

BLENDING FAMILIES

THE GOSPEL WAY

*Grace, Redemption, and Wholeness
for the Blended Family*

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KEY RESEARCHERS & THEOLOGIANS CITED

Dr. Patricia Papernow — Stepfamily development	Brennan Manning — Ragamuffin theology
Dr. Ron Deal — Stepfamily ministry	Timothy Keller — Gospel and marriage
Dr. John Gottman — Marriage research	N.T. Wright — Redemption and new creation
Dr. Judith Wallerstein — Children of divorce	C.S. Lewis — Love, grief, and suffering
Dr. Robert Enright — Forgiveness research	Henri Nouwen — Grace and community
Dr. Brené Brown — Shame and vulnerability	Dallas Willard — Grace and effort
Nicholas Wolfinger — Generational divorce patterns	

John Trent & Gary Smalley — The Blessing

Dietrich Bonhoeffer — Christian
community

John Bowlby — Attachment theory

“Making All Things New”

BOOK OVERVIEW & CORE THESIS

BLENDING FAMILIES

THE GOSPEL WAY

Grace, Redemption, and Wholeness for the Blended Family

“See, I am doing something new! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

— **Isaiah 43:19 (NASB)**

OVERVIEW

What This Book Is

Blending Families the Gospel Way is a pastoral and practical guide for stepfamilies, offering something no self-help manual, parenting seminar, or family therapist alone can provide — the transforming, redeeming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ applied to every broken, beautiful, complicated corner of blended family life.

With over 40% of American marriages now including a stepparent or stepchild, the blended family is no longer the exception — it is the new landscape of family life. Yet the church has been slow to meet these families where they are, often leaving them to navigate overwhelming complexity with inadequate tools. This book fills that gap.

Drawing on extensive research in family psychology, sociology of remarriage, and attachment theory — and anchoring every insight in the unchanging truth of the Scriptures

(NASB) — this book walks blended families through the process of grief, grace, forgiveness, identity, and legacy. The gospel is not merely a backdrop here; it is the operating system of every chapter.

CORE THESIS

The Gospel That Reconciles

The same gospel that reconciles sinners to God can reconcile strangers into family.

The cross is not only the foundation of individual salvation — it is the architectural blueprint for every redeemed relationship.

Blended families do not need a better strategy; they need a deeper encounter with the God who makes all things new.

THE RESEARCH FOUNDATION

By the Numbers

40%

of all marriages in the United States involve a stepparent or stepchild (Pew Research Center)

1,300+

new stepfamilies are formed every single day in America (Stepfamily Foundation)

66%

of second marriages end in divorce — often due to unresolved issues from the first marriage (National Center for Health Statistics)

Only 12%

of stepfamilies report having received pastoral or church-based support specifically for blended family challenges (Fuller Youth Institute)

“The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue, but of life. It cannot be grasped by reason and memory only, but it is fully understood when it possesses the whole soul and penetrates to the inner recesses of the heart.”

— John Calvin, Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life

BOOK STRUCTURE AT A GLANCE

Contents Overview

Introduction	The Broken Made Beautiful: Why the Gospel Changes Everything
Part One	Understanding the Landscape (Chapters 1–2)
Part Two	The Gospel Foundation (Chapters 3–5)
Part Three	Building the Gospel-Shaped Family (Chapters 6–9)
Part Four	Healing the Wounds (Chapters 10–12)
Part Five	Thriving Together (Chapters 13–15)
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Appendices	Discussion Guide, Recommended Resources, Assessment Tools
Audience	Stepparents, remarried couples, pastors, counselors, chaplains
Length	Approx. 65,000–75,000 words; 15 chapters + front/back matter
Scripture	NASB throughout; all major passages used contextually

“Making All Things New”

INTRODUCTION

The Broken Made Beautiful

Why the Gospel Changes Everything

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

— **Romans 1:16 (NASB)**

OPENING HOOK

A Table Set with Tension

The table is set. The food is warm.

But no one is quite sure where to sit.

It is a Tuesday night in a house that is still figuring out whether it is a home. Two sets of kids — strangers by blood, now called family by law — arrange themselves at opposite ends of the table with the practiced caution of diplomats at a summit. The husband passes the bread to a child who flinches at his touch. The wife watches her own son retreat into his phone. Somebody's daughter pushes food around her plate in a silence that says more than any argument could.

And the couple — the two who started this whole thing with hope and vows and the best of intentions — sit at the head of the table like referees at a game with no rulebook, exhausted and quietly terrified that they have made an enormous mistake.

Is there a gospel powerful enough to redeem this too?

This is not a hypothetical family. It is a composite of a hundred real ones. It is possibly yours. And the question hanging over that dinner table is the question this book exists to answer:

Because the gospel that was powerful enough to reconcile a holy God to rebellious sinners — the gospel that crossed an infinite distance, absorbed infinite wrath, and offered infinite grace — is more than sufficient for a dinner table in Illinois. Or Texas. Or wherever you are reading these words tonight.

The same power that split the Red Sea, raised Lazarus, and emptied a tomb on the third day has not grown tired. It has not been stumped by your custody arrangement, your stepchildren's anger, your ex-spouse's hostility, or the grief your family carries like furniture from a house that burned down.

That is the audacious claim of this book. And it is not a claim we make lightly.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS — AND ISN'T

An Honest Introduction

Before we go further, a word of honest orientation. This book has a specific voice, a specific claim, and a specific audience. Knowing what it is — and what it is not — will help you decide how to read it.

