

parenting
with
words of

grace

Building Relationships
with Your Children
One Conversation at a Time

William P. Smith

Foreword by PAUL DAVID TRIPP

“This book immediately affected the way I had conversations with my grandchildren about some teachable moments in their lives. Smith brings together Scripture and illustrations in a way that makes you want to do better in those conversations, and helps you know how to do it.”

Ed Welch, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

“If you’re like me, you might have read the title of this book, *Parenting with Words of Grace*, and felt the need to stifle a moan. *Oh, no . . . here comes the guilt!* Please don’t make that assumption. Like its title, this book is filled with words of grace: grace to you as a parent and grace to you as a child of the only Father who knows what it is to always speak with words of grace. It’s full of deeply satisfying encouragement for your soul and is written in a winsome and honest way. You’ll be glad you read it. You really will.”

Elyse Fitzpatrick, author, *Give Them Grace*

“A rich resource loaded with scriptural insight. Bible lovers will relish Smith’s use and application of Scripture. Parents will be comforted that they are not alone in some of their struggles and given helpful instructions on how to be good parents.”

Ajith Fernando, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka; author, *The Family Life of a Christian Leader* and *Discipling in a Multicultural World*

“*Parenting with Words of Grace* delivers on its title. In short, easy-to-read chapters, Bill Smith introduces parents to God’s amazing grace for their own lives and helps moms and dads understand how to apply that grace in their families. The wisdom found in these pages will help you love your kids in spite of their failures, trust God for the outcome of your parenting, and encourage your children through the trials they face.”

Marty Machowski, Executive Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church, Glen Mills, Pennsylvania; author, *Parenting First Aid* and *Long Story Short*

“I am allergic to formulaic, pedantic, ‘how-to’ Christian books on parenting. Thankfully, that is *not* what this book is. Bill Smith recognizes that gospel-shaped parenting is more like art than mathematics; we need to depend more on the Holy Spirit than any how-to manual! Most importantly, Smith urges Christian parents to see their God-given role as authoritative, yes, but also formative as they use their *words* and *conversations* to establish a Christ-centered relationship with their children that can continue for all eternity. I commend this book to you and have already benefited from it myself.”

Jon Nielson, Senior Pastor, Spring Valley Presbyterian Church, Roselle, Illinois; coeditor, *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry*

“Who doesn’t want to invite their children into a healthy, vibrant relationship? I know I do. Bill Smith gives a compelling vision for how our words and conversations shape our parenting and how, through our words, we are vehicles through which our children see God. I read this book and wanted to go talk to my kids. You will too.”

Courtney Reissig, author, *Glory in the Ordinary*

“A powerful and encouraging read! Bill Smith highlights the power of our words as motivators for our children to seek a real and lasting relationship with Jesus Christ. He offers encouragement for our failed words and help for our future words.”

Shona Murray, author, *Refresh: Embracing a Grace-Paced Life in a World of Endless Demands*

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To Cassie, Timmy, and Danny,
you've added so much to my life and to this book—
without you, both would be far less rich.

Contents

Foreword by Paul David Tripp	11
Introduction	15

PART 1: THE VISION

1 Parenting Is an Invitation	21
2 The Invitation Is Embedded in Your Conversations	29
3 How Jesus Talks to Estranged Friends	33
4 Extended Story: Sacred Space	39
5 You Talk with No Guarantee	43
6 You Speak out of the Grace You've Already Heard	49
7 Extended Story: "Get in the Van"	55
8 Your Kids Need You to Talk to Them . . . a Lot	61
9 Extended Story: Nanny's Funeral	67

PART 2: THE HOPE

10 Sometimes You Don't Want to Talk	73
11 Abraham Misspeaks for God	79
12 God Speaks for Abraham	85
13 Jesus Speaks for You	89
14 You Take Words to God	95

15	Practice Repenting for Misusing Your Mouth	99
16	You Hear Words from God	103
17	You Take Words to Your Kids	109
18	Speaking Truth and Love	115

PART 3: THE SKILL OF ENCOURAGEMENT

19	When Should You Encourage?	123
20	Encouragement Takes Time	129
21	Replace the Negatives at Home and Abroad	133
22	Search for the Positive in Seed Form	141
23	Be Encouraged When You're Tired of Encouraging	147

