaging than parental hypocrisy. Children watch and imitate! (Eli loses control of his sons; 1 Samuel 2:12-15.) Effective leaders (including parents) model their lives after the Lord Jesus (1 Peter 1:21; Ephesians 4:12,13).
- Deuteronomy 6:6-7 – “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”
- “The adolescent may be surprisingly mature, independent and responsible one moment, and childlike and undependable the next. Just when a mother and father think their son or daughter has earned greater freedom, something may happen to make the parents doubt whether he or she has grown up at all” (John Conger, *Adolescence: Generation Under Pressure*).

**II. Willing to Learn**

- Effective parents study the Word, read books, ask questions, seek assistance. Whatever concerns you face in raising your children, there are people in this Christian community who are ready to help. The church is your extended family! Within that family, we are commanded to *submit* to one another (Ephesians 5:21), *encourage* one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18), *care* for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25).
- “[Authoritative communities consist of] groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person” (*Hardwired to Connect*).

**Conclusion:** [Children] “are talked into talking and loved into loving” (*Hardwired to Connect*).

## **Plank Five: Assigning meaning to gender in childhood and adolescence is a human universal that deeply influences well-being.**

Some gender differences and preferences are influenced by environmental factors, but a “number of basic differences in gender role behavior are also biologically primed and even established prenatally. The games and roles that children choose are the ones that will help them develop their sexual embodiment. When children begin to form their gender identity (around the age of 18-24 months) they need relationships with both a male and a female parent.

Adolescents also need guidance in developing their understanding of gender roles and consequences. Cultures around the world “typically mobilize themselves quite purposively to define and enforce the social meaning of sexual embodiment and thereby seek to guide burgeoning adolescent strength, energy, aggression, and sexuality in pro-social directions.” Neglecting this guidance can be dangerous. “Young people have an inherent need to experience the advent of fertility, physical prowess, and sexual maturing within an affirming system of meaning.”

### **What does this mean for the church?**

Preachers, if you’re looking for another argument against same-sex marriage, this is it. This plank is also a strong argument for couples building and maintaining a strong marriage: “When the young child (typically at about 18-24 months of age) begins to show a deep need to understand and make sense of her or his sexual embodiment, the child’s relationships with mother and father become centrally important. For the child searching for the meaning of his embodiment, both the

same-sex-as-me parent and the opposite-sex-from-me parent play vital roles.”

No other plank of this report will cause greater controversy than this one. The commission forthrightly acknowledges that “basic differences in gender role behavior are biologically primed and even established prenatally,” that a child’s relationships with both his mother and father play vital roles in the child’s understanding of his or her sexual embodiment, and that “gender runs to the core of human identity and social meaning—in part because it is biologically primed and connected to differences in brain structure and function, and in part because it is so deeply implicated in the transition to adulthood.”



*“Gender runs to the core of identity. It is biologically primed, connected to differences in the brain, and is deeply involved in the transition to adulthood.”*

For years, many in the church tried to adapt to the prevailing thinking that gender was something merely enforced on children by archaic, stereotypical training. We offered little boys the opportunity to play with dolls and encouraged the little girls to play with trucks. Few would argue that there is anything wrong with encouraging little boys to develop their tender characteristics, or teaching little girls that they can aspire to any job that interests them. However, is it possible that by discouraging a child’s natural tendency to emulate gender-specific roles, we have confused them? It seems that this report is saying that the games that come naturally to children may be the ones that allow them to develop their natural sexual identification. Instead of trying to get children to cross their gender barriers, perhaps good caregivers ought to let them play the games they want to play.

The report says that by 18-24 months, “the child’s relationships with mother and father become centrally important” to the child’s under-

standing of his or her own sexual embodiment. What does this mean in a society where “one of every three children is born to a single mother” (Institute for American Values) and where “sixty percent of all children in the United States today will spend some part of their childhood in a single-parent family” (2000 U.S. Census)? The church can fill this great gap for gender models, but it will not be easy. Everyone is busy, but if the church is going to play a role in helping children grow into mentally healthy adults, two-parent families must include children from single-parent families in their home activities as much as possible. In fact, inviting the single parent along on outings is yet another terrific aspect of ministry! Families in the church need to reach out to others. This is not just a nice thing to do; it is a biblical mandate. We are to be the family of God. There are singles, and single parents all over your congregation who are dying for lack of love. They are struggling to maintain a Christian perspective in a world that fights them on every turn. Invite them into your home. Give them a place of rest.

Children, especially those from single-parent homes, often enter the church program when they are old enough to ride the church bus, or be invited by a school friend. That is long past the time when they are forming their gender identification. In order to meet this need, God’s people must be much more aggressive in reaching out to their neighbors, friends from work, and parents they meet at school functions. The fact that each of these people need the salvation of the Lord ought to be enough to motivate us. Now we have the added scientific evidence that incorporating lonely people into the body of Christ will change their lives for the better here on earth. (See more about this in Planks 8-10.)

The report notes that “human communities across time and cultures typically mobilize themselves quite purposively to define and enforce the social meaning of sexual embodiment [gender identification],” and that “the need to attach social significance and meaning to gender appears to be a human universal.” But what special rites of passage are typically observed in our society? Can the church/should the church institute a program to change this? Can the church provide a safe place for adolescents to “experience the advent of fertility, physical prowess, and sexual maturing within an affirming system of meaning”?

*Hardwired to Connect* refers to the trend in our society to seek an androgynous state, and then notes, “Neglecting the gendered needs of adolescents can be dangerous.” “When adults choose largely to neglect the critical task of sexually enculturating the young, they are left essentially on their own—perhaps with some help from Hollywood and Madison Avenue—to discover the social meaning of their sexuality.” Can the church publicly recognize the differences between males and females, teach adolescents what they can expect to think and feel during puberty, and provide them with opportunities to celebrate their developing roles as men and women?



*“What better authoritative community can there be than the church to teach children the right roles to assume as godly men and godly women?”*

We believe that God’s answer to all these questions is “yes.” (See Titus 2.) Children are receiving information on sex roles at school and from the media. What better “authoritative community” can there be to help them sort through these confusing messages than the church? Many congregations have men and women’s Bible studies and support groups: what if the men conducted a training program for boys, and the woman did the same for the girls? Such programs could outline the high calling of a man of God and a woman of God, and set goals for the young

people. The older men and women could teach the younger that sex is a gift of God, given at the wedding ceremony. Any abuse of this gift is an affront to their partner, an abuse of their own bodies, and a sin in the eyes of God. Yes, this message should be taught in Christian homes, but there is safety in numbers! Parents who are reluctant to tackle this subject with their own children might feel more comfortable in a team. And children from single parent families simply don't have the role models that they need.

Such a program could begin in the preteen years and continue throughout the teen years. Perhaps it could be a once-a-month meeting. *Hardwired to Connect* reports that, "what works best in efforts at prevention and intervention often varies significantly according to gender." So let the church be the place for Christian men to share with the boys the information that "Boys' aggressive tendencies put them at increased risk for being perpetrators and victims of homicide, suicide, or injuries," and let the women impress upon the young girls that "girls' capacity for pregnancy places them at special risk for lower educational achievement and future poverty related to teenage childbearing." As young men and women learn to trust their elders in the church, they might turn to them in times of crisis—or temptation. As the children emerge from puberty, the church could provide the place for celebrating their roles as Christian men and women. The church could set the standards for these young people and help them form their goals. The church could help them understand that their confusing emotions are a product of brain growth, and not brain abnormality! The church could be the steady place in a shifting world, and help these young people get their moorings. There is simply no better place in our society for godly values to be taught than in the church.



**Sermon Topic:  
The Holiness of Human Sexuality**

**Thesis:** *Gender roles are programmed by God and should be reinforced by both church and family.*

**The Need:** Our secular culture blurs the lines between men and women, presenting the gay lifestyle as a viable alternative to heterosexual unions. Those who oppose gay marriage are often portrayed as small-minded and intolerant.

**Caveat:** This doesn't mean, however, that children should be stereotyped into rigid roles that fail to allow for individuality. Consider, for example, the personality contrasts between Esau and Jacob (Gen. 25:27,28).

**The Focus Question:** What do we learn about sexuality from Scripture?

**We learn that . . .**

**I. Marriage is a sacred covenant between a man and a woman** (Ephesians 5:22-33).

- The research reported in *Hardwired to Connect* shows that more than simply commanding this covenant, God created our bodies to thrive within the covenant, and suffer when we break it. Multiple studies reveal how chemicals in our bodies react to enforce committed relationships, and cause us to be vulnerable to disease when we are in "anti-intimate" relationships. "Brain researchers are mapping out the biochemistry of connection" (*Hardwired to Connect*).

