

INTRODUCTION



“WHAT’S WRONG WITH  
OUR KIDS, ANYWAY?”

Recently, I was talking to my son about my latest writing project. He said, “Dad, what do you expect to accomplish with this book?”

I was shocked that he asked such a deep, thought-provoking question. My boys generally ask things such as, “Dad, can I borrow five dollars?” (If you have been a parent very long, you know that the word *borrow* has a different connotation than it did when we were kids. It now means, “Thanks, Dad—say goodbye to your money.”)

Since Caleb asked a serious question, I thought I would give him a serious answer. I said, “Parents today are called the ‘lost generation’ because we have lost the tools to develop capable, responsible, self-reliant children. I want to help ‘lost generation’ parents become good parents.”

Without even thinking, my son said, “Dad, *bad* parents don’t buy books.”

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Like Caleb, I am convinced that if you have bought this book, you are a *good* parent—someone who wants to become the best parent that you can possibly be. I admire anyone who is willing to take the time to learn the tools for effective parenting. You can't take the journey without making that first step—and you've done it!

As I thought about my son's question, I realized I easily could have told him that I wanted to *fix it* for today's parents. *Fix it* is a phrase that holds special meaning for me. When I was in high school, I had to take the dreaded . . . speech class. Because I did not enunciate very clearly, people couldn't understand what I was saying. Every day before class, I would pray for Jesus to come back . . . right away. There is nothing more terrifying for a kid who doesn't speak clearly than to stand in front of a group and talk.

My speech teacher was a member of our church, and she would regularly invite me over to her house to give me extra help. During one of my visits, she told me, "Walker, whatever you do when you graduate, don't do anything that requires verbal skills." She handed me a list of all the jobs she thought I might consider: mechanic, carpenter, draftsman—any occupation where I could use something other than speech. I got the message.

Soon after that, when I was only twenty years old, God called me to preach. Most of the people who knew me were immediately convinced that the Lord had made His first mistake. Being young and naïve, I thought if God called you to do something, you were supposed to start that day. I began looking for a place that would let me . . . preach.

The only church that seemed interested was Second Baptist Church of Linneus, Missouri. I did not get First Baptist Church. Instead, I got Second Baptist . . . in a town of three hundred

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people. When I arrived, I saw only a handful of church members. The youngest was sixty-nine, and the oldest was eighty-one. All the people at Second Baptist were African-Americans.

I had never preached to an all-black congregation before, and I didn't know that the members talk to the preacher during the service. They'd yell out things like, "Bring it on down!" or "Glory to God!" as I preached. If my message wasn't going very well, the women would take out their hankies and flail them over their heads in figure-eight patterns, yelling, "Help him, Jesus!"

That first Sunday, I got numerous "Help him, Jesus!" shouts while I worked my way through the sermon. Surprisingly, the church asked me if I would become their pastor and preach every week.

Later on, because of my experience with this all-black congregation, I was asked to speak at a black pastors' conference in Los Angeles. I had just started my message when a young man in the middle of the congregation stood up and yelled, "Fix it, brother, fix it!"

I looked around to see what was broken. Maybe the flowers had fallen off the Lord's Supper table, or maybe the microphone wasn't working. I couldn't figure out what he wanted me to fix, so I kept going.

Then it happened. The same man yelled again, standing up to make sure I heard him: "Fix it, brother, fix it!"

At this point, all I could think of was that my zipper must be undone. I attempted one of those spiritual moves and bowed my head, put my hands over my eyes, and scanned quickly downward. No problem there.

In another fifteen seconds, the same man stood back up again. This time, he started doing jumping jacks as he waved his arms, still yelling, "Fix it, brother, fix it!"

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He had me now. I finally stopped preaching and asked the moderator, “What does he want?”

The moderator said, “Don’t you know what he’s asking for?”

The answer may have been obvious to everyone else . . . but I answered honestly, “No, I don’t.”

“Well, this man was sitting in darkness, and as you opened God’s Word, all of a sudden, the light began to shine on the truth. He wants you to *not* go on to your next point. He wants you to expound, expand—open the window all the way up and let the light shine on that passage. He just caught it, and he wants you to park it right there and tell him how to ‘Fix it, brother!’”

For the past thirty years or more, parents have been wandering around in the darkness, unsure how to raise capable, responsible, self-reliant adults. All of a sudden, the light has begun to shine on the truth. We’ve begun to understand why our kids are having a problem. It’s because of a cultural shift.

In this book, I want to expand, expound, open the window all the way up and help you understand what’s going on in your child’s life. I want to park it right here and “fix it!” by teaching you how to become a Rite of Passage Parent. This book offers new hope for the struggles today’s families encounter. I have some proven strategies that will help. I began searching for them during my early days as a youth minister, over thirty years ago.

