

“*The Pastor’s Kid* is a must-read for PKs and their parents. It is also an invaluable guide for church members that will gently correct some misconceptions about how to minister to PKs. Piper speaks with the heart of not just a PK but a parent who is seeking to love his own children well. *The Pastor’s Kid* deeply stirred my memories of growing up and encouraged me to know that my feelings and journeys were not wasted.”

Samuel D. James, Editor, *Letter & Liturgy*

“Kermit thinks it isn’t easy being green; he should try being a pastor’s kid. Few roles are more tricky and taxing than growing up as the son or daughter of a minister. And few voices are more qualified to speak to that enigma than Barnabas Piper. *The Pastor’s Kid* is an insightful and winsome look at what it means to follow Jesus in a pressurized fishbowl of expectations and is laced with helpful advice to stay sane in the midst of it all. I wish I had had this book to help me make sense of life in my formative years.”

Jonathan Merritt, proud PK; Author,
Jesus Is Better Than You Imagined

“Barnabas Piper challenges us to put faith into action. Practical and insightful, *The Pastor’s Kid* is a must-read for anyone who wants a closer relationship with Christ.”

Ryan Shook, Author, *Firsthand: Ditching
Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own*

“Here’s straight talk to PKs, pastors, and churches about the unique hazards of growing up in a spiritual hothouse and the deep grace available to go forward.”

Don Sweeting, PK and father of four PKs;
President, Colorado Christian University

“The tragic celebrity culture that shrouds pastors and their families is a bit like applauding the tallest miniature horse. God is supposed to be the only one we make much of, not the pastor or his children. And yet our need for idols has placed a crushing weight on PKs so that they are, in the words of Barnabas Piper, *known of* and not *known*. As a PK myself I know all too well the euphoria of being known of and the utter emptiness of not being known. This book gives much-needed hope to families navigating the ‘reality show’ called church. Thank you, Barnabas Piper!”

Bryan Loritts, Senior Pastor, Abundant Life
Christian Fellowship; Author, *Insider Outsider*

“This book is well-written and preaches an important message. I don’t know of any other book that is designed to both help those who have been hurt and equip those in the ministry who are raising another generation of children. Cautions are raised and challenges issued, but grace and hope pervade the book.”

Bob Hayton, PK; Blogger,
Fundamentally Reformed

“As a PK, I know few understand the perspective from inside the church fishbowl. Barnabas Piper captures the fishbowl perspective and writes what a lot of us PKs have been thinking for a long time. But this book isn’t just for PKs. It’s for the church. *The Pastor’s Kid* is a case study on the effects of unrealistic expectations; those others place on us and the ones we place on ourselves. Every churchgoer should read this book.”

Sam S. Rainer III, PK raising more PKs;
Lead Pastor, West Bradenton Baptist Church;
Author, *Obstacles in the Established Church*

“A liberating and refreshing read. I wish every Christian would read this book.”

Jessica, PK

“Very grateful for this simple book that no one was thoughtful enough to write until you. Realizing I was not alone was a huge breakthrough for me.”

Paul, PK

“Thank you for showing me that I’m not alone.”

Daniel, PK

The Pastor's Kid

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For his sake I have
suffered the loss of all
things and count them
as rubbish, in order that
I may gain Christ and
be found in him, not
having a righteousness
of my own that comes
from the law, but that
which comes through
faith in Christ.

BARNABAS PIPER

*To Karsten, Ben, Abraham, and
Talitha—my siblings.*

Your roads are different than mine; so are your stories.

*All of us have had and will have our own
struggles and twists on our way.*

Each of you has inspired me and fed these pages.

Thank you, and I love you all.

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Foreword

You will ask, “Was it painful for me to read this book?” The answer is yes. For at least three reasons. First, it exposes sins and weaknesses and imperfections in me. Second, it is not always clear which of its criticisms attach to me and the church I love. Third, this is my son, and he is writing out of his own sorrows:

“Writing this book has been hard. Maybe it’s more accurate to say that a lot of hardship went into writing this book, some of it in my own family and some of it through the pain of other PKs I connected with along the way. So many PKs carry so much pain and anger and sorrow with them. Some of them have fallen into bitterness, and others are rightly doing the hard work of trust in Jesus to help them through.”

I am overwhelmingly thankful that Barnabas is in that last category. It took trust and courage to write this book. The road has been hard. And sometimes, as he says, “We need to pour out

what is boiling in us.” When that happens, pressure is relieved and people get burned.

But Barnabas is not out to burn. Not me or any pastor. His aim is healing. “That is part of why I wrote this book,” he says, “to help PKs make sense of, sort through, and express those bottled-up frustrations and pains.” Frustrations built up from carrying an “anvil-like weight,” of being the most “watched”—“the best known and the least known people in the church.”

But the boiling over does burn. “I have been hard on pastors throughout this book. I have pointed out weaknesses and tendencies and failures. I have prodded and demanded and pushed them to be different, to change, to become aware.” My suggestion for the reader is that, if it gets too hot in the boiler room, you take a break from the heat, and jump in the pool of chapter eight.