**II. Homosexuality is a sin that violates the intentions of our Creator** (Romans 1:24-27).

- "Neglecting the gendered needs of adolescents can be dangerous" (*Hardwired to Connect*).

**III. Sexual purity matters to our holy God** (1 Corinthians 6:18-20; 1 Peter 1:13-15).

- But knowing that we humans would choose to disobey, God designed our bodies and our minds to suffer the consequences of sexual impurity.

**IV. Forgiveness is available to those who repent of their sin and change their lifestyle** (John 7:53-8:11).

- John 8:11 – "Then neither do I condemn you . . . . Go and leave your life of sin."

**Conclusion:** "Saying 'yes' to God means saying 'no' to anything which offends his holiness" (A. Morgan Derham).

## **Plank Six: The beginning of morality is the biologically primed moralization of attachment.**

Infants learn that certain behaviors please or displease their parents. They learn this through feelings of security and insecurity combined with intuition, and emotionally toned messages. They learn “a bedrock value for human connectedness [that] guides the child’s readiness to behave in response to parent wishes and attentiveness.”

When children do not receive this earliest training in parent-pleasing behavior (or the parent’s standards are skewed) they do not develop a “value-driven sense of oughtness” (the “bedrock value for human connectedness”) that will later govern their behavioral systems.

“All of the early researchers, though unaware of one another’s work, had unanimously found the same symptoms in children who’d been deprived of their mothers—the superficial relationships, the poverty of feeling for others, the inaccessibility, the lack of emotional response, the often pointless deceitfulness and theft, and the inability to concentrate in school.”

The commission concludes this plank with the statement, “Ignoring the moral needs of children can be a form of child neglect.”

### **What does this mean for the church?**

Look again at the last line of the previous plank. Isn’t that an amazing conclusion for a group of secular scientists to reach? In a society that thinks the church and its teachings are largely irrelevant, this quote is one for the church to widely publicize.



Plank six begins with the statement, "the fundamental idea of morality is love of neighbor." The church knows that. Jesus said the first and greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" and the second greatest is to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22: 34-40). The challenge for the church is simply to help people to see that this old, old truth not only has merit in the spiritual realm, but is also imperative for an emotionally healthy, fully functioning life.

The commission writes that children are "born to attach," and are "talked into talking and loved into loving." (We love because he first loved us; 1 John 4:19.) Deprived of their mothers (whether physically or emotionally) children develop "superficial relationships, a poverty of feeling for others, inaccessibility, lack of emotional response, pointless deceitfulness and theft, and the inability to concentrate in school." It has long been said that mothering is the most important job on earth. If we ever thought of that as a cliché, here is the scientific proof.

We are now into the third and fourth generations of "children raising children" and children coming from emotionally deprived environments. What can the church do to help young mothers break this cycle? Is it possible to teach someone who has never been properly loved herself how to love her child? We believe God answers with a resounding "yes!" and that He has given the responsibility of spreading this news to His church.

## **Mentoring Parents**

Years ago, after watching James Dobson's video series "Turn Your Heart Toward Home," a father was heard to lament, "I wish I'd seen this series years ago when my children were young. Why is

life structured so that by the time you learn anything about good parenting, it's too late?" (Unfortunately, this video series is no longer available.)

Perhaps one of the best ways to answer his regretful question is to harness the education and experience of seasoned parents, and let them help the younger generations through a mentoring program. It would be nice if such relationships could come about naturally, but structured relationships are better than no relationships. Pairing an older, experienced parent with a young parent could have enormous benefits—for all parties!

Sometimes, the most helpful thing in the world is simply to have someone to talk to. When young parents feel at their wit's end, and their own parents live across country, or are emotionally unavailable, an "adopted" parent within the congregation may be just the ticket. Young parents can receive the advice and guidance they need, their children can receive the loving attention they crave from missing grandparents, and the mentors will find new purpose and fulfillment for their own lives—perhaps at a time when they are struggling because of their own empty nest syndrome. It is a win-win situation if church leaders can convince both generations to open their hearts and homes to the possibilities.

According to *Hardwired to Connect*, this innate need for attachment is also the "foundation for the emergence of conscience and of moral meaning." This foundation has three parts:

- The bonding between infant and parent forms a sense of "security-empathy-oughtness" in the child's mind.
- The child intuitively perceives messages about parent-pleasing and non-pleasing behaviors, and



*"The challenge for the church is to help people see that "loving their neighbors" is not only a commandment, it is the basis for an emotionally healthy, fully functioning life."*

- "A bedrock value [appreciation/need] for human connectedness guides the child . . . to behave in response to parent wishes and attentiveness."

As a part of his course work for a disability ministry class taught by Jim Pierson at Johnson Bible College, Matt LaRocco wrote a paper on *Hard-wired to Connect*. Regarding these conclusions he wrote, "This goes to show that good morals stem more from relationships than they do from rules. Maybe that is why Christ focused less on following the law and more on loving others and loving God. Christ knew that humans automatically act morally out of a sense of love and not out of responsibility. People can be taught to act morally out of social responsibility, but with far less success than when they learn to act morally from loving relationships."

We believe there is a role for the church to play in teaching good parenting skills so that parents will be able to teach good moral values to their children. We must remember that in the society in which we live, many, many children (now raising their own children) did not have the advantages of a good home where good parenting skills were modeled. With so many congregations already offering elective classes on Sunday mornings, Saturday nights, or Wednesday nights, surely we can find a place for an ongoing (or periodic) class on parenting. People's schedules may or may not allow a parenting support group, however, survey your congregation and find out the level of need and interest. Keep in mind that as you offer these parenting classes, and if they are worthwhile, word will spread throughout the church and perhaps throughout the community to build attendance and appreciation.

A partial list of good parenting skills is found in Plank Nine: expressions of affection, monitoring, effectively establishing discipline, and parental involvement in children's schools. In your parenting course, you might want to include a discussion of the following verses:

- Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).
- Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:2).
- My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me (1 Corinthians 4:4).

Sunday school teachers and youth workers also need to understand that they play a huge role in molding a child's conscience correctly. Christians who accept God's law as law are perhaps the last segment of today's society that lives by a moral code that places the good of the others ahead of the good of self. In the rest of society, self comes first and everything is relative to "what is best for me." Without firm guidelines, our children are floundering. Let's give them an anchor.

Again, the church can take great encouragement from this report. We have always known that moral training is important to God, who said regarding His laws, "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" Deuteronomy 11:19). Now we have the scientific community saying morality is important, too.



**Sermon Topic:**  
***Correct, But Don't Fail to Connect!***

**Thesis:** *Rules are good, but relationships are great!*

**The Need:** Hard-nosed, authoritarian parents often fail to develop close relationships with their children. This adversarial environment causes children to become resentful and rebellious. (**Caveat:** I am not arguing for "egalitarian" parents who fail to set limits and provide boundaries for their children.)

**The Focus Questions:**

I. What does our relationship with *our Heavenly Father* teach us about raising mature children?

- "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5: 1-2).
- Mature Christians don't simply follow a checklist of rules. Instead, they love God, as he has loved them. Their faithfulness is a mature response to his unwavering love.
- "What is significant is the quality of the relationship that exists between the child and the significant adults in his or her life" (Stanley Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*).

II. How should we emulate God's example with our own children?

- As our Heavenly Father calls us to maturity through his eternal love, so also should we love our children into Christian maturity. Children are commanded to obey (Ephesians 6: 1) and parents to discipline while respecting the personhood of the child (Ephesians 6: 4).
- "This goes to show that good morals stem more from relationships than they do from rules" (*Matt LaRocco*).
- "[Good parents] are authoritative without being authoritarian. They value both autonomous self-will and disciplined behavior." (Diana Baumrind, *Adolescence*).

**Conclusion:** "My dad is kind of special I guess. Like he takes me camping, and sits down and talks to me about trouble at school. He wants to know what I am doing, where I am going. He helps me learn things, and I admire him for being smart and strong and able to handle problems" (As quoted by John Conger, *Adolescence: Generation Under Pressure*).

## **Plank Seven: The ongoing development of morality in later childhood and adolescence involves the human capacity to idealize both individuals and ideas.**

"The moralization of attachment that begins with the infant-parent bond later extends outward, to the larger community, as growing cognitive capacity and widening networks of relationships lead young people to identify new and additional sources of moral meaning. For the developing child and adolescent, then, forming a moral identity is an on-going and increasingly complex process. In a society that cares about moral conduct, it cannot be left on autopilot."