PART 4: THE SKILL OF HONESTY

24	The Goal of Honesty: Rescue	153
25	Think Before You Speak	159
26	Be a Mirror That Invites Participation	165
27	Aim for the Heart	171
28	Lead with Your Worst Foot Forward	177
29	Build Bridges with Your Failures	183
30	Expect Your Kids to Make Mistakes	189
31	Extended Story: Catching a Line Drive . . . or Not	197
32	Why You Really Do Want a Forgiving Lifestyle	201

	Afterword: You're a Megaphone	205
--	-------------------------------------	-----

	General Index	209
--	---------------------	-----

	Scripture Index	211
--	-----------------------	-----

Foreword

Some books are informative, and sometimes new information can change our lives. Some books confront, and sometimes we need someone to interrupt our private conversations to help us see ourselves with more accuracy and evaluate our behavior more humbly. Some books give hope. We all know that sometimes hope is hard to find, and because it is hard to find, joy is difficult to experience. And when you have no joy, it's hard to be motivated to do the uncomfortable things that we all have to do in this fallen world. What I appreciate about this book is that it does each of these things very well.

I am a father, and although my children are adults, I still talk to them, so what I read here was enormously revealing, helpful, and encouraging. As I read, a thousand parenting scenes from my life came back to me; some made me thankful, some made me laugh, and some caused me grief. But as I was reliving those scenes, four things came to mind.

1. *Our first moment with our daughter Nicole.* I will remember this moment forever. Nicole is adopted, and we first set our eyes on her at a gate that had been reserved for us at the Philadelphia airport. She was just four months old, and her escort carried her so that little Nikki was facing us as she approached. We were immediately emotional when we saw her little smiling face, but we fell apart when the escort handed this little human being to us and then faded into the background. In a moment a human life

had been handed to us and placed in our care. The inescapable significance of what it means to be a parent hit us harder than it had ever hit us before. God had placed a life in our hands—a totally dependent little person whose life would be largely shaped by what we decided for her, how we acted in relation to her, and what we would say to her.

The one we held in our hands would have her view of herself shaped by us and her knowledge of God formed by us. Her perspective on relationships would come from us, her sense of right and wrong would be sculpted by us, and all of this would be built by thousands and thousands of interactions we would have with her. We felt overwhelmed, unprepared, and unworthy, and because we did, we cried out to God for the grace to represent him well in this little one's life. As I have written elsewhere, we were impressed that few things are more important in life than to be God's tool for the formation of a human soul.¹

2. *The incredible power of words.* By words God created this amazing cosmos out of nothing. By words God revealed to us the story of redemption and all the explanatory truths attached to it. By words Jesus showed us the heart of the Father and the nature of his kingdom. By words Jesus healed the sick and brought dead people back to life. By words the apostle Paul explained to us what grace looks like and how it operates. By words Satan tempts us to doubt God's wisdom and goodness and to step beyond God's boundaries. Words are powerful.

With words you can bring tears to your child's eyes. With words you can give a hopeless child a reason to continue. With words you can help a lonely and alienated child feel loved and accepted. With words you can light fires of anger in a child's heart. With words you can calm the storm of your troubled child's emotions. With words you can help a spiritually blind child to see God. With words you can stimulate a rebellious child to consider doing

1. Paul David Tripp, *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 21.

what is right. With words you can begin the process of healing a broken relationship. With words you can help a child interpret the past and you can lay out warnings for the future.

Words are powerful. You will speak to your child, and what you say will always produce some kind of harvest in your child's heart and mind.

3. *Speaking the truth is not always helpful.* This may surprise you as you read it, but this book reminded me of how important it is to understand this concept. Truth can be a wonderful tool of grace or a weapon of destruction. You can say something true to your child, but in a way that is meant to hurt him. You can speak truth to your child in a public setting that unnecessarily embarrasses her. You can use truth to never let your child live beyond past wrongs. Truth is a tool of vengeance or a tool of forgiveness. It is a tool to tear down or to build up. Truth can open up a heart or cause it to be defensive. Few things are more important in your parenting than the way you use the tool of truth.