There is a stream of grace that runs through this book. You taste it along the way. But it becomes a pool at the end. A soothing. Barnabas is honest about his own struggles and failures. He has drunk deeply at the fountain of grace. He knows from experience the ultimate solution for all of us:

“I desire to point to Jesus as the turner of hearts and the lifter of all burdens ... Grace, the undeserved favor of God, through Jesus, is the source of life and personhood and identity ... It is in the freedom of Jesus’s overwhelming love that the PK can break out of false expectations and see what it is that makes Jesus happy.”

As it turns out, when the boiling is over, and the burns begin to heal, there is hope for PKs and pastors and churches. “It’s not all

bad news for PKs.” Through it all they have been unwitting, and sometimes unwilling, apprentices. They have seen—and many have benefited from—the bad and the good.

“We have seen the pleasures of ministry ... Helping mend a broken marriage, praying with a heartbroken widow, serving the destitute man who knocks at the door ... the close fellowship of a united church staff or ... the deep, humbling satisfaction of seeing God use faithful ministry over time to right a sinking ship of a church.”

Boiling over because of painful experiences may be unavoidable at some point, but Barnabas beckons his fellow PKs not to “wallow and bemoan them. Rather we must own what responsibilities are ours: to honor Jesus, to honor our fathers and mothers, to love and support the church, and to go about our lives not as victims but as the redeemed. Grace is here for all of us.”

And that includes the sinful and wounded pastors. “No man is adequate to be a pastor ... That is a job no person is up for, not alone, not without profound grace. And that is the key to all this: grace.” And, of course, it is true for the wife and mother, watching, with tears, the drama play out between her son and husband, or bearing the weight of her daughter’s rejection.

And finally there is grace for the church. “The church is our family, it’s the family that God gave us, so don’t give up on it. There isn’t a better place out there to be restored.”

When I received the manuscript of this book and read it, I gave a copy to our seventeen-year-old daughter. “Would you read this, and then talk to me about how I can be a better dad?”

Barnabas Piper

She did. It was a good talk. It's not over. I suspect she will have ideas about that when she is thirty and I am eighty. I hope she will be spared some sorrows because of her big brother's book. Of course, most of that hangs on me. And, as we have seen, on grace. Which is why I appreciated Barnabas's encouraging conclusion:

“But now I want to express thanks. I want to say that PKs are blessed to have parents who devote their lives to serving Jesus ... So thank you, pastors (and spouses). You have given your lives to serving Jesus and his church, and that is a blessing.”

John Piper

Introduction

March 31, 2013, Easter Sunday, was John Piper’s last as the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was the senior pastor there for nearly thirty-three years. During his time as pastor, the church had grown from a few hundred to a few thousand people. They went from a traditional Baptist church in a rickety old building on the east side of downtown to a multicampus megachurch spread across the Twin Cities area. It was a long and fruitful tenure by both numeric measurements and those more significant ones—souls changed, hearts drawn to Jesus, and a passion for the supremacy of God spread.

John Piper is my father.

March 31, 2013, was also my thirtieth birthday. If you’re quick with math, you’ll realize that means the entirety of my life up to that day had been spent as a pastor’s kid—a “PK.” It was all I had known. I moved away from Minnesota for college when I was eighteen years old. Over the next decade I got married, raised two children, moved to Nashville, saw my marriage come to a painful and unwanted end, changed careers, and now serve

at a church. But all that change and progress does not remove me from the reality of being a PK. Once a PK, always a PK. It is an indelible mark.

Every child faces challenges in his or her upbringing. Every family suffers from idiosyncrasies, oddities, and faults. Everyone is a sinner brought up by sinners, so our stories all include foibles and face-plants before God and man alike. But I have found that there is uniqueness to the challenges PKs face. The reality of being a sinner on display in a ministry family creates quite the spiritual and emotional Molotov cocktail. And so I write this book, not as some sort of exposé on the miserable lives we PKs lead or about my family in particular, but to describe the unique challenges PKs have faced being the children of ministers.

The life of a PK is complex, occasionally messy, often frustrating, and sometimes downright maddening. It can be a curse and a bane. But being a PK can also be a profound blessing and provide wonderful grounding for a godly life. Often the greatest challenges are the greatest grounding and the biggest falls are the best blessings. This polarity exemplifies the challenge it is to be a PK.

For PKs, Pastors, and Congregants

My aim in writing this book is threefold. First, I want to speak for PKs, not as an expert observer or master researcher, but as one of them. I want to speak with honesty, humility, and clarity on behalf of those who face these unique challenges and don't know what to say to describe their struggles or how to say it. I want to give voice to the PK who doesn't know what to do with his challenges.

Second, I want to speak to pastors. Ministers of the gospel, your children are in an enormously challenging position. You are in an equally challenging position. While the prudent among you know this, I fear you may not fully understand the depths of the struggle they face (or will face). This is not a book to point an accusatory finger at the failures of pastors, although some will be dealt with, but to assist you in avoiding and remedying those failures. For some pastors this will be a harsh wake-up call, a bucket of ice water in your sleeping face. And that's good. If you're sleeping, you need it.