The psychiatrically trained anthropologist David Gutmann says that the adolescent "discovers the ideal self outside of the self," by recognizing that his own concept of being relates to the concept taught by "some worthy group, vocation, profession, religion, or nation." Gutmann says that adulthood has been achieved when we stop being fixed on the self and instead are more concerned with our community, vocation, and family. "Accordingly, the challenge for civil society is to expose young people to morally admirable persons."

Barbara Stilwell writes, "What really holds potential for making a moral impact on a mid-adolescent is a powerful connection with individual adults whom he can admire or idealize. It is that individual teacher, coach, counselor, religious youth worker, Big Brother, neighbor, stepparent, grandparent, police officer, or other individuals in the community who can inspire him to make moral sense of the social confusion of his surroundings."

## What does this mean for the church?

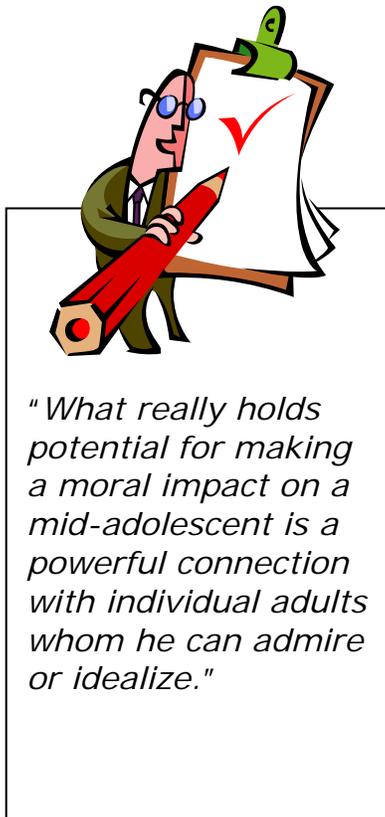
This is another plank that really grabs the church by the throat! Put in the simplest terms, the adolescent seeks moral meaning outside of himself, and creates his identity by identifying with some group or person that he aspires to be like.

The report asks, "In a society that honors diversity as much as our does, who sets the standard of morality? And in a society that honors tolerance, who teaches this moral standard?" If ever there was an invitation for God's people to answer a question, this is it! Advertise to your community: "God sets the standard of morality! Come learn about His standard with us."

Aspects of this plank that are just as encouraging are the statements that "what really hold potential for making a moral impact on a mid-adolescent is a powerful connection with individual adults whom he can admire or idealize, " and "numerous researchers have demonstrated the protective impact of extra-familial adult relationships for young people." What an open door for the church! Every adult in your congregation needs to know that he or she can have a positive "protective" impact on the life of a child simply by modeling a life that the child can admire, and by being a friend to that child. This news is so uplifting!

The need, then, is for young people to see adults in the church whom they can admire and emulate. Does this mean sports stars, musicians, successful businesspersons, and beautiful models? Not necessarily.

Bertram Allen, Jr., professor of psychology at Milligan College participated in a group organized by CCFH Ministries to discuss the implications of *Hardwired to Connect*. In a follow-up e-mail he



wrote, "If we are to make an impact with adolescents, we need to go and meet them, listen to them, truly hear them and then structure with them ways to meet their needs and wants. The teens are doing what they see and hear in every avenue of life—film, music, magazines, and television. These are all sexy; the church has nothing that is as sexy. But we do have the ability to go where they are and listen to them, and provide them with someone who cares about them, If we hang in and run the course, some of them will ask, 'Why are you doing this? Why are you hangin' with me? You could be doing anything else but you come to see me—what's the deal?' That is when we might open the door for our Savior!"

In other words, the only attribute absolutely necessary to make an impact on a kid is love. We know this is true. We are drawn to those who care for us, no matter what they look like, what they drive, what they live in, or what they do for a living. Children willingly climb into the laps of strangers with open arms. Grade-schoolers become enamored with their teachers, babysitters, and next-door neighbors simply because they pay attention to them. Teens open up to school counselors and youth leaders when they listen, and listen without judgment.

Barbara Stilwell wrote for *Hardwired to Connect*, "What really holds potential for making a moral impact on a mid-adolescent is a powerful connection with individual adults whom he can admire or idealize." Mentoring programs such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, CELTS, Reach Out! and many others, are successful simply because they provide kids with an adult to talk to. The image of a kid who hangs around the carpentry shop of the man next door, or the neighbor who is often tink-

ering with his car, or in his yard, is almost a cliché. Similarly, a young girl will often bond with the woman for whom she baby sits, or will choose to spend time with an elderly neighbor who shows her how to make an Angel Food cake, or how to crochet. Why do kids want to hang with these people? Because while they are tinkering, they are also listening. And occasionally they get to offer an insight from their own lives. And in this gentle, gradual way, they are helping to mold young lives. Whether your congregation organizes a new program or simply works within an existing program, spending time with kids is a must. Adults outside the family can turn a kid's life around.

However, in order to set a standard that is worth emulating, the church must state, unapologetically, that it follows a moral standard set by God. There can be no compromise on this issue. While there are areas of God's Word that are difficult to interpret, there are many others that are crystal clear. Isn't it possible that the church has lost its position of moral leadership simply because so many Christians have chosen to disregard God's laws? How can we hope to set an example for young people when we break the laws of honesty, loyalty, sexual purity, fidelity, etc., ourselves? As Matt LaRocco suggested in his paper, young people do not think of Christian men and women as role models. "As a result, we see more and more Christian adolescents leave the church and adopt a worldly moral code." As stated elsewhere in *Hardwired to Connect*, children need structure and guidance. It seems that they ought to be able to find that within God's church.

Anthropologist David Gutmann said that, "Instead of himself, the true adult venerates ideal versions of his community, his vocation and his family."

Using this definition, do you think that many people in our society have reached adulthood? Is there anything in our culture that teaches us to honor and respect those whose lives exhibit honesty, loyalty, faithfulness, and other virtues? Isn't this a role that the church can fill? Imagine a series of lessons on the heroes of the faith—and not just the ones in the Bible! Imagine sermon illustrations and church newsletter articles that identify and praise members of the congregation who have taken a moral stand within the community. Imagine a congregation that recognizes those who have remained faithful in marriage, have been loyal employees, have dedicated themselves to the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts of America, have participated in PTO, have worked for years in the church, have been foster parents, or have successfully raised their own offspring. The church can do something to increase society's appreciation for such values.

Teach this point in your parenting class: children need role models outside of their families. It is just a fact of life that kids will open up to strangers when they won't even communicate with their parents. Parents need to be open to the influence of others in the church. If there is a single person, or older adult with whom your children relate, you should do everything in your power to encourage that relationship. (Making sure that you know the character of that person, and are fully aware of where they are and what they are doing at all times.) Your child will not only benefit from observing how another adult handles his or her life, the adult will benefit from the relationship with your child.



**Sermon Topic:**  
**The "Crisis" and "The Christ"**

**The Thesis:** *Mature Christians must become role models for children and young adults who desperately need people they can admire.*

**Need:** Writes Bruno Bettelheim, "The question for the child is not, 'Do I want to be good?' but 'Who do I want to be like?'" Developmentally, children admire and imitate long before they understand pleasing God.

**The Focus Question:** What difference can Christian role models make in the lives of young men and women?

**I. The Crisis**

- "What's causing this crisis of American Childhood is a lack of connectedness—close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning" (*Hardwired to Connect*).
- A nineteen-year-old named Laura wrote to "Dear Abby." Laura has fallen in love with a man and moved in with him. Her problem: she has discovered that she's pregnant with another man's child. Laura doesn't want to abort the baby, but fears she will lose her new lover if she does not have an abortion. Apparently, she has no parents or church from which to seek counsel, so she writes to Dear Abby, "How can I resolve this dilemma?"

**II. The Christ**

- Laura doesn't need Abby, she needs Abba (her Heavenly Father)! She needs a church family to take her in and love her into a new life. What about a "seasoned Christian couple" to take her under their wing and teach her the meaning of a Christ-centered marriage? Jesus calls us to be "salt" and "light" (Matthew 5: 14-16). Whatever we do for the "least of these," we do for him (Matthew 25: 40).
- "For the developing child and adolescent, then, forming a moral identity is an on-going and increasingly complex process. In a society that cares about moral conduct, it cannot be left on autopilot" (*Hardwired to Connect*).

**Conclusion:** The following is a definition of "counseling," but it also describes "conversion": "The process of building a relationship which ultimately causes the counselee to 're-story' his/her life" (Author unknown).