At that time, I was facing a real problem. No matter how much Bible teaching I did, no matter how many activities I planned, no matter how much I prayed and spent time with the students, I did not see real growth in their lives. Nearly all of them were still dealing with exactly the same problems as seniors in high school that they faced in their early teens. In fact, they took these struggles along to college, on to their

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jobs, and into their marriages. Very few of them ended up as capable, responsible, self-reliant adults.

Why was my work so ineffective? Why weren't the students maturing as God intended? I didn't know what to do. I began to label myself a failure, and I was ready to quit youth ministry altogether. Their parents and I had the same question: "What's wrong with our kids, anyway?"

CULTURE CLASH

Our society has undergone a number of drastic changes. No one would argue that point. In fact, many of our cultural norms have changed so rapidly and dramatically that only recently have parents faced the truth: Something is radically wrong with our kids.

America's youth culture is spiraling downward as never before. School shootings continue to make headlines. Experts blame all sorts of factors for students' poor test scores and lack of motivation. Studies reveal that even "church kids" regularly experiment with drugs and premarital sex.

Cultural analyst George Barna reports that there has been a 42 percent drop in weekly church attendance among young people, from the time they graduate from high school until they reach age twenty-five. A total of 58 percent will have dropped out by age twenty-nine. In other words, about eight million twentysomethings who were once active churchgoers will no longer be involved in a church by their thirtieth birthday.<sup>1</sup>


The struggles don't confine themselves to church attendance, though. Every year, thousands of young adults return to their parents' home, unable to cope with life apart from mom and dad's sheltering presence—and pocketbook.

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While I was struggling with the problems in the lives of these students, I began to study teenage culture, and I discovered something amazing. Our society's downward plunge accelerated during the post-World War II era, when we completed the move from an agricultural to an industrial society. Young married couples moved farther away from their parents, following the lure of large companies and secure employment. People left the farms and moved closer to their jobs and schools for their children.

As a result, we made a very rapid switch from generations that lived and worked together to a much more isolated family unit. No longer could mom and dad consult *their* parents for advice, which would have involved either a long wait or an expensive phone call. Instead, they turned to parenting

"experts" like Dr. Benjamin Spock, and raised . . . my mixed-up, self-centered, rebellious generation!

  
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Neither my generation nor the ones following have done any better at producing capable kids. The "expert" advice on which parents depended did not stop the cultural shift or its dramatic, devastating impact. The downward plunge that began in the 1950s has

not yet stopped. Even with all our progress - including the advent of color TVs and CDs and DVDs and MP3s and all the other high-priced, high-tech gadgets that we consider so essential today—we can't seem to raise kids who grow into capable, responsible, self-reliant adults. It's time someone cried out, "Fix it, brother!"

## PAY NOW, PAY LATER

After all, having children costs a lot. I don't mean the financial costs alone—I mean that you will pay a price for parenthood. You will pay the price of the time and effort it takes to develop self-reliant children. In fact, if you are not willing to pay this price as you go, you will pay it for the rest of your life. You will pay because your children will continually lean on you to raise *their* children, pay *their* bills, take care of *their* needs—and never become truly responsible.

You have a choice about which kind of parent you want to be: the kind who pays now and enjoys the fruit of his labor as the children grow, or the kind who pays later and spends years trying to salvage their lives. I believe that you are the first kind of parent. Adding just *one* of the Rite of Passage Parenting essential experiences back into your children's lives will cost you dearly—but it will also dramatically enhance the quality of your parenting and your life together.

As I said, I want to *fix it* by equipping good parents and helping them become even better. I've spent years developing and applying these principles, but I want you to know that I'm a fellow struggler. I know firsthand the joys and heartaches of parenting. Throughout this book, you'll read stories about my family: my wife, Cathy, my two grown sons, Jeremiah and Caleb, and yours truly—the guy who doesn't always get it right.

Our family life has brought us tears as well as laughter. It's also helped me test the answers I found. These answers have helped us to deal with the cultural forces none of us can control. These persistent forces have cost today's parents the ability to equip their kids to grow up to lead capable, responsible, self-reliant lives. What's wrong with our kids is what's

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wrong with our culture. It's not just time for a change—it's time for us to *fix it, brother!*

Understanding the gaps cultural forces have left in our kids' lives and implementing Rite of Passage Parenting will produce change that lasts. I can say this because I've seen it happen again and again. Families who have added these four essential experiences back into their kids' lives are seeing some great results. Even in a world filled with chaos and confusion, caring families can help their children become capable, responsible, self-reliant adults.

I know you're a good parent—after all, you bought the book. I want to help you become an even better parent, so let's begin together. What's wrong with our kids, anyway?

*Fix it, brother!*