

How a Gospel Music Star Is Raising Godly Sons

“Lord, have mercy on our souls,” I mumbled to myself as my friend Marvie turned the key in the ignition. She was 16, did not have a driver’s license and was behind the wheel of my father’s car. I was 15, was a nervous wreck on the passenger side and had just pulled off an unlikely scheme to fool my dad into handing over the keys.

Our mission was to make it to a gospel concert at Detroit’s Northwest Activity Center. We were determined to fulfill that mission. After all, we both loved good singing, and it wasn’t as if we were sneaking off to a Jackson 5 concert. It was a gospel concert, for goodness’ sake.

Needless to say, it didn’t take long for the whole plan to unravel. Although we made it to the auditorium, we never heard one note of that good singing.

One of my brothers was in the audience and spotted us right away. The questions came fast and furiously. We were totally busted. Within the hour, I was back in my bedroom on Woodingham Street.

When Dad found out that Marvie had showed him a fake ID and that I had lied to him, he didn’t say anything; he simply shook his head. The look of disappointment on his face as I told him the entire story made me want to run and hide in shame.

That adolescent prank happened more than 25 years ago. But lessons learned from the experience have stayed with me to this day and are helping me to impact the next generation, including my own two teenagers.

The first lesson I learned is that the heart dispenses its own

retribution. My father didn't have to punish me with a whipping or a verbal tirade. I had been raised in a godly, decent home. I had been taught what the Bible said: "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold" (Prov. 22:1).

I knew that I had brought dishonor to my family's good name and (at least for a moment) had lost the favor of my dad. It made me want to cry for days. Guilt from betraying a loved one's trust has its own sting.

The second lesson I learned is one of forgiveness. I had disappointed a wonderful man who had placed his trust in me. Dad could have shunned me or made me walk around in disgrace for weeks, but he didn't. Instead, he chose to be an example of what it means to forgive someone you love.

My parents knew the power of Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Growing up with the last name of Winans meant more than growing up in a house full of music. Mom and Dad worked hard to create a home in which love took priority over things. Discipline was second to love. And laughter ran a close third.

Regardless of all the hustle and bustle involved in bringing up seven boys and three girls, my parents consistently pointed their children in the direction of holiness. In a nutshell, this meant honoring your parents, respecting your elders, not talking back and having a fear of God.

Throughout the years, they gave us a firm foundation. As each of us matured and set out on our own journeys, we took with us the truth of God's principles and the assurance of His grace.

Now as I look back on that incident of teenage rebellion in my own life, it seems rather innocent. The current temptations and dangers facing my two teens, Alvin and Ashley, are overwhelming—even scary—at times.

The young generation of today is literally bombarded with negative and disturbing messages from all corners of the culture. Music, movies, television and the Internet seem to invade our families with ungodly and anti-Christian influences.

Instead of talking about the joys of romance, fidelity and commitment, teens are using phrases such as “casual sex,” “friends with benefits” and “hooking up.”

They enter a sports arena and, instead of finding heroes or role models, they’re introduced to athletes who have violent outbursts, use dangerous drugs and live immoral lifestyles.

Even a simple trip to the mall can turn into a moral dilemma. Teenage girls who still believe in modesty and purity receive little help from the marketing and manufacturing professions. Being stylish without being suggestive is difficult these days.

I look into the eyes of these precious young people and think how unfair it is for them to be faced with such choices. Although I’m disheartened by it all, I believe there are ways to counteract the coarsening of our culture—and it’s up to us to get involved.

Sharing the Responsibility

Recently, I heard about a small county just outside of Nashville, Tennessee, in which half the young female residents are suffering from HIV/AIDS. At first I was astonished, then heartbroken, then convicted. This wasn’t a big city statistic or news from a foreign country. This was coming from my own backyard.

As my heart was stirred, I began to think about my own generation and its relationship to the next. I believe we’re letting the young people down.

In many ways, we've missed the mark. The Bible tells us, "In all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach" (Titus 2:7-8, NASB). Every mature believer should be a good example—a godly role model—for those who are younger.

As a parent, I've never understood the idea of trying to be your child's best friend. Alvin and Ashley have many friends but only one set of parents. My husband and I love them with all our hearts. We know it's important to show our love, not just by having fun with them, but also by nurturing, teaching and protecting them. Every adult believer can do this for the youth around him.