**Plank Eight: Primary nurturing relationships influence early spiritual development—call it the spiritualization of attachment—and spiritual development can influence us biologically in the same ways that primary nurturing relationships do.**

“Children’s conceptions of God—who God is and how God acts—initially stem partly from the child’s actual day-to-day experiences with the parents, and partly from the child’s magnified, idealized conceptions of who the parents are.” At first, children attribute to God the traits that they see in their parents. As children grow older, they begin to attribute to God the larger-than-life traits that they first thought their parents had.

“As the child matures in religious faith, her or his images of God become more complex and developed, fed by a diversity of ideas and experiences other than those linked to parents.” For this reason, among others, a child’s concept of God can never be fully attributed to his relationship with his parents. However, “the child’s earliest experiences of parental attachment and idealization, and the happiness or disappointment that comes with them, can lay an important foundation for the beginnings of religious comprehension and may set a course in spiritual and religious development that will influence the rest of the child’s life.”

Whether or not a child has a positive experience with his parents that helps him form a positive image of God, religious experience at any stage in life influences the physical and emotional well-being of that person. Gail Ironson’s research with HIV-infected men and women shows that “spirituality is positively associated with long-term survival.” The benefits include lower levels of stress



hormones, more optimism, and commitment to helping others.”

We have quoted the last paragraph of this plank in its entirety: “Thus we discover an amazing fact. The physiological and emotional resilience that Ironson finds associated with spirituality is the same kind of resilience that, as the report has shown, is associated with effective early parental nurture.<sup>85</sup> In short, the two kinds of connectedness analyzed in this report—connection to others and connection to the transcendent—seem to influence the same biological systems in quite similar ways. This phenomenon may help explain why some people find, in their religious faith and spiritual practice, some of the very sources of security and well-being that were not available to them from their parents.”

## **What does this mean for the church?**

The implications of this plank should either leave parents trembling with fear, or leave them on their knees in gratitude for the awesome responsibility that God had entrusted to them. (Perhaps the reactions are one and the same.) The idea that “children’s conceptions of God—who God is and how God acts—initially stem partly from the child’s actual day-to-day experiences with the parents, and partly from the child’s magnified, idealized conceptions of who the parents are” is a cause for self-examination. All grace and no discipline is not an accurate picture of God. All discipline and no grace is just as inaccurate. Do parents provide for their children so that they live in security and peace? Can children trust their parents and rely upon their word? Do children know that their parents will never intentionally hurt them with word or deed, but that their discipline will be fair and just? If not, then perhaps the church needs to offer more classes on good parenting, more support and accountability

groups, and more mentors—especially ones who will pray diligently with these parents.

A key idea in this plank is even though the child ascribes attributes of God to his parents, “he will later transfer [these attributes] to God if his religious education gives him the possibility.” Many parents ascribe to the philosophy, “I’m not going to shove religion down my child’s throat. He can choose for himself when he gets older.” Since “primary nurturing relationships influence early spiritual development,” what’s wrong with this approach?

The fact that “Children often associate both maternal and paternal qualities with God, and their early positive or negative experiences with their parents can predispose or hinder their development of religious faith later in life” speaks again to the need for a two-parent family, and is a fact that needs to be taught in early parenting classes.

More affirmation for the church comes from the idea that while children’s concepts of God are greatly influenced by their early parental nurturing (or lack thereof), they can, nevertheless, overcome negative influences to form a strong connectedness “to the transcendent” that will give them the sense of “security and well-being that were not available to them from their parents.” Ministers and counselors can use this fact to help individuals let go of their unhappy pasts and enter into a satisfying relationship with God. If one needs more motivation than forgiveness, peace of mind, and eternal life, the commission points out that “spirituality is positively associated with long-term survival.” Whether one has emotionally supportive relationships with other human beings or not, they can find the “security and well-being” that increases “physiological and emotional resilience” in a relationship with God.



## Sermon Topic: "Unloved! Can the Church Help?"

**Thesis:** *A personal relationship with Christ and involvement in the church can help provide nurture for both children and adults who have been caught up in the chaos of dysfunctional homes.*

**The Need:** In American culture, the "Leave-it-to-Beaver" days are gone. For the most part, the traditional family has disintegrated before the onslaught of divorce, infidelity, out-of-wedlock births, and gay lifestyles. Children, caught like a deer in the headlights, are left bewildered and yearning for nurture and acceptance.

**Definition:** "Nurture" – From the Latin *nutrire*, which means, "to suckle or nourish" (*Webster's Dictionary*).

**The Focus Question:** What can the church contribute to the lives of people who are lonely, empty, and craving acceptance?

### I. The church can become a conduit for the unconditional love of God as reflected in Jesus Christ.

- God has demonstrated his great love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ: (Ephesians 2:4-8). This healing love is immeasurably wide, long, high, and deep (Ephesians 3:17-21).
- "Nonjudgmental, unconditional love is the most healing force in the world" (C.A. Sequin).
- ". . . people find, in their religious faith and spiritual practice, some of the very sources of security and well-being that were not available to them from their parents" (*Hardwired to Connect*).

### II. The church can become an extended family providing hope, healing, and encouragement.

- Delores Curran wrote, "There's an inescapable core of strength that religious faith gives families. We notice most its absence in families that seem to have little sense of purpose . . ." (*Traits of a Healthy Family*).
- Those who lacked such parental nurturing can find the love and acceptance they missed in childhood in the Lord, and in a Christian spouse and children.
- The command to love, care, and edify each other runs like a golden thread through the texts of Scripture (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; Romans 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9; 1 Corinthians 12:25; Romans 14:19; 15:2).

**Conclusion:** "Meeting these basic needs for connections is essential to health and human flourishing" (*Hardwired to Connect*).

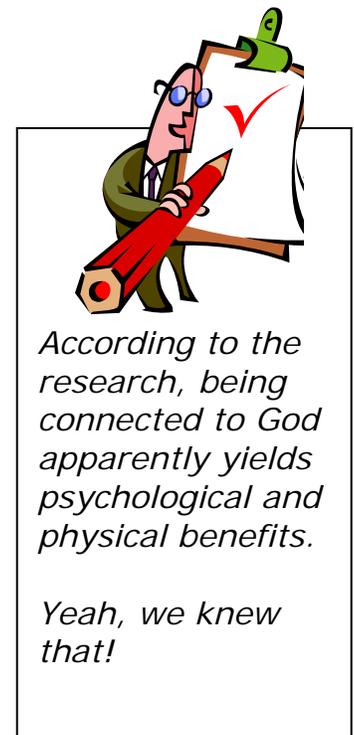
## **Plank Nine: Religiosity and spirituality significantly influence well-being.**

Every line of this plank has such good meaning for educators, that we have not summarized it, but reprinted it almost in full.

“Paul C. Vitz of New York University puts it this way: ‘Emerging in contemporary psychology is a general belief that the good life involves a significant spiritual component.<sup>86</sup> . . . We as a commission report that seeking connectedness to the transcendent through religious and spiritual belief and practice appears frequently to yield psychological benefits and reduce the risk of certain pathologies.<sup>89</sup> This generalization is as true for children as for adults.

“By almost any measure, U.S. young people are quite religious.<sup>90</sup> About 96 percent of U.S. teenagers say that they believe in God.<sup>91</sup> More than 40 percent report that they pray frequently. About 36 percent are members of a church or religious youth group.<sup>92</sup> Notwithstanding these robust social facts, however, Byron Johnson of the University of Pennsylvania reports that, to date, the influence of religion on U.S. young people has been ‘grossly understudied.’<sup>93</sup> At the same time, existing research is highly suggestive. For adults, religious faith and practice appear to have a sizable and consistent relationship with improved health and longevity, including less hypertension and depression, a lower risk of suicide, less criminal activity, and less use and abuse of drugs and alcohol.<sup>94</sup>

“Religious practice also correlates to higher levels of reported personal happiness, higher levels of hope and optimism, and a stronger sense that one’s life has purpose and meaning. Part—but almost certainly not all—of the explanation for these findings is that people

