Setting a Tone for Your Christian Family

Part 1 of 2: Nurturing a Christian Family in a Secular World
with Darrell Bock, Chip Ingram
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Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. And today our topic is the Christian family in the midst of a swirling world. And my guest today is Chip Ingram. It's a real pleasure to have you with us, Chip.

He is here this week at the seminary giving a series of lectures that - when we give someone a whole week at the seminary we're highly committed to what they have to say to us. So, we're excited! And Chip has done a lifetime of ministry as a pastor and has his own radio program and ministry. Why don't you tell us about that? What is it that you've been doing?

Well, Darrell, I've been a pastor for about 30 years. And then we kept running out room and someone put it on a local station and it multiplied and grew in about the last 15, 16 years to a lot of stations here and around the world.

But my real passion out of that was that I ended up traveling around the world a lot in my time with Walk through the Bible. And then they started putting things on video. And so we want to help Christians live like Christians. And so our passion at Living on the Edge, even though we kind of do teaching is then we take just extreme effort to get people in small groups. So we launched about 160,000 small groups in the last three years.

Oh wow.

And then created resources to coach people because we think life change really happens not because you just hear or know the truth, but in the context of community applying it, holding each other accountable, loving each other - places where it's safe. And then we get people on mission and say, "Okay, 24/7 where God planted you." So that's what I'm all about and it's a thrill to be here.

Well, great. Well, you did that so fast. The name of the program is -

It's called Living on the Edge.

Okay. And I won't ask you what the edge is like but, anyway!
It's where I live in California - the Silicon Valley and it's -

There you go! Okay. So where are you exactly in California?

We're in Los Gatos, California. It is in just the edge of San Jose right in the Bay area.

So, you're there with the cats, huh?

In there with the cats, that's right! It's a unique community. Thirty-seven percent of the people in the Silicon Valley, San Jose area, are born outside the United States. Fifty-one percent speak another language at home.

Oh wow.

And so it's super multicultural. Fifteen, 20 minutes you have Palo Alto, Stanford, Google, Facebook, so it's an exciting place to live. Very un-Christian, but very exciting.

Yeah, well, it's the way our world is and that's part of what we want to talk about. We want to talk about living christianly and preparing your Christian family to live in a kind of culture that we find ourselves in.

And there's a lot to celebrate that goes on around us in the world in terms of the beauty that's created and the art that exists and that kind of thing. But there also are a lot of challenges to being a Christian today.

Let's talk about the Christian family and setting a right tone for your kids. And I think the best way to do this might be to just move through the phases of life, if you will, okay, rather than just dive in.

So, let's talk first about the family that has really little kids, and setting the right tone for the home for a family that, say, has toddlers and kindergarteners and that level. How do you get started in setting the tone for what a house should look like?
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*Chip Ingram*

Well, that was a challenge for Theresa and myself. We both came from non-Christian homes and both came from dads that were alcoholics - fairly functioning. And so I remember we had kids and it was like, I didn't know what to do. So I read a couple books, and I was around some good families. And I think you need to really lay down what is it as our objectives? You want our kids to be holy or do you want them to be happy?

And so in those toddler years we tried to set some things up that we wanted, sitting around the table and eating together and talking. Putting your kids to bed and reading them stories; making very few rules but having clear boundaries where you help the little ones understand, "This is right. This is wrong." Understanding - intellectually they can't grasp all these concepts. You don't need to explain a ton of things.

*Darrell Bock*

So, you didn't do the ontological trinity with them?

*Chip Ingram*

No, we waited for the third grade for that one. But I mean it was just really loving them a lot. Modeling is so big at that age. But also, I think, what I watch happening, now that I have grandkids that age, is there's such a pull to make kids the center of the world, and everything revolves around them. That doesn't produce healthy kids.

You want kids to understand God is the center of our family and not just in words but what you do and how you model that.

*Darrell Bock*

And we did the same. I remember we had these little stories that were done by Concordia Press, which is a Lutheran press, that are all in rhyme, that would be the stories we would read every night. And it got to the point where I would have read them enough that I could stop in the middle of the sentence and they would finish it and that kind of thing. And it just - it does, it sets a right kind of tone and puts a right feel to the family in terms of the types of things that you talk about.