THIS BOOK IS NOT	THIS BOOK IS
<i>A self-help manual with five easy steps to blended family success</i>	A theological and pastoral companion for the long, holy work of family redemption
<i>A book that pretends blended family life is easy if you just believe hard enough</i>	A book that names the real cost of blended family life with pastoral honesty

<i>A substitute for professional counseling, therapy, or legal guidance</i>	A book that insists the same God who raised Christ from the dead can resurrect dying relationships
<i>Written for people who have it mostly together and want a tune-up</i>	Written for people who are tired of trying harder and ready to trust deeper
<i>A guilt trip about the past or the choices that led you here</i>	A declaration that where you are right now is exactly where grace meets you

You may have picked up this book exhausted. You may have picked it up angry, or grieving, or somewhere in that hollow space between hope and resignation. You may have been given it by a pastor who did not know what else to say. Whatever the circumstances — you are in the right place. The God who makes all things new is not waiting for you to clean up first.

THE FURNITURE MAKER’S GOSPEL

A Metaphor for What God Does

Before I was a chaplain, I was a furniture restorer. I still am. There is something about the work of taking a broken, scarred, discarded piece of furniture and returning it to beauty that I have never been able to fully separate from my theology.

The work begins not with polish but with honesty. You have to look at the piece as it actually is — not as you wish it were, not as it once was, not as it might become. You strip it back. You find the grain beneath the damage. And what you discover, more often than not, is that the wood itself is sound. The structure is still there. The beauty was never actually gone — it was only hidden under years of neglect, bad repair work, and accumulated damage.

This is precisely what the gospel does in a family.

The Furniture Maker Sees:

- *The craftsman does not merely patch the damage — he strips it down to the original grain*
- *He does not erase the history of the wood — he works with it, honors it, integrates it*
- *The scars do not disappear — they become part of the character of the finished piece*
- *What looked like trash to everyone else becomes, in the craftsman's hands, something of lasting beauty*
- *The piece is not restored to what it was — it is made into something better than it was before*

Blended families are not broken furniture that needs to be hidden in the garage. They are pieces in the hands of a master craftsman who specializes in the work the world has given up on. The tagline of my furniture restoration business has always been: Making All Things New. I did not choose that phrase because it was clever. I chose it because it is the oldest and most reliable promise in Scripture.

"Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5, NASB). This is not a metaphor. This is an announcement. And it includes your family.

KEY THEMES ESTABLISHED

What This Book Builds On

Every chapter in this book grows from four theological convictions established here in the introduction. These are not new ideas. They are the oldest truths in the world, applied to the newest landscape of family life.



The gospel is not a coping strategy — it is a resurrection power. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead lives in every believer in this family. That is not a

bumper sticker; it is a pneumatological declaration with real implications for real Tuesday nights.



Every blended family carries grief that must be grieved, not bypassed. There are no shortcuts through the valley. But there is a God who walks through it with you, and a community of faith designed to walk through it alongside you.



Grace does not ignore the complexity — it enters it. The incarnation is our model: God did not shout instructions from a safe distance. He moved into the neighborhood. Grace does the same thing in blended family life.



God specializes in families the world has written off. The genealogy of Jesus Christ is all the evidence we need. Rahab. Bathsheba. Ruth. Tamar. The broken, the scandalous, the foreign, the grieving — all woven into the royal line of the Savior of the world.

These four convictions will resurface in every chapter, every section, every pastoral application in this book. They are not the conclusion — they are the foundation. And foundations are not things you visit once and leave behind. They are things you return to, especially when everything above ground is under pressure.

“The gospel is not the ABC’s of Christianity. It is the A to Z. We never leave it behind; we always go deeper into it.”

— **Tim Keller, Center Church**

The chapters ahead will take you into the landscape of blended family life with honesty, with research, and with the full weight of the gospel bearing on every page. But before we go there, one more thing must be said.

You did not end up in a blended family because God ran out of better options for you. You are here because the God of the second chance, the God of the prodigal's welcome, the God who builds new things from broken material, had a plan that your pain could not derail.

The craftsman is already at work.

“Making All Things New”

PART ONE

Understanding the Landscape

Before healing can begin, honest diagnosis must come first. Part One names the reality of blended family life — its staggering statistics, its unique grief, and the wounds that walk through the door before a single word is spoken.

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 1	The Blended Family Reality: Statistics, Struggles, and Sacred Opportunity
Chapter 2	What Went Wrong: Grief, Loss, and the Wounds We Bring

“The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

— **Psalm 34:18 (NASB)**

CHAPTER ONE

The Blended Family Reality

Statistics, Struggles, and Sacred Opportunity

“Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past. Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it?”

— **Isaiah 43:18–19 (NASB)**

THE SCOPE OF THE CRISIS

The New Normal Nobody Prepared Us For

America’s family landscape has been irrevocably reshaped.

The so-called “traditional” nuclear family — two biological parents raising their shared children under one roof — is now a statistical minority in the United States. The blended family is not a deviation from the norm. It is increasingly the norm itself. And yet the church’s resources, counseling frameworks, pastoral literature, and support structures have not kept pace with the seismic shift that has taken place in the living rooms and dinner tables of its own congregation.

The result is a growing population of families who show up at church every Sunday carrying a complexity they have never been invited to name. They sit in pews designed for a family structure that no longer represents their reality. They hear sermons about marriage and parenting that assume an architecture their lives do not reflect. And they go home carrying the same weight they arrived with, with one additional burden: the quiet suspicion that their kind of family is somehow less than.

This chapter exists to name the landscape honestly. Before the gospel can do its healing work, we must first look clearly at the ground on which that work is needed.