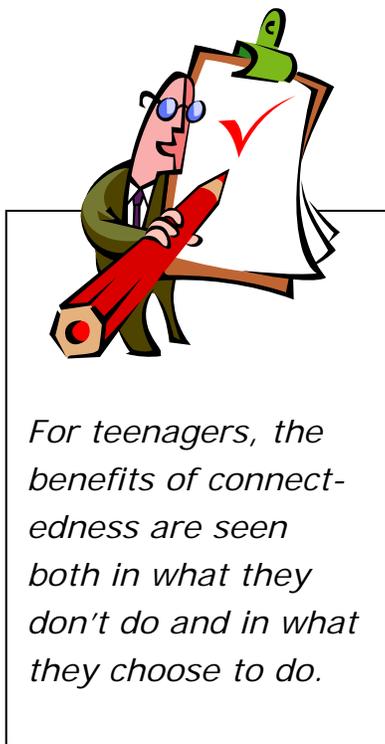


who are religiously active appear to benefit from larger social networks and more social contacts and support. Byron Johnson stresses: 'The beneficial relationship between religion and health behaviors and outcomes is not simply a function of religion's constraining function, or what it discourages—opposition to drug use, suicide, or delinquent behavior, but also through what it encourages—promoting behaviors that can enhance hope, well-being, or educational attainment.'<sup>95</sup>

"For adolescents, religiosity is significantly associated with a reduced likelihood of both unintentional and intentional injury (both of which are leading causes of death for teenagers).<sup>96</sup> Compared to their less religious peers, religious teenagers are safer drivers and are more likely to wear seatbelts. They are less likely to become either juvenile delinquents or adult criminals.<sup>97</sup> They are less prone to substance abuse.<sup>98</sup> In general, these young people are less likely to endorse engaging in high-risk conduct or to endorse the idea of enjoying danger.<sup>99</sup>

"Looking at the other side of the developmental coin, religiously committed teenagers are more likely to volunteer in the community. They are more likely to participate in sports and in student government.<sup>100</sup> More generally, these young people appear to have higher self-esteem and more positive attitudes about life.<sup>101</sup> Much of this research is based on large national studies.<sup>102</sup> While these and similar findings demonstrate clear correlations between religiosity and good outcomes for young people, they do not prove a causal connection.<sup>103</sup> (Definitive proof regarding causation is all but impossible in social science research.) Yet there are good reasons to suspect that causal factors may be involved.

"First, religious involvement appears to increase social connectedness. It also commonly exposes



*For teenagers, the benefits of connectedness are seen both in what they don't do and in what they choose to do.*

young people to messages about good behavior and connects them to other young people who are presumably sympathetic to those messages.

“Second, positive religious coping mechanisms—including a framework of meaning as well as specific religious practices, such as the cultivation of gratitude<sup>104</sup>—may help children and others deal with stressful situations and orient them towards specific goals.”

“Third, it can be helpful to compare the influences of what the sociologist James Coleman calls purposive institutions, such as corporations, state welfare agencies, or even clubs or athletic leagues, to the influences of primordial institutions, such as religious groups and (even more primordial) the family. One major distinction is that primordial institutions are more likely to treat children as ends in themselves rather than largely as means to one or more particular ends, such as buying a product or winning a game. For example, because religious institutions are inherently oriented to passing on a body of belief and practice from one generation to the next, they tend to demonstrate what Coleman calls ‘an intrinsic interest’ in ‘the kind of person the child is and will become.’<sup>106</sup> Consequently, religious institutions are more likely than many others to offer a shared vision of the good life, communal support for good behavior, a long-term rather than short-term outlook, and thick networks of relationships that are multi-generational rather than uni-generational.

“Fourth, some research indicates correlations between religiosity and several aspects of good parenting, including expressions of affection, monitoring, effectively establishing discipline, and parental involvement in children’s schools. One recent study finds that these correlations are stronger for poor and working class families than they are for middle



*“Religious institutions are more likely than many others to offer a shared vision of the good life, communal support for good behavior, a long-term outlook, and thick networks of relationships.”*

and upper class families.<sup>107</sup> The domains of religiosity, parenting style, and child outcomes appear to affect one another in complex ways. For example, one study focusing on adolescent alcohol abuse points to the value of those families that provide 'an important social context for the development of adolescent religiosity,' partly due to the fact that 'religious commitment, in turn, reduces the risk for alcohol use among teens.'<sup>108</sup> In general, according to W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia, religious commitment on the part of parents appears to be associated with 'significantly higher investments in parenting and better parenting environments.'<sup>109</sup>

"Finally, for adolescents, one religious quality that appears to be especially beneficial, in terms of the range of mental health and lifestyle consequences that we are describing, is what some scholars call personal devotion, or the young person's sense of participating in a 'direct personal relationship with the Divine.'<sup>110</sup> Personal devotion among adolescents is associated with reduced risk-taking behavior. It is also associated with more effectively resolving feelings of loneliness,<sup>111</sup> greater regard for the self and for others,<sup>112</sup> and a stronger sense that life has meaning and purpose.<sup>113</sup>



*"Personal devotion among adolescents is associated with. . . a stronger sense that life has meaning and purpose."*

"These protective effects of personal devotion are *twice as great for adolescents as they are for adults.*<sup>114</sup> This particular finding clearly reinforces the idea, found in many cross-national studies, of adolescence as a time of particularly intense searching for, and openness to, the transcendent.<sup>115</sup> For this reason, we believe that our society as a whole, and youth advocates and youth service professionals in particular, should pay greater attention to this aspect of youth development. This task will not be easy. Because we are a philosophically diverse and religiously plural society, many of our youth-serving

programs and social environments for young people will need to find ways respectfully to reflect that diversity and pluralism.

“But that is a challenge to be embraced, not avoided. Denying or ignoring the spiritual needs of adolescents may end up creating a void in their lives that either devolves into depression or is filled by other forms of questing and challenge, such as drinking, unbridled consumerism, petty crime, sexual precocity, or flirtations with violence. Here is how Lisa Miller of Columbia University puts it: ‘A search for spiritual relationship with the Creator may be an inherent developmental process in adolescence.’<sup>116</sup>”

### **What does this mean for the church?**

It may go against our grain that non-believers may become interested in “religion” because studies show that “the good life involves a significant spiritual component,” but that is an accurate representation of the society in which we live. The idea that one might choose to get involved with religion for the psychological and physical benefits is an absolute perversion of God’s offer to mankind. And yet, God in His infinite goodness will still pour out His gifts on those who come to Him, gently leading them to an understanding of their need for a Savior, and a greater appreciation of what He has done for them.

On the other hand, the unemotional wording of this report does not necessarily mean that the “religious practices that correlate to higher levels of happiness, hope, optimism, and a sense of purpose” do not include a deep, personal relationship with Jesus! Whatever the relationship, the commission notes that the benefits result both from what religious training discourages as well as from what it encourages.

## How can the church use this information?

To put it most crudely, we can advertise that being involved in the church is good for one's health. Christians know that "believing in God" (as 96 percent of teenagers say that they do) is not the benchmark—Satan has a profound belief in God—in fact, he probably has a much greater appreciation for God's character and His ability than do most Christians! But this common belief is a good place to start. Like Paul in Athens, we can meet people where they are and lead them from belief to faith.

Since most parents are interested in providing the best life possible for their children, the church can use the statistics reported in *Hardwired to Connect* to encourage them to bring their children (especially teens) to church.

"For adolescents, religiosity is significantly associated with a reduced likelihood of both unintentional and intentional injury (both of which are leading causes of death for teenagers)." Compared to their less religious peers,

- Religious teenagers are safer drivers and more likely to wear seatbelts.
- They are less likely to become either juvenile delinquents or adult criminals.
- They are less prone to substance abuse.
- They are less likely to endorse engaging in high-risk conduct or to endorse the idea of enjoying danger.

At the same time, religiously committed teenagers

- are more likely to volunteer in the community
- are more likely to participate in sports and student government
- appear to have higher self-esteem and more positive attitudes about life.



*"Religiously committed teenagers appear to have higher self-esteem and more positive attitudes about life."*

Many people outside the church still claim that religion is nothing more than a set of rules; dos and don'ts designed to take all the fun out of life. How can the church use the facts in this plank to refute that claim? We *know* God is good, and good to us. We need to be busy advertising these facts to our communities!

After giving a *long* list of benefits of religious involvement, the commission makes this statement: "These protective effects of personal devotion are *twice as great for adolescents as they are for adults.*" The church can use this statement 1) to encourage teachers, 2) to draw young people into the church, 3) to convince school counselors and parental caregivers to send/bring their teens to church.



## Sermon Topic: Life At It's Best!

**Thesis:** *Life at its best* can only be experienced in connection with God and his family, the church.

**The Need:** Many unbelievers see God as a "Cosmic Party-Pooper" who conspires with the church to take all the fun out of life. The Evil One creates that distorted perception: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers . . ." (2 Corinthians 4:4).