Now, I'll tell you something that we didn't do well. I'm not a big eat-around-the-table person. I tend to eat in the living room. And so we tended to be real informal about the way we structured that. I think I'd do that differently if I had a chance to start over again. But you're right. When they're young, it's important. And here's another question that often comes up.
How much should a parent say, "It's the church's job to help with the kids as opposed to my job because, after all, they're the professionals?"

Well, I think that is a myth. The church will not stand before God for your kid - you will.

And so I really felt like even not just spiritually, we lived in a part of the country that had very, very poor education - had schools where I watched my kids in school, like in the really early grades - they weren't learning. And I realized, you know something? I own that. So, I took that on at home and we had to kind of educate our kids because I thought, you know, they're getting good grades as they kept pushing them through.

But I think it's our responsibility. You know, Deuteronomy 6 talks about it's that when they rise and when you walk and -

Exactly.

And it's the whole ambience of your home. And so it's not just we read a story or eat together. It's you're playing games and you're talking. I was really committed, because of my background of not coming to Christ that it was going to be an exciting, adventurous, fun place to live in my house. And also, very Word-centered.

Yes. And so I take it then, it's clear you put your kids in schools - were they Christian schools or public schools?

You know, we did both. In the early years we kind of did both because, frankly, there were a lot of limited options. But my personal perspective was, in those very early years, when kids can't rationally reason, I wanted the school to be on my team.

I wanted them reinforcing things. At junior high we evaluated each kid and what was best, and all of our kids spent either all or some time in public high schools.
And we spent a lot of time around the table. We talked about evolution and sexuality. And my kids saw themselves as missionaries. And I think that really helped them own their faith. I think you have to look at your child, where they're at, what's their maturity, what's the environment? And you make individual decisions.

That's great advice. I mean we also put our kids in Christian - sorry - in public schools after a start in Christian school. And we did it for the reason that we really wanted them to be able to grow up and interact with the culture. And we wanted to be around them as they were learning those lesson and be able to reinforce what was going on because we were afraid that if it was, you know, I'm in a seminary so it's seminary, church, Christian school, that they would never get a sense of the larger world that they would live in.

Of course, we did sabbaticals in Germany which put them in German schools and second language. So, that was a whole another kind of experience.

Wow.

In which they - you know, they were learning German at eight and nine and five. They were learning German with kids from Serbia and Bosnia and, you know, I mean that was a completely different kind of experience. Now, that's something most people don't get the chance to replicate but what it did teach our kids is the world has no boundaries. You can go and function anywhere and that was a very, very valuable experience.

Okay. Let's talk about the black hole years. As they grow up and they hit the age of elementary school, begin junior high, hit the teenage years, my description of the teenager is you go from being at the top of the ladder in terms of greatness to way, way down the list.
And a kid oftentimes enters a black hole and they - although our kids were good as teenagers - and then somewhere in your 20s you recover. That when they hit their 20s you recover and you may not get back quite to the level that you were when they were real young, but that they begin to respect you again. And when that happens don't ask how it happened or why, just be grateful that they've come back.

Chip Ingram: Yes.

Darrell Bock: So, let's talk about those hard years that oftentimes are the teenage years, where kids are facing tough choices and parenting is tricky because you're trying to give them space as they're finding out who they are. And yet at the same time, you've got to be there for them.

Chip Ingram: Well, I would say both by experience and watching this happen in the church wherever - and research as well - is the greatest thing you can do is live the life before them. When kids see you live differently at home than you do at church or outward - that is a recipe for rebellion and rejecting your faith.

I think the other thing is that you're not going to be that person on the top. And I think a lot of parents struggle because as they feel rejection from their kids, they cave in and give them things they know aren't very good or are passive.

And so I think you need to be really strong in terms of these are the boundaries. I love you. You can never do anything that I'll stop loving you, but you can't have your own way. And the culture - I mean it's not just out there; it's in the church.

Darrell Bock: Right.

Chip Ingram: And so I mean I was the worst parent in the world according to my kids at times. Dad, what you mean we can't play that video game where people kill? Well, we don't do that here and here's why. And music issues. And so we were never legalistic about this makes you right or this makes you wrong, but we made our home the place that was fun. Their friends came over. I mean I lived in Santa Cruz where they think Berkeley's too far right.