This is why the Bible calls us to “[speak] the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) or to only speak words “that give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). You will know things about your children—things about their personality, their strengths and weakness, their susceptibilities, their past choices, their level of maturity, their spirituality, their best and worst moments. It is nearly impossible to overestimate the importance of the way you use the truth that you know about your children in the thousands and thousands of moment-by-moment, day-by-day encounters that God has planned for you to have with them.

4. *The impossibility of what God calls us to do and say as parents.* It's simply not possible for people who have sin still living inside of them to do what God has called us to do and speak as God has called us to speak on our own. If we are going to speak as God's tools of wisdom, rescue, and transforming grace in the lives of our children, the thing that must happen again and again is not rescue from our children. No, we must be rescued from us.

We need to humbly admit that the words we say come from what is inside of us, not from who our children are and what they have done. We need the grace to admit that our words as parents reveal how much we still need the moment-by-moment rescue and forgiveness of God's grace. We need the grace to be more concerned about the sin that still lives in us than we are about the sin we see in our children. And we all need to remember that no one gives grace more lovingly and patiently than the parent who confesses how much he needs it himself. And finally, God never calls us to do something without enabling us to do it, and he never sends us somewhere without going with us.

These four thoughts were not only stimulated by this book, but they also form the reason why I think this book is so helpful and encouraging. Bill Smith knows the significance of the parental calling, he knows well the power of words, he understands that speaking truth is not always helpful, and he gets how dependent every parent is on God's ever-flowing bountiful supply of grace. Because of this, I can tell you for sure that this book will change the way you think about the way you talk not only to your child, but also to every other person in your life. But this book did something else to me and I think it will to you too: it made me even more thankful for the person, presence, power, and grace of Jesus.

I joyfully recommend any book that reminds parents of the grace of Jesus, because living with that awareness changes how you act toward and how you speak to your children, and this book does that as well as any parenting book I have read. Read and allow God to use Smith's wise counsel to sharpen you as God's tool of grace in the lives of those he has entrusted to your care.

Paul David Tripp
December 2018

Introduction

It was a difficult conversation, and it wasn't getting better. My son and I squared off in the living room, and you could feel the tension building with each interchange as each person dug in, hardening his position. You could see it in our faces. You could hear it in our voices and in the words we used. The situation wasn't out of control yet, but there was no sign of it moving in a healthy direction either.

Then at one particularly strained moment I was struck by the thought, "Be really careful right now, because what you say next will impact your relationship with him well beyond today." That moment of insight helped reshape what I said. It didn't immediately defuse everything, but you could sense the atmosphere in the room starting to change. We were now working toward a resolution rather than further escalation. Thinking about the future and what I wanted for the two of us in that future affected what I said in the present and helped set us on a different course.

That conversational moment was uniquely charged, but at its essence, it was like any other. The things you choose to say or not to say, along with how you say them, will either invite the people around you to enjoy greater relationship with you or warn them against having anything more to do with you. Every conversation comes with a silent, implied question that asks, "Would you be interested in building an ongoing friendship with me in the future based on how you are experiencing me right now?"

The awareness of that unspoken invitation was profoundly helpful to me in transforming what I was about to say to my son and how I said it, both in that moment and in many conversations since.

That awareness was also profoundly unsettling. I cannot begin to count the number of destructive things I had already said to him over the course of his life or the harmful ways in which I said them. Worse, not only did this insight arrive too late to avoid a checkered past, but it hasn't always had the power to reshape conversations with my son since. My communication failures after that day are also too many to count.

But that doesn't leave me hopeless. Thankfully, what is true of us and our words is also true of God. When he speaks to us, he not only reveals his character and personality, but he also reveals what he's like relationally. Those interactions give us reason to trust him as we learn how he treats us, especially during those times when we make his life more difficult—such as those times when we speak poorly to our children.

As God speaks to us, taking into account our weaknesses, our immaturity, our fearfulness, our arrogance, our ignorance, and even our mistrustfulness, we discover someone who is worth knowing—someone who does not hold our sins against us, but treats us better than we deserve.

When he speaks kindly yet directly to us, he gives us reasons to trust him and in turn to want more of him. His words invite long-term relationship as we (re)experience the gospel through them. And as you hear him talk to you, you learn to speak to your children in similar ways that give them reasons to want to continue their conversation with you despite your many missteps.