**The Focus Question:** What *benefits* are bestowed on one who actively lives the Christian life, including consistent participation in the church? **Those benefits include . . .**

### I. Living at peace with God.

- God becomes the fulcrum, the solid place, on which we build our lives. Listen to Paul at Athens: "For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). To those who worshipped an *unknown god*, Paul described the splendor and majesty of the one true God (Acts 17:24-31).
- Every person has a God-shaped-hole that no earthly thing or being can satisfy. In a prayer-filled connection with God, we discover "the peace of God which transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

### II. Living at peace with ourselves.

- Said a counselee named Janet: "I don't know what it is, but down deep, something is wrong with me." To one degree or another, every human feels this sense of what theologians call: "something missing, something wrong." To the woman at the well, Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13,14).

### III. Living at peace with others.

- The Apostle Paul wrote, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18).
- Note these words spoken by a father whose family became involved in the church: "When we found the church, we found a lot more than God; we found our family."

**Conclusion:** "Emerging in contemporary psychology is a general belief that the good life involves a significant spiritual component" (Paul C. Vitz as quoted in *Hardwired to Connect*).

## Plank Ten: The human brain appears to be organized to ask ultimate questions and seek ultimate answers.

Again, the conclusions found in this plank are so valuable to the church that we have reprinted the plank in full:

"Human beings have a basic tendency to question in order to know. Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? How should I live? What will happen when I die? Exploring these questions of ultimate concern, and making choices and judgments about what we value and love, are characteristic human activities. They reflect the deep human drive to order and draw meaning from experience and are part of what distinguishes us as a species."<sup>117</sup>



*"Recent advances in neurobiology suggest that . . . spiritual and religious experiences stem partly from processes and structures that are deeply embedded in the human brain."*

"Calling these activities 'religious' partly misses the point, since they are more an aspect of personhood than a result of institutionalized religion. Better, perhaps, simply to call them human. At the same time, across time and cultures, this distinctively human pursuit has been closely connected to spiritual seeking and experience and to religious belief, ritual, and practice.

"Recent advances in neurobiology also suggest that these spiritual and religious experiences stem partly from processes and structures that are deeply embedded in the human brain.

"For example, the neuroscientists Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg have used brain imaging to study individuals involved in spiritual practices such as contemplative prayer and meditation. During such states, they have found an increase in activity in a number of frontal brain regions, including the prefrontal cortex."<sup>118</sup> They report that these

*. . . experiences are based in observable functions of the brain. The neurological roots of these experiences would render them as convincingly real as any other of the brain's perceptions. In this sense . . . they are reporting genuine, neurobiological events.*<sup>119</sup>

"This research suggests that the human need to know what is true about life's purpose and ultimate ends is connected to brain functions underlying many spiritual and religious experiences. These findings are one reason why these researchers suggest that human beings appear to have "no choice but to construct myths to explain their world."<sup>120</sup>

"These findings may also help to explain why modern psychiatry in recent years has appropriated some spiritual practices, such as mindfulness, in an effort to alleviate patients' suffering and enhance their functioning."<sup>121</sup>

"Studies also reveal that children whose parents have low levels of religiosity report levels of personal religiosity quite similar to those of other children—additional evidence to support the thesis that the need in young people to connect to ultimate meaning and to the transcendent is not merely the result of social conditioning, but is instead an intrinsic aspect of the human experience."<sup>122</sup>

"Even the intensified search for meaning commonly seen during adolescence may be in part biologically determined, given that the brain regions that are activated during religious experiences, such as the prefrontal cortex,



*" The need in young people to connect to ultimate meaning . . . is not merely the result of social conditioning, but is instead an intrinsic aspect of the human experience."*

are also among the regions undergoing considerable developmental change during adolescence."

### **How can the church use this information?**

God told us that we were created in His likeness (Genesis 1:27) and that He planted knowledge of Himself within us (Romans 1:20). It should come as no surprise to anyone then, that "The need in young people to connect to ultimate meaning and to the transcendent is not merely the result of social conditioning, but is instead an intrinsic aspect of the human experience." C. S. Lewis explained the need as a "God-shaped hole."

Youth workers have long known and admired the fervency and dedication of some young Christians. They will take amazing stands for God in their high schools. They will willingly wear "the Silver Ring" that proclaims their position on sexual purity in front of their friends. They will work tirelessly in the church and on the mission field. They will anguish over the condition of the lost world. What happens to this fervency? Could it be that it fades away because the church does not rise to the challenge? The church does not give these young people enough scriptural meat to feed their ravenous appetites? The church does not set a standard high enough to cause these vibrant young people to see that "striving for perfection" is a lifelong pursuit? If adolescence is a time of burgeoning spiritual growth (even for those whose parents had no religious commitment), then the church should pay extremely close attention to what these young people are being fed, and how their needs are being met.



## **Sermon Topic: Ultimately, Jesus Makes a Difference!**

**Thesis:** *Healthy children come from healthy families; only Christ and his church can create the climate for healthy families.*

**The Need:** Children raised in Christ-less homes live in a world of chaos and bewilderment. Consider these words spoken by a mother as she describes life without Christ and the church: "Without it, nothing else makes much sense—all the work and the worry—what's the point if you don't believe in anything?"

**Focus Question:** How are Christ-less families different from Christ-filled families?

### I. Christ-less Families

- "This research suggests that the human need to know what is true about life's purpose and ultimate ends is connected to brain functions underlying many spiritual and religious experiences" (*Hardwired to Connect*).
- The absence of God and his love in a home creates a spiritual vacuum in which the "acts of the sinful nature" flourish: "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy" (Galatians 5:19). Writes the apostle Paul: "The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants" (Galatians 5:17; NLT).
- Without Christ as the model, selfishness shapes the family; in Christ, selfless, giving love shapes the home (Philippians 2:1-11).
- John Bradshaw: "No parents in a dysfunctional family can give their child what he needs, because they are too needy themselves" (*Home Coming*).

### II. Christ-filled Families

- Hope, healing, and meaning flow from life in Christ. This holds true for both individuals *and* families. Holy Spirit directed lives overflow with "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control" (Galatians 5:22).
- The church affirms the message of the song: "People Need the Lord!" Again, this refers to *both* individuals and families. We "bear fruit" when we are connected to the Christ (John 15:4, 5).

**Conclusion:** "Researchers found that those youth who went to church every week, that is, whose family placed a high value on religion, had parents more likely to help with their homework, praise them for something they did, hug and kiss them, tell them they were loved, and talk with them about their activities during the day (Delores Curran, *Traits of a Healthy Family*).

## The Fundamental Conclusion and Recommendation

The Commission on Children at Risk concludes, “We believe that building and strengthening authoritative communities is likely to be our society’s best strategy for ameliorating the current crisis of childhood and improving the lives of U.S. children and adolescents.”

Because of the decline in the traditional family unit—which is a child’s first and most influential authoritative community—other communities are going to have to step in. Christians can take heart from the scientific findings in *Hardwired to Connect*, and continue the work God has given us to do with renewed vigor.

### With Regard to Authoritative Communities . . .

Refer to the list of ten characteristics of an authoritative community on page nine.

With regard to number four, the commission writes, “Close relationships matter, but so do clear rules and expectations. Children need adults to set clear standards and a positive vision of the goals they are to achieve and the people they are to become. Again, to frame the issue negatively, a style that combines warmth and affection for the child with no, or few, or unclear limits and boundaries—and therefore few if any clear adult expectations regarding the child’s conduct and character—is not authoritative. It is what Diana Baumrind and others call permissive, and its consequences are also less than optimal.”

With regard to characteristic number five, the commission writes, “Authoritative communities are less likely to use words such as “client” or

“services,” for example, and more likely to use words such as “neighbor,” “friend,” and “family.” They are also more likely to employ moral reasoning and offer moral judgments.”

With regard to characteristic number six, “A sizable body of scholarship confirms what most people sense intuitively: Children benefit enormously from being around caring people in all stages of the life cycle. They benefit in special ways from being around old people, including, of course, their grandparents.”

An important aspect of a multi-generational community is “shared memory;” the telling and retelling of “this is where we came from. This is what happened. This helps explain why we are who we are.” (See Exodus 10:2; Deuteronomy 4:9-11; 32:7; Psalm 78:4-6; 145:4; Isaiah 38:19; Joel 1:3.) Just like the authors of the Bible, the commission writes that “Shared memory can help to deepen identity and define character, largely by giving the child clear access to lessons and admirable persons from the past.”