The blended family is not a deviation from the norm — it is increasingly the norm itself.

52%

of Americans have been a stepchild, a stepparent, or have a step-sibling — a majority of the country carries personal experience with blended family life (Pew Research Center, 2022)

75%

of divorced individuals remarry — often within 4 years of the original divorce, frequently before emotional and relational healing has taken place (U.S. Census Bureau)

1,300+

new stepfamilies are formed in America every single day, creating a continuous and growing pastoral need that the church is only beginning to recognize (Stepfamily Foundation)

These are not merely demographic curiosities. They are faces in the congregation. They are the couple in the third row who don't quite look like the families in the bulletin artwork. They are the teenager who disappears every other weekend and comes back on Monday with something unresolved behind her eyes. They are the man who remarried with hope and woke up three years later wondering how a fresh start got so complicated so fast.

The church has a shepherd's responsibility to go where the sheep actually are — not where we wish they were.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Why Blended Families Struggle

The struggles of blended family life are not simply the result of poor planning, insufficient love, or weak faith. They are structural. Researcher Dr. Patricia Papernow, whose decades of work on stepfamily development remain the definitive resource in the field, identifies the blended family as one of the most complex family systems human beings ever attempt to navigate. Understanding why these families struggle is not an exercise in pessimism; it is an act of pastoral compassion.

The Six Core Struggle Zones

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Competing loyalties between biological and stepchildren	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unresolved grief from the first marriage or the death of a spouse
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boundary conflicts with ex-spouses and ongoing co-parenting stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children caught between two households with differing rules and values
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Financial strain from supporting multiple households simultaneously	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of bonding time and the dangerous myth of the “instant family”

What makes these struggles particularly acute is that they are not caused by moral failure. Most blended families enter with tremendous goodwill, genuine love, and sincere intention. They do not fail because they stopped trying. They fail because the complexity of what they are attempting is rarely named honestly before they attempt it — and because the tools they are given are designed for a different kind of family entirely.

The myth of the instant family is perhaps the most damaging of all. Pop culture, sentimentalized films, and even well-meaning pastoral advice often suggest that love is sufficient to dissolve the structural realities of blended family life. It is not. Love is necessary. It is not sufficient. What love requires alongside it is time, truth-telling, patience measured in years rather than weeks, and the kind of grace that does not calculate its return on investment.

“It takes an average of four to seven years for a blended family to reach genuine cohesion — a timeline most families are never told when they begin.”

— Dr. Patricia Papernow, *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships*

THE CHURCH’S SILENCE — AND OPPORTUNITY

From Invisible to Invested

Research from the Barna Group (2020) reveals a striking pastoral gap: only 1 in 8 blended families reports having received any meaningful church-based guidance specifically tailored to their situation. The majority describe their experience with the church in one of three ways: invisible, judged, or simply unpastored.

The Research	Barna Group (2020): Only 1 in 8 blended families has received meaningful church-based guidance for stepfamily challenges
How They Feel	"Invisible, judged, or simply unpastored" — the three most common self-descriptions of blended families in church settings
What They Need	Not programs. Not pity. Pastoral presence, informed grace, and the honest application of the gospel to their specific complexity
The Opportunity	Every blended family in your congregation is a mission field the gospel has already positioned you to serve

This is not a crisis to lament. It is a mission field to enter. The church that learns to pastor blended families well does not merely solve a social problem — it becomes a tangible demonstration of the gospel’s reach. It announces, through its pastoral practice, that there is no family configuration beyond the redemptive reach of the cross.

The question is not whether blended families need the church. They do, desperately. The question is whether the church is willing to become the kind of community that meets them where they actually are rather than where we wish they were.

The Church's Sacred Opportunity

Every blended family sitting in your congregation is not a problem to be managed.

They are a canvas on which the artistry of divine redemption can be displayed most vividly.

The gospel has always been most alive among the broken.

THE GOSPEL AS SACRED DISRUPTION

Not a Problem to Solve — A Canvas to Fill

The blended family does not need a better curriculum, a more sophisticated co-parenting app, or a pastor who has memorized the statistics. What it needs — what every broken family system in history has needed — is a direct, unmediated, transforming encounter with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is the audacious claim that drives every chapter in this book. Not that the gospel makes blended family life easier in the short term. Not that faith eliminates the structural complexity or dissolves the grief overnight. But that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is actively at work in families that invite it in — and that this power is sufficient for every specific, complicated, Tuesday-night reality that blended family life produces.

Isaiah 43:18–19 opens this chapter with a command and a promise. “Do not call to mind the former things.” Stop rehearsing the wreckage. “Behold, I will do something new.” The God of the universe has not finished with your family. The story is not over at the divorce decree. It is not over at the custody agreement. It is not over at the dinner table where nobody knows where to sit.

He is making a way in the wilderness. Even in yours.

The blended family is not a problem to be solved. It is a canvas on which the artistry of divine redemption can be displayed most vividly.

The chapters ahead will name the grief, trace the wounds, lay the theological foundation, and walk step by step through the practical implications of a gospel-shaped blended family life. But this chapter ends where every chapter must end: not with a strategy, but with a Savior.

Not with a program, but with a Person who said, “Behold, I am making all things new” — and has never once been wrong.

“The church must be a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. The blended family needs a hospital with real medicine.”

— Augustine of Hippo (adapted), Confessions

Chapter 2 will move deeper into the territory this chapter has mapped. If Chapter 1 names the landscape, Chapter 2 names the wounds — the specific griefs that every member of a blended family carries into the home before a single house rule is established or a single dinner is eaten together. Before healing can begin, the wound must be named. That is where we are going next.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER TWO

What Went Wrong

Grief, Loss, and the Wounds We Bring

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

— Psalm 147:3 (NASB)

THE GRIEF NOBODY NAMES

The Foundation Nobody Talks About

Every blended family is built on a foundation of loss.