Nurturing involves showing young people their true worth. They must be taught to see themselves the way God sees them. He valued their lives so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to save and redeem them. Real self-esteem comes from knowing Him and believing the words of Jeremiah 29:11: "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'"

Teaching involves introducing the next generation to the importance of God's Word. I've been thrilled to watch my children develop a real appetite for the ways of the Lord. They're beginning to experience a revelation of Matthew 5:6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

But this desire didn't grow by accident. Consistent exposure to the power of the Scriptures came through attending church services, Sunday school, youth group and Christian summer camp. I believe seeds were planted in Alvin and Ashley even when they weren't aware of it.

Honest study of the Bible reveals that God's Word is alive and active in our lives. Psalm 119:105 says it this way: "Your

word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.” When the next generation becomes full of the Word of God, they’re also going to become the leaders God created them to be.

Protecting our teens in this day and age can be a real challenge. But we must make every effort to offer them clear guidelines. Establishing parameters can prevent many a broken heart and damaged spirit. I’ve told my children often, “Anything that God does not smile upon is not good for you to listen to or watch.” It’s a simple yet powerful reminder that we’re to keep our senses sanctified.

The opportunity to nurture, teach and protect is not available only to parents. We all have a responsibility to encourage the next generation to be bold for the Lord.

I know from personal experience that it requires help to raise a godly child. I clearly remember how the saints of Mack Avenue Church of God in Christ made an impact on my life when I was young. They showed me love, gave me correction and prayed for me.

Church was a place where God-fearing people surrounded me: preachers, mothers, deacons, trustees, teachers, elders and friends. We loved one another as family, and we were taught to be accountable for one another’s care.

The adults felt responsible for one another’s children. And everything my parents taught me at home was reinforced at church. I grew to appreciate being surrounded by that kind of love and protection.

When believers take the time to sow truth and grace into a child’s life, whether that child is theirs or not, they are blessed. These saints are investing in their own future by helping to shape the values of generations to come.

Turning the Tide

There are four practical steps Christian parents and the

church community can take to help empower the next generation to live for the Lord.

Talk to them. Don't be afraid to approach them about every aspect of their day. If you sense something is wrong, ask questions—lots of them. My children know I plan to “stay in their business.” I make sure they understand that it's my love for them that compels me to be involved.

Pray over them. I remember hearing my mom and dad pray over all their children at night. I can still hear their voices as they lifted each one of us to the throne of grace. James 5:16 tells us, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” I have no doubt their earnest prayers played a powerful role in my life.

Today, I find myself doing the same thing on behalf of my family. When I stay on my knees and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to me, I receive guidance and counsel. It's one of the most valuable gifts I can ever give my children.

Set the rules. Help them guard their eyes, ears and hearts from influences that will negatively affect their spirits. This takes effort and consistency, but it's extremely important.

At the same time, allow them to enjoy acceptable entertainment that's fun and exciting. Plan family events and look for wholesome movies. Encourage their creative, athletic and musical abilities.

Thankfully, there's a great deal of uplifting gospel and Christian music being recorded today. It's a wonderful alternative to what's being offered in the secular marketplace.

Encourage them to make right choices. Remind young people that each time they stand up for what's right in the eyes of the

Lord, they gain strength. The more strength they gain, the better leaders they will become. Eventually, they'll be the ones influencing others to make godly choices.

Most teenagers feel different from their peers in one way or another. Let them know that being different on behalf of the Lord is a blessing, not a curse.

I'll always be grateful that my parents provided a moral compass for my siblings, my friends and me. I'm convinced that the biblical truths and ethical principles they stood on a generation ago still work today.

They were steady and wise. Looking back, I realize I could always depend on Mom and Dad for certain things.

Although the household rules were very strict, I knew that I could trust their discipline. They were fair and reasonable. Even in the midst of being punished, I never doubted their love for me because they showed it in so many ways.

Church was my family's second home. We had to go.

When we weren't at church service on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday, we were attending summer church camps, going to revivals, or off somewhere singing in the young people's choir. We were submerged in the things of the Lord and discovered what it was like to be in His presence.

It was a life-changing discovery. The Bible tells us, "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forever" (Ps. 16:11).

Mom and Dad kept us motivated. They encouraged each of us to achieve our full potential.

Dad in particular never lost sight of the fact that we were young and needed something to do. He showed us that a saved life was not a bored life.

When we weren't bowling, we were skating. When we weren't skating, we were playing baseball or running track. If we weren't playing sports, we were having concerts. Life was busy, and my parents were always involved.

Many times, our instinct is to shield the next generation from every ungodly thing. But that's impossible. Instead, we must equip them for whatever they may face.

Whether we're parents or not, we have a responsibility to plant a seed—say a prayer, get involved, be a role model. There's a generation counting on us—and the time to start making a difference is now.

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