With regard to characteristic number seven the commission writes, “Me first. Instant gratification. What have you done for me lately? These are some of the slogans of a social environment in which all connections to others, even including marriages, are increasingly viewed as contingent, non-permanent, and prospectively short-term. Perhaps the most celebrated observer of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, called this set of values ‘individualism’ and warned at length of its capacity eventually to separate the American from his ancestors, his descendants, and his contemporaries, throwing him ‘back forever upon himself alone’ and threatening in the end ‘to

confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.'

"An authoritative community cuts the other way. It connects us to others and to posterity in ways that extend our time horizon."

With regard to characteristic number eight the commission writes, "The psychologist Jerome Kagan of Harvard University says: 'After hunger, a human's most important need is to know what's virtuous.' More than anyone or anything else, authoritative communities must and can meet that basic human need.

"For this reason, an authoritative community stands for certain principles and in its treatment of children, seeks to shape and launch a certain type of person. Put a bit more formally, an authoritative community clearly embodies a substantive conception of the good and includes effective communal support for ethical behavior."

With regard to characteristic number nine the commission writes, "An authoritative community recognizes that religious and spiritual expression is a natural part of personhood.

"Pretending that children's religious and spiritual needs do not exist, or arguing that it is too hard to address them in ways that respect individual conscience and pluralism, is for an authoritative community a form of denial and even self-defeat."

With regard to characteristic number ten the commission writes, "Sometimes also described as either the principle of "equal moral regard" or as the "golden rule" ethic, this credo . . . constitutes what almost all moral philosophers view as the necessary minimum foundation of any philosophical



*"An authoritative community clearly embodies a substantive conception of the good and includes effective communal support for ethical behavior."*

*Humm...*

*What happened to tolerance?*

stance consistent with basic human and moral values.

The principle that one should love one's neighbor as oneself is found in many religions. For believers, the call to neighbor-love commonly flows from the belief that all persons are created in the image of God. . . . At the same time, it is important to stress that the call to neighbor-love and the principle of equal human dignity constitute a floor, not a ceiling. . . . Real-life authoritative communities will clearly embody and seek to pass on to children numerous other moral norms and specific spiritual and religious values that richly add to, without negating, the foundational moral principle."

### **Recommendations**

The final section of *Hardwired to Connect* contains eighteen recommendations for citizens of the U.S. The two that most strongly relate to the church are number eight:

"We recommend that youth-serving organizations purposively seek to promote the moral and spiritual development of children, recognizing that children's moral and spiritual needs are as genuine, and as integral to their personhood, as their physical and intellectual needs. For organizations that include children from diverse religious backgrounds or no religious background, this task admittedly will be difficult. But it need not be impossible and should not be neglected. In a society in which pluralism is a fact and freedom a birthright, finding new ways to strengthen, and not ignore or stunt, children's moral and spiritual selves may be the single most important challenge facing youth service professionals and youth-serving organizations in the U.S. today."

And number eighteen:

“We recommend that youth service and civic leaders across the country, drawing on this report as well as other resources, help to lead a new and sustained national conversation about the crisis of childhood in the U.S. and the most effective ways to meet that crisis.”

To that, CCFH Ministries can say that Christians know how to meet that crisis. We have only to do the work. The remainder of our report suggests some practical ways of doing this.

## One (Huge) Idea for Youth Ministry

Plank Five talks about the importance of puberty and adolescence as “a time of rapid physical, sexual and reproductive maturing . . . in which human communities across time and cultures typically mobilize themselves quite purposively to define and enforce the social meaning of sexual embodiment and thereby seek to guide burgeoning adolescent strength, energy, aggression, and sexuality in pro-social directions. These mobilizations are commonly expressed through sex-specific rituals, tests, and rites of passage.”

Plank Three says that “Social environments matter. They can impact us at the cellular level to reduce genetically based risks and even help to transform such risks into behavioral assets.” Plank Four talks about the need for mature guidance through the adolescent time of risk-taking. Plank Seven talks about the developing moral identity, and says “What really holds potential for making a moral impact on a mid-adolescent is a powerful connection with individual adults whom he can admire or idealize.” Plank Eight says that “religious experience” can positively influence physiological and emotional resilience (whether or not



“These conclusions point to the need for a structured program to guide children through adolescence.”

the child received effective parental nurturing!) and that the quality of personal devotion is especially beneficial to the mental health and lifestyle choices of the adolescent.

These conclusions all point to the need for a structured program that guides children through adolescence and into adulthood. Except for the Jewish celebrations of bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah, there are few such celebrations of emerging adulthood in our society today. Even if parents were 1) aware of the need, 2) trained to handle it, and 3) had the interest and motivation, such a program needs to be a bigger than the family unit can provide. The adolescents need to be recognized as emerging adults (something that parents often have trouble doing), they need their future roles defined for them, and they need to feel that they have a part in a larger community—goals for life. If such a program were to take place within the church, the roles and goals could be defined by Scripture; what makes a godly woman and a godly man? Where does sex fit into the picture? What do clothes have to do with anything? What is the definition of love? Respect? Loyalty? Truthfulness? Purity? Fidelity? Where else in our culture are young people going to hear discussions of these values if not in the church?

We propose that the church take on the task of “defining and enforcing the social meaning of sexual embodiment and thereby seek to guide the burgeoning adolescent.” If churches would design (and announce to the community) an entire program to guide kids through adolescence, and conclude this program with a huge celebration to honor those who are emerging into adulthood, the consequences could be magnificent. If this task seems too overwhelming, the church could get actively involved in community programs that already seek to teach good values. Why can't mature Christians influence these programs? Every plank in *Hardwired to Connect* could be used to build or strengthen such a program. Adolescents could be presented with goals that would last for a lifetime. They could be

encouraged and praised for qualities that please God rather than being pressured on every side to fit into the world.

## Ideas to Build Upon

CCFH Ministries asked a group of local Christian educators to read *Hardwired to Connect* and meet together to discuss its implications. They were

Dr. Bert Allen, professor of psychology at Milligan College, also serves on the board of directors of CCFH Ministries

Charles Beckett, senior minister of Woodlawn Christian Church, Knoxville

George Clark, senior minister of West Towne Christian Church, Knoxville

Randi Nussbaum, children's director at Woodlawn Christian Church

Dr. Laura Payne, executive director of Joni and Friends, Knoxville

Chuck Ruth, executive director of Rainbow Acres, Knoxville

David Wheeler, professor of youth ministry, Johnson Bible College

These men and women were excited about the report and its implications for the church. On the Sunday following our meeting, Charles Beckett said to his congregation, "The study has corroborated Biblical teaching. God designed us to live in connection with Him and with one another. As people who have been reconnected with God through Christ, He has commissioned us to devote ourselves to reconnecting the unconnected with Jesus.

"What is most encouraging about the study is that the researchers found that regardless of how much negative baggage people carry as a result of being unconnected, they can be redeemed. The researchers also found that when people take the time to connect with others who are

suffering from all kinds of trouble and difficulty, the relationship helped changed the chemical makeup of the brain. Healing is possible, spiritually, and often physically.

“God is inviting us to take the time to really, truly, honestly care about people—to connect with people. Life-changing things can happen. God empowers our mission to redeem human life by reconnecting the unconnected through faith in Christ and the fellowship of His people.”

As Mr. Beckett said, reconnecting people to God has been the church’s mission from the beginning. And, our task is really about “taking the time to connect with others who are suffering.”

## **What can the church do to make use of this report?**

The men and women who met at the office of CCFH Ministries made the following suggestions:

- Read it! It is mandatory for all leaders, including children’s and youth workers.
- Make this report concrete and prescriptive with examples of programs/people who are modeling the principles.
- Develop parenting and marriage classes.
- Use for teacher training.
- Use to structure mentoring and after school programs.
- Explode with programming no longer coming only from our mouths!
- Apply what is being done—give examples that demonstrate the recommendations in this report. Seek out models; ministries in community that already apply this in real life.
- Create a system in which the congregation is joined across generations. Develop mentors at many levels in which the older is guiding the younger;

grandparents to parents, the older child mentoring the younger child. At every level, something can be passed from one to the next.

- Get this information to local school administrators.
- Offer to start an after-school mentoring program for at-risk kids.
- In conjunction with the YMCA, the Institute for American Values is currently organizing town meeting across the country where community leaders can meet to discuss *Hardwired to Connect*. Contact your local YMCA to see if this might be an opportunity for your congregation to get involved in strengthening your community.