Darrell Bock: Right, right.
And so we had a world where multiple sexuality, the tri-sexual, bi-sexual speakers were in all of the public schools. And so my kids were bombarded with things but they learned to own their faith. But you need to have sort of that open communication and I think when you set boundaries, then make them few but enforce them.

And you just keep loving them through it. And we had some that - compliant personalities. They sailed right through. And I had one son that I mean no matter what I did, how hard it was, he'd look at, "Is that all you got?" So, I just think it can be tough water at times but you persevere and you love them and you model it.

How do you wrestle with the problem of deciding which battles are the ones worth fighting? I mean because you can deteriorate into an environment in which everything is a battle. So, how do you wrestle with the choice of I'm going to give a child space here because this is - yeah, it might not be the best decision but this is not one to go to war on, versus the ones that really matter. How do you help sort through that?

Well, what we tried to do is really lay the foundation - the earlier you start, the better. And having a real clear picture of what do you want your kids to turn out like, and what's your part and realize you can't own all that. Your kids don't - I mean there's not a one-to-one correlation that these kinds of parents produce these kinds of kids.

Right.

But what I did know was that it's like letting out string on a kite. And so what you want to do is you want to feed them more and more responsibility. And then when it got to be one of those semi-gray - rather than say yes or no, I'd often ask my kids, "Well, what do you think you ought to do?"

And, "Well, Dad, I want to go to this/that." "Okay. I tell you what - for 24 hours I want you to pray about it and then let's get back and talk about it and tell me what God says to you." So, I wanted the weight of their decisions to move from my mom or dad say yes or no, to them.
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*Darlle Bock*  
So, you wanted them to own it.

*Chip Ingram*  
Yeah. And there's times where, like you said, it was like this is probably not going to be the greatest decision, but that's how you learn to make good decisions. But they were ones that I knew that the damage would be minor.

On a couple others where they got involved maybe in dating a non-Christian and you could just see the writing on the hand - what's that phrase? Handwriting on the wall.

*Darlle Bock*  
Handwriting on the wall. Yeah.

*Chip Ingram*  
And I set some really clear boundaries, and we had some, you know, "I just can't believe you" and "that's so ridiculous." But about ten years later they really thanked me. But that was hard. And there's no way around it. There are certain things I think you draw real clear lines.

And then on other things it's just, you know, they make some decisions; they get some consequences and they learn and they grow.

*Darlle Bock*  
Now, let's talk about devotions in the house and that kind of thing because there are a variety of ways to encourage that in terms of what you encourage your kids to read, etc. How did you handle those kinds of situations?

*Chip Ingram*  
We did some stuff around the table. Dinner was like the most sacred thing - 5:30. And I was pastoring a very large church. It was growing. There were all kinds of demands but I was there. The kids were there. We ate. We talked. We did tons of Bible stories foundationally and all that.

The older we got, it was more application interaction. I tried to help my kids early on develop some time with God. And so the older we got it was more of the expectation is they would meet with God on their own.

*Darlle Bock*  
Right.
And we would talk and discuss it. So, it wasn't sort of this the older you get the more top-down you are - the more they reject it. And often it was brief, but very interactive. And then that's what our kids saw us do.

And most of them, early on, developed that habit and I've since kind of read the research that if you walk with God personally and your kids, early on, get in God's word for themselves - I was way more excited about them meeting with God privately than us saying, "You know, five out of seven times this week..."

We were sort of formal in limited ways but really wanted them to grow on their own.

And here's a real kind of practical question. I know that we have people in our church who wrestle with this. We do have a culture that encourages kids to participate in all kinds of activities. And particularly when they hit junior high and high school the opportunities, whether it be band or sports or whatever, and the tension there becomes - these events, of course, oftentimes take place on the weekends.

And oftentimes Sunday is a big day for those kinds of events. So how did you sort - did you sort through those kinds of tensions and how did you negotiate those elements alive?
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Chip Ingram  Well, I was - I mean my dad was a great athlete. I went to college on a basketball scholarship so I'm a sports crazy guy; played all kind of sports with all my kids. But I realized early on that youth sports could take over your family. And we made it real clear that you could play one sport in one season. I'm watching families now who spend most of their time in a minivan or an SUV eating fast food. And again, the whole world is - it's this fear that, well, all the other kids are starting at three. I got news for you! Three, four, five, six-year-olds don't need to be in any kind of formal youth sports.

Darrell Bock  The NFL is not looking yet, right?