Part 1 of this book, “The Vision,” explores how your words, like God's, either invite or repel long-term relationship. Relationships are dynamic. Ever changing. Each conversation you have alters the relationship, nudging it in one direction or another. The innumerable conversations you have with your kids are daily op-

opportunities to invite them to enjoy building a satisfying, long-term relationship with you. This kind of relationship models what they could have with the God who longs to communicate with people so much that he gave us the gift of language in the first place.

Part 2, “The Hope,” recognizes the sad reality, however, that you haven’t always said things that foster positive relationships with your kids. Before you can confidently embrace a good future with them, you need reasons to believe that your past failures do not control that future. You need hope that you have not damaged your relationship with your child so badly that it is beyond repair.

The confidence you need can only come from seeing that God does not leave you to your failures. Instead, he continues relating to you, inserting himself into your life to restore you to being the parent he always intended you to be. He comes to you to show you ways of living righteously, even after you’ve failed, that are guaranteed to restore your relationship with him and that will invite your child to something far better than the two of you have had.

Parts 3 and 4 explore the skills you need to offer that invitation by using Paul’s broad rubric of “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) as a guide. Both sections will keep tying what we say to our children back to what we’ve heard from God. We can communicate gospel-rich content that invites them to gospel-centered relationships—with God and with ourselves—only when we speak out of our own reliance on this same gospel.

Part 3, “The Skill of Encouragement,” studies the antidote to conversations that more easily speak truth that is not concerned for the other person—when “truth” leaves out love. If that’s a temptation for you, then you want to learn to speak truth that builds your children up rather than tears them down.

Part 4, “The Skill of Honesty,” looks at the opposite problem of withholding truth out of fear that the other person won’t like it—when “love” leaves out truth. If that’s your tendency, then you’ll want to learn to speak truth courageously, even if it leads to

awkward moments, out of a desire to help your children become strong enough to turn away from things that would hurt them.

Let me say one more thing to encourage you before we get started. You don't have to wait until you and your child are in a relationally healthy place to have conversations grounded in the gospel that hold out hope for a good future with him. The gospel doesn't require a positive starting point. It doesn't even require a neutral one. In fact, it's used to entering into the brokenness of human relationships. It thrives there.

You probably already know that. In your own life, the gospel had to begin at a negative place—God came to you and started talking with you after you'd ruined your relationship with him and dug yourself a hole you couldn't climb out of. He didn't wait to get involved until you and he were on good speaking terms. Instead, he optimistically entered into your life, believing that things between the two of you didn't have to stay the way they were. His involvement alone guarantees that your relationship with him will be better than what it was.

Similarly, despite tainted or even broken relationships with your children, you can learn to engage them conversationally in ways that begin to undo the effects of past brokenness and offer them a better future—a better future with you that gives them a taste of what a future could be like with God.

Part 1

THE VISION

Parenting involves countless interactions through which you invite potential future peers to an ongoing relationship if they should so choose.

Parenting Is an Invitation

Parenting doesn't work. It woos.

After I finished talking to a mother's group about parenting, one of the ladies came up to me and said, "I see how I've not been very gracious with my kids, so, if I were more gracious with the things that I say and do, then things would probably work better at my house, right?"

Now I don't think she's unusual, but she missed the point of what I was trying to say. The point of parenting is not that things would work better in our homes—that life would be a little easier and that things would run more smoothly. That's not the goal, but it is what she wanted. And so she was looking for some kind of method that, once mastered, would guarantee certain results if only she invested the right amount of time and effort. She wanted something that works.

Parenting doesn't "work." Parenting requires you to invest time and energy without knowing for sure what the outcome will be. That's true of all relationships, but it's surprising when you realize that you're going to pour yourself into your children, bend your life around them, sacrifice for them, change your world for them, and yet have no guarantee they'll respond well.

Who wants that? I don't. I want some certainty. I want some sense that if I say the right thing and do the right thing, then my kids will respond positively to me, and I'll at least get some of the result I'm looking for. Only, there is no certainty. That's probably not what you want to hear. I know it's not what I want to hear.