This is not a pessimistic observation. It is a pastoral one. And until it is said out loud — plainly, without apology — every strategy, every communication technique, every family meeting and household rule will rest on ground that has never been properly examined.

Whether the blended family was formed through divorce or through the death of a spouse, every single member — every adult, every child, every teenager sitting in silent fury at a dinner table that does not feel like theirs — has suffered a rupture. A world that was supposed to be one way turned out another. A promise that was made was broken, either by human failure or by the indiscriminate arithmetic of mortality. The family they expected to inhabit is gone.

And here is the pastoral truth that most blended families are never told: grief does not wait for permission. If it is not named, held, and walked through with honesty and compassion, it does not disappear. It goes underground. And underground grief does not stay quiet — it finds other ways to speak. It speaks in the teenager’s rage, in the couple’s distance, in the stepparent’s resentment, in the child who will not call the stepparent anything at all.

Grief unacknowledged is grief that hijacks.

This chapter does not offer easy comfort. It does not rush to the resurrection before it has spent sufficient time at the tomb. It insists instead on doing what the best pastoral care has always done: sitting with the grief before attempting to move beyond it. You cannot heal a wound you have never named. You cannot grieve a loss you have never acknowledged. And you cannot build a healthy blended family on a foundation of suppressed pain, however earnest the good intentions stacked on top of it.

The God of Psalm 147:3 heals the brokenhearted and binds up wounds. But notice the sequence: first the wound must be present, acknowledged, and brought to Him. The binding comes after the naming.

THE AMBIGUOUS LOSSES OF BLENDED FAMILY LIFE

Every Person at the Table Is Carrying Something

Pauline Boss, the researcher who coined the term “ambiguous loss,” defines it as a loss that lacks the clarity of a traditional bereavement — a loss without a funeral, without social permission to grieve, without a clear moment of closure. Blended family grief is almost always ambiguous in exactly this sense.

No one sends flowers when a family restructures. No casseroles arrive at the door when a child’s parents divorce. Society does not pause to honor the death of what the family was — it simply moves forward and expects everyone to keep pace. The result is a constellation of unacknowledged griefs that each member of the blended family carries alone, often without the language to name what they are carrying.

The Four Grief Portraits

The Children

Grieving the family they had — or the one they never got. Grieving the loss of daily access to a parent. Grieving the version of their life that no longer exists. Some are grieving a father or mother who died; others are grieving one who simply

left. Both are profound losses, and neither should be minimized in the name of moving forward.

The Adults

Grieving a marriage that failed — and the identity loss that follows. Who am I if I am no longer someone's spouse? What does it mean that something I promised before God did not hold? Adults in blended families carry not only the loss of the relationship but the loss of the self they were inside it.

The Stepparents

Grieving the “easy family” they imagined they were joining. The stepparent entered the relationship with hope and love — and discovered a complexity no one warned them about. They grieve the relationship they thought they were building with children who do not yet want to be known by them.

Extended Family

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and close friends grieving fractured connections. Grandparents who fear losing access to grandchildren. Siblings who no longer know how to relate to a family that has been restructured around a stranger. The grief of the blended family extends well beyond its immediate household.

What unites all four grief portraits is the absence of social permission to grieve them fully. Children are often told to be happy for their parent's new beginning. Adults are told they should have known better. Stepparents are told they knew what they were signing up for. And everyone, everywhere, is told some version of the same inadequate counsel: just give it time.

Time is necessary. It is not sufficient. What is needed alongside time is honest, compassionate, theologically grounded grief work — the kind that says to each person in

the blended family: your loss is real, your grief is valid, and the God who heals the brokenhearted has not missed a single wound you are carrying.

THE RESEARCH ON ATTACHMENT AND LOSS

What the Science Tells the Pastor

Two bodies of research are essential for anyone who wants to pastor or counsel blended families with credibility and compassion. The first is John Bowlby's attachment theory. The second is Dr. Patricia Papernow's longitudinal research on stepfamily development. Together, they illuminate why blended family grief operates the way it does — and what it actually takes to move through it.

BOWLBY'S ATTACHMENT THEORY — The Wound Beneath the Wound

John Bowlby's foundational research established that the earliest relational experiences of childhood — particularly the quality and consistency of attachment to a primary caregiver — create what he called internal working models: deep, largely unconscious templates for how relationships work, whether people can be trusted, and whether the self is worthy of love.

When family breakdown occurs — through divorce, death, or prolonged parental absence — those internal working models are disrupted. Children who have experienced relational rupture carry those disrupted models into every subsequent relationship, including the new blended family. They are not simply being difficult. They are protecting themselves with the only tools they have been given by their experience. Pastoral care that does not understand this will misdiagnose behavior as rebellion that is actually a trauma response.

PAPERNOW'S STEPFAMILY DEVELOPMENT — The Timeline Nobody Tells You

Dr. Patricia Papernow's decades of research on stepfamily development produced one of the most practically important findings in the field: it takes an average of four

to seven years for a blended family to reach genuine cohesion. Most families are never told this. They enter with a timeline measured in months and are devastated when year two feels harder than year one.

Papernow identifies seven developmental stages — from Fantasy through Awareness, Mobilization, Action, Contact, and Resolution — each with its own predictable challenges, grief points, and opportunities for growth. Families who understand this map are significantly more likely to persevere through the difficult middle stages, where most blended families dissolve.