### **What can be done in the nursery?**

- Encourage workers to get more personally involved in the lives of their kids outside of Sunday morning.
- Encourage multigenerational support.
- Have prenatal and parenting classes.
- Provide parent/child bonding experiences.
- Connect with children, provide one-on-one, small group activity time.
- Have nursery workers connect with the parents; ask about their needs, etc.
- Have experienced parents offer to help young or inexperienced parents. Offer mentoring, guidance, support, fellowship.
- Members of the church should model good parenting techniques.

### **What can be done in children's ministry?**

- Take the children on field trips.
- Get involved in the children's lives, do home visits.
- Create multigenerational support systems.

- Offer prenatal and parenting classes.
- Create parent/child bonding experiences.
- To connect with children, provide one-on-one and small group activity time.
- Make sure that church is a place where children and young people feel valued. Give them a part in the body. Let them give the meditation? Clean up Communion cups? Make sure the adults convey the idea, "I believe in you!"
- Have varied ages working with younger children. Often, older people bond best with little kids. Have them come to class to read, guide, teach a part of the lesson.
- Help teachers learn the art of helping students connect in class, rather than simply lecturing them.

## **What can be done in youth ministry?**

- Build a family atmosphere to involve disconnected kids.
- Be a safe place where youth can express themselves. Be wise (provide leadership), but allow them to be open and honest without being judged.
- Conduct mission trips into the community.
- Develop a benevolence program funded and managed by youth.
- Offer multigenerational support.
- Offer parenting classes and support groups (i.e. Moms 'n Tots, Families with elementary children, etc.).
- Provide opportunities for parent/child relationship building (campouts, etc.).
- Conduct a "Who Am I Sexually?" retreat for sixth and seventh graders.
- Research and take advantage of city youth programs (your kids can not only benefit from programs, but also from the ministry opportunities).

- Spend time with your youth. Find out who they really are.
- Encourage peer tutoring.
- Teach the spiritual disciplines; help student learn how to connect with God.

### **What can be done from the pulpit?**

- Preach sermons that biblically validate the report. (Appeal to the intellectuals with the “you don’t have to check your brain at the door” approach. Appeal to Christians with “following God is not only the right thing to do, it is the scientifically smart thing to do.”)
- Emphasize that relationships are the primary way we relate to God.
- Preach/teach that the foundation of connection is compassion.
- Focus on the Gospels.
- Preach about relationships; Elijah/Elisha and others
- Preach the Word. Love God. Hate sin. (Set God’s standard before the community.) Preach the Word of God without apology.
- Talk about examples of Jesus’ love for all without regard for status.
- Give people a chance to interact/connect/respond as a part of the message, in pairs or in small groups.

### **What can men’s groups do?**

- First, learn how to be a good man, a godly man.  
—What is his role in marriage? As a parent? In the church? In the community?.
- Provide mutual support for marriages, parenting, single fathers.

- Encourage the “adopting” of fatherless (or poorly fathered) children.
- Get involved in community sports programs.
- Get involved in community service projects.
- Find ways of connecting with other men.
- Focus on people (boys and girls) with needs.
- Mentor, mentor, mentor!
- Enable men to meet together with no particular agenda, except to build godly friendships.

### **What can women’s groups do?**

- First, learn how to be a good woman, a godly woman.  
—What is her role in marriage? As a parent? In the church? In the community?
- Match mature women/mothers with young or immature mothers.
- Serve as surrogate grandmothers (get involved with the children in your neighborhood).
- Offer support for singles, marrieds, mothers, grandmothers.
- Have Bible studies and fun get-aways. Sometimes combine all ages, sometimes separate.
- Same as men’s groups, focusing more on women and girls’ needs.
- Create opportunities for relationships.
- Mentor, mentor, mentor!

### **How can the church assist children in dealing with divorce?**

- Love them. Be honest with them.
- Make sure they know the divorce was not their fault.

- Provide homes/families who “adopt” these children. (Possibly an adult “child of divorce.”)
- Provide support for the divorcing parents
- Provide free counseling for children and parents
- Create firm relationships with persons of the opposite sex from the one who is the child’s primary caregiver.
- Take care of the parents.

### **What can the church do to celebrate adolescence?**

- Preach and practice unconditional love.
- Have a biblical sex-ed class. Stop relying on schools (and the media) to teach values.
- Promote programs like the Silver Ring Thing and America’s Promise.
- Add books to your church library that promote understanding and self-esteem. Dr. Payne of Joni and Friends recommends anything by Edward Hallowell.
- Add movies to the church library that teach acceptance:
  - Antwone Fisher
  - Radio
  - Nell
  - Rainman
  - A Beautiful Mind
  - Shine (questionable sexual content)
- Have movie nights with guided discussion after the movie. Help kids to make sense of and express their emotions about the movie.
- Teach them (and be an example for them of) the value of living a life that is pleasing to God and honors the Lord.
- Guide the parents to parent well.

## In Conclusion . . .

The cover story of the May 10, 2004 issue of *Time* Magazine was "Secrets of the Teen Brain." The October 25 cover story was "The God Gene." On December 8, 2004 National Public Radio aired a story about a home nurse/new mother mentoring program. In the program, more than 1,000 low-income, unmarried, teenage mothers received weekly visits from a nurse during their pregnancies and for two years after their children were born. For some of these girls, the nurse was the first adult who had consistently been a part of their lives. The subsequent pregnancy rate for this group dropped, the girls learned how to be good mothers, they finished high school, and got jobs. The researcher studied their children four years later (when they were six year old) and found higher I.Q. scores, fewer behavioral problems, and less aggressiveness than their peers. These results were accomplished at a relatively low cost, and have so impressed city leaders that the program has now been implemented in 22 states. These life-changing results all stemmed from the fact that the young girls found a friend. Is this not something that Christians could implement in their own communities?

The clinical research reported in all these stories went hand-in-hand with *Hardwired to Connect*. While we can't quote any of the above-mentioned material in print, preachers can find it on the Internet and quote it in their sermons, youth workers can use the material to better understand their kids, and church leaders can use it in the preparation of training classes. The point is, the subject of the need for connectedness is on the cutting edge of science and is in the media; *you* can use this public awareness to draw people closer to the Lord.

The Institute for American Values is a resource that needs to be further examined by the church. Look at the list of publications available at [www.americanvalues.org](http://www.americanvalues.org). Mark Noll of Wheaton College writes, "the Institute for American Values has been a pioneer in producing solid studies on the moral state of American family life and related topics. Its publications feature the best kind of solidly grounded factual materials combined with a sensitive reading of modern culture. The Institute has proven it can be relied upon for straight talk and wise counsel."

Robert George of Princeton University said, "On questions central to the family and the rearing of children to be responsible adults and good citizens, no institution compares with a think tank in New York City known as the Institute for American Values."

## **Giving credit where credit is due**

The fact that the commission reaches the conclusions they have without paying homage to God the Creator is sad, but it does not negate the truthfulness of their conclusions:

- The human brain "appears to be organized" to ask ultimate questions and seek ultimate answers.
- [The questions] "reflect the deep human drive to order and draw meaning from experience and are part of what distinguishes us as a species."
- "Recent advances in neurobiology\* also suggest that these spiritual and religious experiences stem partly from processes and structures that are deeply embedded in the human brain."

*\* The scientific study of the molecular and cellular levels of the nervous system, of systems within the brain such as vision and hearing, and behavior produced by the brain.*

- [Contemplative prayer and meditation] “are based in observable functions of the brain” . . . They are as real “as any other of the brain’s perceptions.”

Science is merely agreeing with the Word of God. The researchers say that we are “*Hardwired to Connect*,” but they don’t say connect to what or to whom. But as Christians, we know that “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’” (Acts 17:24-27). Children of God understand that we seek God because “it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 1: 21, 22).

The commission says that the human brain is “*Hardwired to Connect*.” We would say the human brain is designed by God to seek Him, to know Him, and to serve Him. That is the purpose of life that so many are seeking. The church can use this report to serve our communities. We can use it to break down barriers of prejudice against religion so that hurting people can find the help they need in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

## What are others saying about *Hardwired to Connect*?

"Messing With the Wiring," Charles Colson's commentary on "BreakPoint," 10/03/03

"Science Discovers Our Need for God" *tothesource* magazine, 5/21/04 [www.trinityfamily.org](http://www.trinityfamily.org)

"Hardwired to Connect," George Will, 9/21/03  
<http://www.townhall.com/columnists/georgewill>

"Hardwired to Connect: Nurturing 'Authoritative Communities,'" Robert Brooks  
<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/writings/articles>

"Hardwired for religion" by Ed Vitagliano published in *American Family Association Journal*, January, 2005  
<http://www.afajournal.org>