Third, I write to the church, because the congregation has more responsibility than it knows to care for and ease the burden of the pastor and his family. Too often the church has fostered a culture that puts enormous pressure on the pastor and his family. And by "the church" I don't mean just the organization, although that is included. I mean the collection of people who make up the church. It is people, individually, who contribute to the burden PKs carry, and I hope this book opens some eyes to things that need to change.

So as you forge ahead, know my heart in this book. I desire to see the hearts of fathers turned to their children and children to their fathers (and mothers, but, being a good PK, I had to use the biblical phrasing). I long for burdens to be lifted and cast off, ones that have been carried since childhood. And I desire to point to Jesus as the turner of hearts and the lifter of all burdens.

What This Book Is Not

A final word about what you will find in these pages: one of the worst things that can happen in the relationship between reader

and book is for there to be misconceptions or faulty expectations. So let me be clear on what this book is and is not.

I am not George Barna or Dave Kinnaman. Research and statistics are not my forte, so what you are about to read is not extrapolations and conclusions based on surveys and numerical data. Neither, though, is it a memoir or some sort of tell-all exposé of the dirty secrets of my family. This is not an autobiography telling the story of my upbringing. I don't think that would be interesting. Also, to write a memoir well, one has to be an artistic genius.

Instead, this is the conglomeration of dozens upon dozens of conversations I have shared with fellow PKs. It is drawn from emails and stories they have sent me. It is the result of a lifetime of observing my own family and the families of numerous other pastors I have had the chance to know. It is drawn from my own experience and the experiences of those close to me. Rather than tell a series of vignettes, I have woven these hundreds of experiences into a single person—the “PK.” This means that I will share the story of the PK in broad, sweeping strokes. Not every PK will share all these experiences, but every PK will know of them.

I am not a church-health or pastoral-ministry expert either, so I will not offer a series of lessons or prescriptive chapters. I *am* an expert at being a PK (I can't really help that), so what you will find in these pages is the perspective of the PK shared in such a way as to help the church, the pastor, and my fellow PKs. My aim is to raise awareness of the struggles of PKs and give voice to a group of people who are often well recognized but little known.

The Pastor's Kid

When unpacking one's problems and struggles, it is easy to delve into psychology, developmental issues, family of origin, nature versus nurture, and the like. I am not qualified to do this either. Every PK has a different genetic makeup and a different environment in which they were brought up. Some are from tiny churches, and some from huge. Some moved around all the time, while others were at the same church for their entire childhood. Some are from distinctly conservative contexts, and others are from more liberal ones. All of this matters in the makeup of a PK. But I am not one to sort it out and explain it all. Instead, this will be a book of description, observation, and conglomeration.

I am so grateful for how this book has been received in the years since its initial release. I have heard from PKs ranging from middle school to middle age about how it puts into words their feelings and experiences. I have heard from young pastors and their spouses about how it's helped them prepare to bring children into ministry. And, maybe most gratifying of all, I have heard from experienced pastors about how it has helped them bridge the gap between them and their older children.

I've also received criticism from some pastors who feel unduly chastised or criticized. I've heard from others that this book makes a mountain out of a molehill. More than once I have heard from PKs that their parents aren't even willing to consider reading it because they see no issues and view this book as, at best, a waste of time and, more likely, as divisive and hurtful. My intent in this book is not to hurt anyone, but hurt may happen. Pastors may feel attacked. Churches may feel criticized. PKs may feel exposed or even misrepresented. Please know this: I respect those in pastoral ministry, I am devoted to Christ's church, and as a PK, all I want to do is be a voice to bring about healthy change.

We will start at the beginning, by baring the soul of the PK. As we do this, other things will be exposed too, including some deficiencies of the church and its leaders. We will spend ample time on these but not in a melancholy, introspective way. Rather, we will be looking for the hope and restoration PKs need. It is there to be found.

CHAPTER 1

What's Wrong With That Boy?

“**O**h, so you're a *PK!*” It's a punch line to a joke that doesn't even have to be told. That joke is my life, the life of a pastor's kid. PKs have a reputation. We are notorious troublemakers, rebels, rabble-rousers, and general miscreants. You can even tell we have a reputation because we get our own abbreviation. You don't see a teacher's kid getting called a “TK” or a salesman's kid getting called an “SK.” This reputation is justly earned in many cases and goes back a long way. (For example, Captain Kidd, notorious seventeenth-century pirate and Presbyterian minister's son.)

Just as common as the outright troublemaker, though, is the PK who cares nothing for the faith of his father, who exits the church either in a slow drift or a dead sprint with his middle finger flying high. Other PKs might never leave the church, but their staying is rote and habitual rather than committed and passionate. Much has been written about church kids leaving the church and the faith,¹ but these are *pastors'* kids.