What the research confirms, the Scriptures have always insisted: transformation is a process, not an event. The same God who led Israel through forty years in the wilderness before bringing them into the Promised Land understands that the journey through grief and toward wholeness cannot be rushed. He does not despise the process. He inhabits it.

The Presenting Wounds: What Walks Through the Door

THE WOUND	HOW IT TYPICALLY PRESENTS
Unprocessed divorce grief	<i>Anger, emotional numbness, or inappropriate attachment to the next relationship; rushing into remarriage as a grief bypass</i>
Childhood abandonment wounds	<i>Hypervigilance, testing behavior, explosive anger, or complete emotional withdrawal in children</i>
Identity loss after divorce	<i>Depression, over-parenting, or the frantic pursuit of a new identity through the new marriage</i>
Betrayal and broken trust	<i>Inability to trust the new spouse, chronic conflict escalation, disproportionate reactions to small failures</i>

Spousal bereavement	<i>Idealization of the deceased parent, resistance to the stepparent as replacement, complicated grief in children</i>
Financial trauma	<i>Control issues, resentment over resources shared with the ex's household, anxiety as a chronic relational undertone</i>

THE GOSPEL ENTERS THE GRIEF

A God Who Does Not Watch from a Distance

This chapter has been honest about the weight of grief in blended family life. It has named the wounds, mapped the research, and refused to offer comfort that outpaces the reality. But it cannot end there. The gospel does not permit us to leave people in the valley without pointing to the God who walks in it.

And the God of the Scriptures is not a God who observes grief from a safe theological distance. He is not a God who hands down a self-help pamphlet from above and wishes the blended family well. The incarnation is the definitive statement on how God responds to human suffering: He moves in. He takes on the weight of the broken world in His own body. He goes to the cross, which is not a detour around pain but the deepest possible entry into it.

**The LORD is near to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.**

— *Psalm 34:18 (NASB)*

He is not distant from the disaster.

He is present in it.

The Hebrew word for “nearest” in Psalm 34:18 is qarov — close, intimate, within reach. The God of the universe does not maintain a polite distance from brokenhearted families. He is qarov. He is near. He is present in the counselor’s office and at the kitchen table and in the car on the way to the custody exchange. He is near in the stepchild’s silence and in the stepparent’s exhaustion and in the couple’s 2 a.m. conversation that begins with “What are we doing?”

This is not cheap comfort. This is the most costly comfort in all of history: a God who paid with His own Son to be near to people who are crushed in spirit. The cross is not merely a mechanism for forgiveness. It is a declaration of proximity. God has come all the way in.

“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” — Hebrews 4:15–16 (NASB)

The invitation of the gospel to the grieving blended family is not “get over it.” It is not “choose joy.” It is the invitation of Hebrews 4 — draw near. Bring the wound. Bring the anger and the shame and the grief that has no name and the loss that has no funeral. Bring it all to the throne of grace, where the One who sits on it is not a God who has never suffered, but a God who carries the wounds of the cross into eternity.

He is not surprised by your blended family’s grief. He is not impatient with the timeline. He is not waiting for you to resolve the wound before He will draw near. He draws near precisely because the wound is there.

And that — before any strategy, any communication framework, any stepfamily development stage — is where the healing of a blended family must begin.

“We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.”

— C.S. Lewis, Letters to an American Lady

“Grief is not a disorder, a disease or sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love.”

— Earl Grollman

Part One has done its work. The landscape has been mapped. The wounds have been named. The grief that walks through the door of every blended family has been honored with the honesty it deserves.

Now the architecture must begin. Part Two will lay the theological foundation that makes everything else possible — a God who redeems broken things, a grace that covers every fractured piece, and a cross that makes forgiveness not just a virtue but a structural necessity. The gospel is not a finishing touch applied to blended family life after the hard work is done. It is the load-bearing wall on which everything else stands.

We are ready to build.

“Making All Things New”

PART TWO

The Gospel

Foundation

Before any family can be built, its foundation must be examined. Part Two lays the irreplaceable theological bedrock beneath everything that follows — a God who redeems, grace that covers, and a cross that makes forgiveness not just possible but obligatory.

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 3	The God Who Redeems Broken Things: A Theology of Family Redemption
Chapter 4	Grace That Covers Every Broken Piece: The Ragamuffin Family
Chapter 5	Forgiveness as Foundation: The Cross and the Blended Home

“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.”

— Jeremiah 29:11 (NASB)

CHAPTER THREE

The God Who Redeems Broken Things

A Theology of Family Redemption

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

— **Romans 8:28 (NASB)**

GOD’S TRACK RECORD WITH BROKEN FAMILIES

The Bible Is Not a Family Album of Perfection

The Bible is not a collection of ideal family portraits.

It is not a gallery of healthy communication, consistent discipline, and harmonious households where everyone loves each other well and no one leaves. It is something far more useful than that. It is a gallery of redemption from the wreckage of broken homes — a sustained, unflinching record of what God does when the families He chooses are far from the families anyone would select.

Abraham, the father of faith, ran a household riddled with jealousy, favoritism, and the catastrophic consequences of trying to engineer God’s promises through human strategy. Jacob’s family was a polygamous, competitive, wound-saturated household that produced both treachery and the twelve tribes of Israel. David — the man after God’s own heart — presided over a family so catastrophically broken that it reads more like a Greek tragedy than a pastoral psalm.

And yet. In every generation, in every fractured household, in every family system that should have disqualified itself from God’s purposes by sheer weight of dysfunction, God was present and active and refusing to let the damage have the final word.