Chip Ingram  And so I think what you do is you say, "This is what really matters" and you draw some lines. And in most Christian - the culture right now, you will feel like you're a salmon swimming upstream even in the church, to set some clear boundaries.

So I wanted my kids to try different sports, and then as they had an appetite for one or other, and then we just set limits on how many we're going to do. And that whole traveling team, weekend thing, you talk about a black hole. I've seen whole families that walked great with God - there's a lot of vicarious ego going on there. There's a lot of money spent that people don't have.

And I watch people work all week and they literally wear themselves out for two days - all day Saturday we gotta to go to this game, this game, this game, this game. Very unwise. And I will tell you what it produces - it produces kids that don't believe that God is the primary aspect of their life.

It produces families that get pulled apart and people that honestly really thought that their own self esteem had to do with how their kid kicked the ball or a made a basket.

Now, we played sports. My kids played different sports but they really understood our world's not going to revolve around your youth sports or your traveling team.

Darrell Bock  Okay. Now the variation on that, of course, is music. I mean we had kids who - I had one son who did team soccer. I had - well, all our kids - I have three children - all of them did band in high school.
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**Chip Ingram** Yeah.

**Darrell Bock** So that took up some time. And, frankly, that was a rounding out experience for them. I went to a school - we didn't have a band or we didn't do - I never learned to play any instrument at all. I mean the only instrument I can play is my voice and I don't play it very well. So, what about those kinds of activities that may be school-related as well in terms of they're pulling your kids into relating to other kids?

**Chip Ingram** Well, our kids did all those. I mean one kid played basketball and volleyball. Another wrestled. All my kids were musicians. A lot of that was is that we did something really - it was an experiment. And that is, when my kids were small I realized that I just had a habit because my parents did. It's amazing how you do things that you don't really think about it. And I just had the habit of kind of from 9:00 to 11:00 you had to watch the news to stay up on life. So, every night I'd watch an hour and a half of TV and I thought nothing bad; this or that.

And so we did an experiment. We said, "Let's try, on a school night, what it's like not just to watch TV." Well, we were - I mean we were on each other and everyone's irritable first two or three days. Well, then pretty soon we're playing a game on the floor. And then kids are bored so picks up a guitar, and someone goes to the piano. And then pretty soon, my lands, it's 9:30! And there's nothing to do so you might as well just go to bed at 9:30 or 10. Well, you wake up at 5 and you're fresh and you gain a couple hours.

So, our kids ended up, during the week that experiment sort of got sustained, and we ended up finding these hours in the day where they did those kind of things but we had a lot of time as a family because we really didn't let - especially during the week - the electronic stuff dominate our home.

**Darrell Bock** Interesting. Now, about how old were your kids when you made that move?

**Chip Ingram** Mine are 13 years apart so they were about every age! I had one 5, one 12 and one probably 14, in that area, so.
Darrell Bock: Oh wow. So again, we were heading into the teenage years where television can be an attractive option.

Chip Ingram: Yeah. Television and surfing, the video games, just - you gotta, again, on the one hand if it's never, never, never you're sort of this legalistic completely apart from the world. Your kids - believe me, they're at their friends homes doing some stuff.

Darrell Bock: Right, right, right.

Chip Ingram: But - so you want to give them opportunities, but at the same time what I'm seeing, and I'm kind of in the trenches as a pastor, is I'm watching really smart people as parents advocate as parents in letting their kids spend incredible time on their phones, computers and games, and can't figure out why there's no communication.

Darrell Bock: As long as they're not in my hair it's fine.

Chip Ingram: That's exactly right. And it's a lot of energy. When you get back to this parenting, it's so much easier - I mean you have to confront. You gotta get up out of the chair. You've got to address the issues. And my journey was we would be real disciplined and real helpful and my kids would really respond well. And the person who always got lazy was me! And so when I got inconsistent, their behavior changed and no matter what you're doing - six weeks from now it's probably not going to work. So, I mean it's a journey.

Darrell Bock: So you're constantly adjusting to what's going on and that kind of thing. That helps teenagers. Let's talk about a very sensitive area of life, I would say, and I've heard you speak about this so this is one of the reasons I'm asking. How do you prepare your kids for their life mate?