You and I are not alone. A father put it this way: "I know it's not right, but I'm more inclined to start conversations if I know there's going to be a payoff. If I know that what I'm about to say is going to work, then I'm all in. But if I don't know, if I'm not sure, then I tend to pull back. I'm hesitant to say anything." He's looking for something that increases his odds of a favorable result. He's looking for a guaranteed return before he invests.

I think he's talking for a lot of us. Parenting, however, is not about figuring out the right thing to do or to say to generate a certain outcome; it's about a person to love. And when you're talking about loving a person, you realize there are no formulas that always work, which means there are no guarantees and no certain return on your investment.

Unfortunately, in my experience as a counselor and pastor (and as a parent!), people want that return. And they want it now. And so they talk with their friends and mentors, read books and go to seminars, open to any strategy that holds out hope that they can get as close to a guaranteed result as possible.

They come with a clearly defined problem—either the child is doing something that the parents need to stop or the child is not doing something that the parents want him to start—then they search for a method that promises to address the problem they see.

But therein lies the trap. When you define parenting as an adult-initiated resolution to a problem created by your child, then you'll think primarily in terms of getting your child back in line. In that case, parenting becomes a negative interaction that's

trying to end the domestic tension generated between what you want and what your child is doing.

So how do you avoid the trap? You refuse to let yourself think only in terms of what you should or shouldn't do. You make yourself look past the problem to the person—your child—which gets you to think in relational terms not merely behavioral ones.

You think about what it means to love your children in the moment more than loving what you want from them or even what you want for them. It's only as you see and value them as individuals that you have any hope of developing healthy connections with them. Start then by considering, at their most basic, who are they? What's their most fundamental identity?

First and foremost, they're not yours. They're God's. He made them and takes primary responsibility for them. They come under your care only secondarily and even then, only temporarily.

They are your children—they may even have come from your body—but they are also autonomous beings in their own right. When God made them, he did not consult you. You picked out none of their attributes, their virtues, their talents, their gifts, their weaknesses, their insecurities, or their struggles.

In that sense, they are not mini-me's—smaller versions of you whose reason for existence is to reflect your glory and make you look good. Nor are they a slightly subhuman species that needs to be socialized through the use of clever charts to elicit good behavior until they're old enough to survive on their own. They are images of God, independent of you, yet related to you.

That means they are eternal beings, who, having begun life, will continue living indefinitely. Think about the maturity gap between you and them right now. Regardless of how great it is, it will continue to shrink as time goes by, becoming less significant until it's immaterial. In fact, they will surpass you in many areas, if they haven't already. Look into the future: how important will your twenty-five year head start be when you are both ten thousand

years old? As your children grow and mature, by God's design, they and you have the potential to become peers.

Parenting, therefore, means I invest in these fellow human beings, but I am not wrapping my world around them nor am I trying to get them to wrap theirs around me. Instead, parenting is the sum total of interactions between two human beings whereby I regularly invite a slightly younger person to a relationship that increasingly closes the maturity gap between us.

God Invites You—You Invite Your Child

The good news for God's people is that you already know what this kind of relationship is like. Even if you're only just getting to know him, you now see things much more like he does than you did before—the gap has shrunk because you've grown. And it will continue to shrink as your Father in heaven parents you.

The apostle Paul talks about how God's people develop, until collectively we are a body whose maturity in every respect matches its head, who is Christ (Eph. 4:15). In the Psalms, Asaph makes obscure comments about people being gods, hinting that we might be more than meets the eye (Ps. 82:6), while Peter declares outright that by God's power, we can now share in his divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3–4; see also Gal. 2:20; 1 John 3:2).

We don't become God. Nor will we ever be God's equal. But God plans a long-term relationship with us, such that we share in his nature and, while not equal to him, we become a partner suitable to him (Eph. 5:31–32). We grow as he interacts with us in the present, with an eye toward the future. Much of that interaction comes from listening to him speak to us—certainly as we pray and even more clearly in the Scriptures.

He talks, and his words draw you to him in the moment because each time he speaks, he tells you about himself. He tells you what he's like—what he values, what's important to him, and what's not. He tells you where his commitments lie and what he thinks is essential in life.

But his words also tell you what he's like relationally—how he treats people, how he expects relationships to work, the role he plays in others' lives, and the role they play in his. And you learn that he doesn't simply treat you well when you've been good. He treats you well when you've not been good—not holding your sins against you, treating you better than you deserve, and all the time speaking kindly yet directly to you. He talks to you in ways you want to be talked to, giving you reasons to want more of him.