God does not select ideal families to carry His story. He redeems the families He has.

This is not a therapeutic observation. This is a theological one with direct implications for every blended family reading these words. You are not the first broken family God has worked with. You are not the most complicated case He has encountered. And your history — however painful, however layered, however resistant to simple solutions — is not an obstacle to His redemptive purposes. It is the raw material He has always preferred.

KEY BIBLICAL CASE STUDIES

Broken Families in the Hands of a Redeeming God

The Scriptures offer not a single blueprint for the ideal family, but a recurring pattern: God takes broken, complicated, grief-laden family systems and weaves them into something that glorifies Him and blesses the world. Four case studies are particularly instructive for blended families today.

Ruth & Naomi

*Loss • Loyalty • New
Beginning*

A blended family formed entirely through grief. Two women, connected only by a marriage that death dissolved, who chose covenant loyalty over the rational alternative of separation. Ruth's declaration — "where you go I will go" — is not a romantic sentiment. It is a theology of chosen family that foreshadows the gospel itself.

Moses & Zipporah

*Cross-Cultural •
Calling • Complexity*

A cross-cultural marriage navigated amid one of the most demanding callings in biblical history. Moses' family formation was complicated by cultural difference, extended separation, and the weight of a divine mission. Yet God sustained it — and used Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, as a source of some of the most practical wisdom in the entire Pentateuch.

Joseph & Mary

*Stepfather • Chosen
• Faithful*

The most significant stepfamily in all of human history. Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, yet he was chosen by God, obedient to the calling, and faithful in every role a father is required to fill. He named the child. He protected the family. He taught the boy his trade. The Son of God grew up in a blended family — and was the better for Joseph's faithfulness.

The Prodigal's Family

*Fracture • Return •
Reintegration*

A family shattered by a son's departure and rebuilt by a father's extravagant welcome. The parable is not merely about individual salvation; it is a portrait of family reintegration. The father runs. He robes. He feasts. He does not demand that the son prove himself before he is welcomed back to the table. This is the posture the gospel calls every blended family to embody.

JOSEPH: THE PATRON SAINT OF STEPFATHERS

The Stepparent God Chose

Of all the biblical figures who illuminate the calling of the blended family, none is more directly instructive than Joseph of Nazareth. Matthew 1:18–25 introduces him with a precision that is easy to overlook: he is a righteous man, a man who does not expose Mary to public disgrace despite having every legal and social right to do so, a man who listens to God in the night and obeys in the morning.

He is also, unmistakably, a stepfather. He did not conceive the child he would raise. He did not share biology with the Son of God. His was a covenant commitment to a family he did not author — chosen not by biology but by obedience, sustained not by natural affection alone but by the same Spirit that overshadowed Mary at the annunciation.

Joseph of Nazareth

The Patron Saint of Stepfathers

He was not the biological father.

He was entrusted by God with the most important child in history.

He provided. He protected. He taught. He loved.

Not because of biology — but because of covenant commitment.

Every stepparent who has ever wondered whether their role has dignity, whether their love counts, whether they matter to the child they are raising without the bond of blood — finds their answer in Joseph. God chose a stepfather to protect, provide for, and form the Son of God. He did not consider that arrangement beneath the dignity of His purposes. He considered it exactly sufficient.

“She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” — Matthew 1:21 (NASB)

Notice what God asks of Joseph in that verse: not to father the child, but to name Him. In the ancient world, naming was the act by which a father claimed a child as his own. God asked Joseph to perform the one act that made him, legally and covenantally, the father of Jesus. The biology was miraculous. The fatherhood was chosen.

This is the dignity of the stepparent: a chosen fatherhood, a covenant love, a calling as sacred as any biology could confer.

THE GENEALOGY OF GRACE

Matthew 1 — A Blended Family Story

The genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew 1 is one of the most deliberately constructed passages in all of Scripture — and one of the most theologically radical. Matthew, writing for a Jewish audience steeped in the honor of lineage, includes five women in a genealogy where women were almost never included. And not five women of unimpeachable virtue. Five women whose stories are marked by scandal, loss, foreignness, and the specific kind of complexity that first-century polite society preferred to look away from.

THE WOMEN IN THE LINEAGE OF JESUS • Matthew 1	
Tamar	<i>Shamed and widowed, used deception to secure her place in the line</i>
Rahab	<i>A Canaanite prostitute — a foreigner and social outcast</i>
Ruth	<i>A Moabite widow — an immigrant who chose covenant over comfort</i>
Bathsheba	<i>The survivor of David's abuse of power — grief wrapped in royalty</i>
Mary	<i>An unwed mother in a world that did not believe her story</i>

Matthew is making a point with the precision of a master theologian: the Son of God did not enter the world through an unbroken line of ideal families. He entered through the exact kind of broken, complicated, grief-laden, scandalous family history that the religious establishment would have been embarrassed to claim.

This is not an accident of history. It is a declaration of intent. The God who wove Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba and Mary into the lineage of the Savior of the world is the same God who is weaving your blended family — with all its complication and history and loss — into His purposes for the redemption of the world.

THE REDEMPTIVE ARC

Not Restoration — Transformation

This chapter’s closing theological framework is perhaps the most important: God’s redemptive project is not the restoration of what was. It is the creation of something better than what was.

The New Covenant is not a return to Eden. It is a progression beyond Eden — to a city, to a community, to a renewed creation that includes what Eden never did: the full weight of human history, redeemed and integrated and made new. The blended family that has been touched by grace is not trying to recover the family it once was. It is being transformed into the family God always intended — a family that carries the marks of loss and redemption both, and is more honest for it.