How do you - I actually can use this - I have a 28-year-old son. He still hasn't found his life mate and he may never do so. And I may have to come to grips with that. But anyway, how do you help them find their life mate? What - are there things a parent can do to help in that regard?
Yeah, I think one is, again, early on, you want to give a biblical world view. I think it's really important - and don't let me go off on this. I've seen really, really godly parents who their kids hit early teens or even middle teens, and they start dating an unbeliever. And they come to me and say, "Well, I know it's not really good but I'm afraid that if I really clamp down they'll rebel." And my message is no, they are rebelling!

You've already lost the battle.

So if they were smoking dope right now or got drunk three nights a week, is that - would you tell me the same thing? And I would say, when you allow your kids hearts to get connected, that will - when you have infatuation and feelings of love, your IQ drops about 30 points and your holy Q drops about 60. And you can make the Bible and anything say anything you want. And so we, one, is we taught them early on - we really spent time when they were young and talked about the areas of sexuality appropriately.

And so it was sort of, again, letting out the string. And we talked about, this is what you're going to experience. I mean a young man - when you have a wet dream, this is what's happening and here's how God's made you. Our daughter, when you're developing. And then it was pretty soon, you know, this is because God has something special for you. And we tried to picture the adventure and the joy of what God has. And some were easier than others.

And then I think that those issues of sexual purity were not about you can't do this, you can't do that. You either parent out of fear or out of faith. And I think what you've got to parent is out of faith and say, "You know what? Your sexuality is precious. It's a gift. It's wonderful. It's good." And now we have research that talks about the bonds that occur actually in the brain, and so you want your kids to understand it's something that's holy and therefore, here's how to prepare for that.

Right. Yeah, and I think this is an extremely important discussion because I think that as I listen to you - we did a podcast earlier where we talked about sexuality. And we had our - two of the people who teach sexuality here and a sex counselor. And what you're saying about life in general is the way they said to handle sexuality: that you talk about it. You create an environment in which you can have a conversation where you can talk about anything.
And you set a tone of I'll use the word "engagement" really - of engagement on the topic where you come alongside your child in a way and set an environment so that through the entirety of their life you're available for them in the area. And it sounds like that's what you're talking about.

If I'm listening to me right now I'm creating pictures that are not true about what I've said. So, here's what people need to understand. I had one son who just absolutely was rebellious. We went through about three-and-a-half, four years of, you know, "I'm not going to live this way."

And I mean it was really, really hard. He didn't go outside of big moral boundaries but I mean it was horrendous. We - I remember my one son in college who came home and in tears and dating a girl - great Christian girl. And literally saying, "Dad, how do you ever stop lusting?" I mean so this was real life. This wasn't like - but he said, you know, "I've thought about this" and you know, we sat on his bed. And I said, "Son, let me tell you about my college years. Let me tell you where I struggled."

Because your kids need to understand that you've been there - there's not something wrong with them. We've been through the time where they meet that person and they're convinced they're the right person. And you and your wife or you're a single parent and you're sitting up in bed alone going, "They marry this person - this is going to be a train wreck." And yet, they're 21 years old - 22 years old. One of the things I think you always want to do is have those people in your home - that whole environment where you get to know them and where you can keep talking about what's going on.

But so, this isn't clean. I just want people to know - this is not like -

It's very messy actually.

Oh, it is really tough! But here's a picture that's always been helpful. If you're the parent here and this is your child, what you need to understand - you need to build a bridge of relationship. And the stronger that bridge of trust in relationship, the more truth that can go over that bridge.
And so there's times where a lot of weight - because down deep in their heart, even though you get to the bottom of that ladder in some ways - down deep in their heart your kids, whether they act like it or not, super respect your opinion and they want your approval. And there's just really hard times I remember with my daughter at one point. I said, "Honey, I really love you" and she said, "Dad, I just want you to bless this. He's a godly guy and etc., this."

And I said, "Honey, I would love to and I've prayed. I've fasted. I love you. I'm for you. But your life vision is this and his life vision and history is this. And I'm behind you 100 percent but I can't be dishonest with you."

And I mean we were in tears. We had about a nine-month period where we'd always been really close and it was, "Well, Dad, you're welcome to your opinion. I'm 21 years old. I'm a junior in college" and boy - what a - I mean what a hard time that was and yet - and it was like this. So, but at the end of the day I think our kids - they'll make right decisions. They might not always be the ones that you like, but it is a journey.