As you think about what he's like as a person and how he relates to people, you realize, "I could like someone like that. If that's the kind of person he is and if that's how he treats people, then I want more of that. I want more of him. I'd like to get to know him better."

That's when you realize that his words do more than simply engage you in the present moment. They carry an implied invitation for the future that asks, "Based on what I just said, do you think I am someone who is worth getting to know? Based on how I just spoke to you, am I someone you'd like to have a long-term relationship with?"

His words give you reason to trust him. You listen to him talk in the Bible to people who are weak, damaged, compromised, or in danger, and you discover that he doesn't take advantage of them. He doesn't crush them. Doesn't push them away. Doesn't hate them. His words don't break relationships. Instead, he uses words to foster greater relationship.

As he speaks, we experience the grace of the gospel and it transforms us, becoming part of us, so that his words become part of us. We then speak to those around us in ways similar to how he's spoken to us.

The same dynamic between you and God is at work between you and your children. Every time the possibility of a conversation comes up, you are communicating exactly the same things to them that God communicates to you: "This is what I am like as a

person—this is what I value; this is what’s important to me; this is how I think about life; this is how I think about you.”

And you’re also communicating what you’re like relationally: “This is what I’m like in a relationship—this is how I treat people; this is how I interact; these are the kinds of things that I say; this is the way that I say them.”

And just like God, you’re not only communicating those things about the present moment, but you’re also inviting the people around you to something more. Whether you choose to speak or choose not to speak, you’re not only telling who you are and what you’re like relationally, but you’re also asking, “Based on what I just said, do you want less of me or more?”

Here’s the kicker: you’re always doing that. You can’t help it. Our children—who in the normal course of life spend a significant amount of their most formative years with us—hear this embedded invitation very clearly. The things we choose to say or not to say, along with the way that we say them, are either an invitation to, or a warning against, greater relationship.

Parenting then is the privilege of wooing potential future peers—smaller, less developed images of God—inviting them, if they so choose, to vertical and horizontal relationships that could outlast time.

Now do you see why parenting doesn’t “work”? It can’t. You cannot force your children to love you or want to be with you or work well with you. But you can woo. You can give them an experience of living in God’s world that invites them to have more. You can use words to love them, pursue them, train them, and engage them like God uses words with you. In doing so your kids will have the chance to sense his character and nature through you, which will help them decide whether or not they’d like more of you and more of him.

This kind of parenting will leave you tired and desperate because you’ll realize how little control you have over your child’s heart and how few abilities to reach it. That’s a good awareness

because it will drive you back to Jesus. And as he meets you in your need, you'll be that much better equipped to invite your kids to that same experience for themselves.

This book is an invitation to experience God's heart with your kids, to experience God parenting you as you parent them.

How you speak to your kids *today* will impact your relationship with them *tomorrow*.

As a parent, your words are powerful. *What you say* and *how you say it* has the potential to either invite your children into deeper relationship with you or push them away. What's more, in a very real sense, your words represent—or misrepresent—God's words to *his* children—meaning they have the power to shape how your children view their heavenly Father.

Offering practical guidance for grace-filled communication in the midst of the craziness of everyday life, this accessible guide will help you speak in ways that reflect the grace God has shown to you in the gospel.

"This book immediately affected the way I had conversations with my grandchildren about some teachable moments in their lives."

Ed Welch, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

"This book is filled with words of grace: grace to you as a parent and grace to you as a child of the only Father who knows what it is to always speak with words of grace. It's full of deeply satisfying encouragement for your soul."

Elyse Fitzpatrick, author, *Give Them Grace*

"Parents will be comforted that they are not alone in some of their struggles and given helpful instructions on how to be good parents."

Ajith Fernando, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka; author, *The Family Life of a Christian Leader*

WILLIAM P. SMITH (PhD, Rutgers University; MDiv, Westminster Theological Seminary) is a pastor, counselor, author, and retreat speaker who has served several churches, been a faculty member of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation, and taught practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Loving Well (Even If You Haven't Been)* and numerous other books and booklets.

PARENTING