THE WORLD’S VERDICT	THE GOSPEL’S DECLARATION
<i>This family is damaged beyond repair</i>	This family is being remade by the same power that raised Christ from the dead
<i>Your past disqualifies you from God’s best</i>	Your past is the raw material God uses most willingly
<i>A blended family is a lesser family</i>	A redeemed family is a living testimony to the power of the gospel
<i>You should have stayed in what was broken</i>	God can build something new from the pieces of what broke

Biology is the only basis for real family love

Covenant love — chosen, sustained, cruciform — is the deepest love there is

Romans 8:28 does not promise that all things are good. It promises that God causes all things — including the divorce, the death, the failure, the grief, the complicated dinner table, and the years of slow, hard rebuilding — to work together for good. Not good in spite of what happened. Good through it, by it, because of the God who refuses to let waste be the final word.

“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” — 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NASB)

The blended family redeemed by grace is not a footnote to the gospel story. It is one of its most vivid chapters — a living demonstration that the God who makes all things new has not run out of material, has not lost interest in the project, and has not revised His estimate of what He can accomplish in the families that invite Him in.

“Redemption is not about going back to how things were. It is about being transformed into what God always intended.”

— N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope

The theological foundation has been set. We know the God we are dealing with: One who has never been deterred by broken families, who wove scandal and grief and foreignness into the very lineage of His Son, and who promises transformation rather than mere repair.

But knowing this God is not enough. We must encounter His grace. Chapter 4 moves from theology to experience — from knowing about the God who redeems to receiving the grace that covers. For the blended family that has been living under the weight of shame, performance, and the quiet terror of not being enough, what comes next may be the most liberating chapter in the book.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER FOUR

Grace That Covers Every Broken Piece

The Ragamuffin Family

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

— Romans 5:8 (NASB)

GRACE IS NOT A CONCEPT — IT IS A PERSON

The Hardest Truth in Scripture

There is a word that has been so overused in Christian culture that it has nearly lost its capacity to wound.

That word is grace. We put it on coffee mugs and cross-stitch samplers. We name our daughters after it. We speak it so fluently and so casually that it has, for many of us, lost the quality that made it gospel in the first place: its absolute refusal to be earned.

Ragamuffin theology — the theological tradition rooted most powerfully in the writings of Brennan Manning and the life of the Apostle Paul — is an attempt to rescue grace from its domestication and return it to its original, scandalous power. It insists on one thing with relentless, almost aggressive clarity: God’s love for you is not contingent on your performance, your history, your current spiritual condition, or the structural complexity of your family.

This is not soft theology. It is not the theology of the spiritually undisciplined or the morally careless. It is, in fact, the hardest truth in all of Scripture. Because soft theology says: God loves you when you get it together. Hard theology says: God loves you right now, exactly as

you are, while the dinner table is still a war zone and the stepchildren still call you by your first name and the guilt from the first marriage has not yet found its way to the cross.

THE RAGAMUFFIN GOSPEL

Grace without qualification

for the broken without exception.

This is not soft theology. It is the hardest truth in all of Scripture.

The blended family does not need more information about grace. It needs an encounter with it. It needs to stand at the edge of the theological truth that the God who created the universe looked at you — with all of it, all of the history and failure and complicated love and imperfect parenting and unresolved grief — and said: I want that one. That family. I am going to make something out of this.

Romans 5:8 is the most precise statement of this truth in all of Scripture. Not “While we were improving, Christ died.” Not “Once we had cleaned up the family situation, God demonstrated His love.” While we were yet sinners. In the middle of it. Before a single thing had changed. That is when the cross happened. And that is the only basis on which the blended family’s healing begins.

THE SHAME THAT KILLS BLENDED FAMILIES

The Hidden Wound Beneath Every Other Wound

Dr. Brené Brown’s foundational research on shame and vulnerability, summarized in *The Gifts of Imperfection* (2010) and *Daring Greatly* (2012), identifies shame as the primary driver of relational disconnection in human beings. Brown distinguishes sharply between guilt — “I did something bad” — and shame: “I am bad.” Guilt motivates change. Shame paralyzes and hides.

In blended families, shame does not operate at a single level. It operates in layers — overlapping, compounding, and mutually reinforcing. Understanding these layers is not

merely a psychological exercise. It is essential pastoral work, because the gospel cannot speak to a wound that has never been named.

The Shame Layers of Blended Family Life

Shame About the Divorce

The foundational layer for most blended families. I failed. I broke my vows. I hurt my children. I am the statistic I never thought I would become. This shame is often carried silently, never confessed, and chronically active beneath the surface of the new relationship.

Shame About Not Bonding

Stepparents carry a particular shame that almost no one talks about: the shame of not feeling what they expected to feel for their stepchildren. Culture promises instant love. Reality delivers slow, complicated affection that takes years. The gap between expectation and experience is a breeding ground for shame.

Shame About Anger

Blended family life produces a level of daily friction that generates real anger — in adults and children both. And in a culture that tells Christians that anger is sin, this anger is immediately loaded with shame. The result: suppressed rage that finds indirect expression in every direction except honest acknowledgment.

Shame About Unequal Love

Perhaps the most closely guarded secret in blended family life: the experience of loving one's biological children more naturally than one's stepchildren. Nearly universal. Rarely admitted.

Weaponized by shame into a conviction that the stepparent is a fundamentally defective human being.

Shame Before the Church

For many blended families, the church — which should be the safest community on earth for the broken — is experienced as a place of judgment rather than grace. The theology of divorce and remarriage, however carefully handled, often leaves blended families with the impression that their family is a second-class family in the kingdom of God.

