

## Generation to Generation

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For many Christians their faith in Christ is part of their family history, a heritage passed on to them from previous generations. For some, it goes back as far as they can trace their family roots. But it wasn't that way in Paul's time. Paul himself was a first-generation believer in Christ, although he had an admirable spiritual heritage in Judaism (Philippians 3:4-6). It was the same for most early Christians, because Christianity simply hadn't been around that long—less than forty years by the time that Paul died. So when we encounter a second-generation Christian in the pages of the New Testament, it's a matter of special interest to us.

According to 2 Timothy 1:5, Timothy was just such a person: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well." Timothy's faith was part of the heritage received from his mother and grandmother. Acts 16:1-3 provides our only other information about Timothy's ancestry, and it informs us that his mother Eunice was a Jew but that his father was a Greek, presumably a pagan. However, Acts 16:3 also says that Timothy had not been circumcised at the time that he began working with Paul, so it seems probable that Eunice had not been a practicing Jew at the time of her marriage to her Greek husband, and that she most likely converted to Christianity after she was married, perhaps at the same time as her mother Lois. Since Timothy's father was apparently not a believer, it was up to his mother and grandmother to see to his Christian upbringing, and Paul was confident that they had done a good job of it (cf. 2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Lois and Eunice provide an excellent example of two women who took seriously what Paul writes in Ephesians 6:4: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." How is it that two **women** can fulfill this teaching, when Paul specifically says "fathers"? The word *fathers* was often used in a generic sense to mean parents of both genders. An example of this is Hebrews 11:23 where the Greek word for *fathers* occurs, just as in Ephesians 6:4: "By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his **parents....**" Paul's point is that both parents need to attend to the spiritual

upbringing of their children. Fathers may have a special responsibility in this area as heads of their families, but rearing children to love and serve Christ requires the efforts and prayers of both fathers and mothers.

Lois and Eunice's example is of special importance today when so many children are being raised in single-parent homes—and those single parents are often mothers and sometimes grandmothers. Timothy's father may or may not have been around when Timothy was being taught the Scriptures by his mother and grandmother, but the responsibility was left solely to them (another circumstance often encountered today). Even in homes where a father is absent or unbelieving, Christian mothers can have profound spiritual impact on their children. This in no way excuses fathers from fulfilling their God-given responsibilities; it simply says that all is not lost when no father is present. Faith can still be handed on.

In this regard it is instructive to notice some common mistakes that Lois and Eunice didn't make:

**1. They didn't wait until Timothy was older to begin teaching him.** Paul says that Timothy was instructed "from childhood." It's never too early to begin the process of Christian training and instruction—in fact, the earlier the better. Children naturally want to know about God, and the sooner we begin feeding that desire, the more likely it will continue throughout life. If parents wait until children are even five or six years old before teaching them and taking them to church, the world has had that long to shape their hearts and minds with all sorts of ungodly ideas. Psychologists have known for a long time that a child's personality is basically formed by the age of five. Unless you want your child's personality to be formed without Christ, don't wait!

**2. They didn't leave it up to the Church.** Churches normally do all that they can in teaching children to love Jesus, usually beginning in infancy and continuing into adulthood. But training your children is not primarily the Church's responsibility: it's **yours**. If you have children, God has called you to a ministry of teaching them to love the Lord, a unique and exclusive "mission field" that will provide you with opportunities for instruction and example that no one else will ever have. The Church can supplement your efforts, but it can never replace them.

**3. They didn't think that they couldn't do it alone.** Timothy's dad apparently had no role whatsoever in his son's spiritual formation. He may have been dead by the time Timothy

met Paul, or he may have been just spiritually useless, or he may even have been opposed to his wife's and mother-in-law's efforts. Whatever the case, it was up to Lois and Eunice to get the job done. It must have been difficult, just as it may be for you, but they didn't back away from their responsibility. In fact, if you are a Christian parent with a non-Christian spouse, it is doubly important that you be diligent in handing on the Faith, because the non-Christian parent will have a negative influence that will be difficult to overcome. With God's help, you can do it!

What Timothy chose to do with his Christian upbringing was ultimately his own responsibility (2 Timothy 1:6, 3:14). Lois and Eunice couldn't make that decision for him; their job was done. You can't make that decision for your kids either, as much as you might want to. But what you **can** do is give them the teaching and example that God has commissioned you to give, and to encourage them to take it and run with it in service to God, and eventually to do the same for their own children. Passing the Faith from generation to generation is much like a relay race. In any relay race, the most important part is the hand-off, that crucial moment when the baton is passed from one runner's hand to the next. That "hand-off" is what you are involved in day by day rearing your children for the Lord. One day the race will have ended. Be sure that you have run—and handed off—well.