The gospel is the only force in the universe powerful enough to dismantle shame at its root. Not because it denies the reality of failure, but because it insists on a more fundamental reality: that the person Christ died for is not a cleaned-up version of you. It is you. Right now. In the middle of the shame. The cross speaks directly to the I am bad at the center of shame's lie, and it says: No. You are beloved.

The gospel does not offer a cleaned-up version of you to God. It offers you — and declares you beloved.

THE ANATOMY OF GRACE IN THE BLENDED HOME

What Grace Actually Looks Like on a Tuesday

Theology that does not land on Tuesday is not yet finished theology. The grace we have been describing is not an abstraction; it has specific, practical, Tuesday-night implications for every person sitting at the blended family's table. What follows is not a list of coping strategies. It is a description of what grace looks like when it actually takes up residence in the blended home.

<p>For the Stepparent</p> <p><i>Grace means you are not competing with the ghost of the biological parent. You do not have to win a comparison you were never invited to enter. You are called to be present, faithful, and covenant-committed — and that calling carries its own irreplaceable dignity.</i></p>	<p>For the Children</p> <p><i>Grace means children are not required to love on a schedule. Their attachment timeline is their own. Demanding premature affection produces performance, not relationship. Grace creates the unhurried space in which real love slowly, organically grows.</i></p>
<p>For the Couple</p> <p><i>Grace means the second marriage is not haunted by the failure of the first. The new covenant is not a re-run of the old one. What God is building in this marriage is not a corrected version of what failed — it is something genuinely new, built on a foundation the first marriage may never have had.</i></p>	<p>For the Whole Family</p> <p><i>Grace means God works through imperfect families. Because all families are imperfect. The blended family's visible complexity does not disqualify it from God's purposes — it may, in fact, make it more transparent about the grace that every family needs but most families pretend not to.</i></p>

There is a particular freedom that arrives when a blended family genuinely receives this grace. It is the freedom of not having to perform. Not having to pretend that the dinner table is more harmonious than it is, that the stepchild's resistance doesn't sting, that the ex-spouse's interference isn't exhausting. Grace creates the conditions in which a family can be honest about its actual condition — and discover that God is already present in the honest condition, not waiting for a more photogenic version to arrive.

WHAT GRACE IS NOT	WHAT GRACE ACTUALLY IS
<i>Permission to avoid growth or change</i>	The power source for the hardest growth and change imaginable

<i>Pretending the wounds don't exist</i>	The courage to name the wounds without shame
<i>The absence of accountability</i>	The presence of unconditional love that makes accountability possible
<i>A license to stay stuck</i>	The oxygen that makes the long, hard journey sustainable
<i>A feeling of warmth that comes and goes</i>	A theological fact anchored in the character of God — immovable

THE THEOLOGY BEHIND THE GRACE

Manning, Willard, and the Ragamuffin Household

BRENNAN MANNING ON THE RAGAMUFFIN GOSPEL

Manning's theology begins with what he called the "Sunday morning crowd" — the people who show up at church with everything held together on the outside while everything falls apart within. His central claim was that the American church had domesticated grace, turned it into a reward for the moderately virtuous, and stripped it of the scandalous power that made it gospel.

For blended families — who often carry the unspoken fear that their family structure is a disqualification rather than a canvas — Manning's ragamuffin theology is not merely encouraging. It is oxygen. It declares that God's acceptance is not the destination reached after moral improvement; it is the starting line from which all healing begins.

Alongside Manning's theology of grace, Dallas Willard offers a corrective that prevents ragamuffin theology from becoming passive: grace, Willard insists, is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning. This distinction is everything for the blended family, which needs

both the unconditional love that Manning describes and the invitation to active transformation that Willard provides.

The family that understands grace correctly does not stop working. It works differently. It works from security rather than fear, from belovedness rather than shame, from the settled conviction that God's verdict on this family has already been delivered and is unchangeably good — and therefore the work of building the family is not an attempt to earn that verdict but a response to it.

*“My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is perfected in weakness.”*

— 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NASB)

The blended family is not disqualified by its weakness. It is the exact address to which this promise is delivered.

Paul's declaration in 2 Corinthians 12:9 is addressed to a man who has been asking God to remove a thorn in the flesh — a persistent, specific, unresolved source of pain. God's answer is not removal but sufficiency. My grace is sufficient for you. Not “Once the thorn is gone, My grace will be enough.” The grace is sufficient now, in the presence of the thorn, precisely because power is perfected in weakness.

The blended family is not disqualified by its thorns. It is not disqualified by the ex-spouse who makes every holiday harder, by the stepchild who still refuses to acknowledge the stepparent at school, by the grief that resurfaces at Christmas with the precision of a recurring alarm. These are not signs that the family has failed. They are the exact conditions in which the sufficiency of grace becomes visible.

“The gospel declares that no matter how dutiful or undutiful we have been, no matter how many times we have tried and failed, God's love for us does not fluctuate.”

— Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

“Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning.”

— Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*

Grace is the atmosphere the blended family breathes. But there is one more dimension of the gospel’s foundation that must be laid before the building can begin. Grace covers the past and empowers the present. But what about the specific, named, still-bleeding wounds between the people in this family? What about the ex-spouse who betrayed the covenant? The parent who abandoned the child? The stepparent who said the thing that cannot be unsaid?

Chapter 5 takes the most demanding step in the gospel’s application to blended family life. It takes the cross — which we have seen as the foundation of grace — and places it squarely in the middle of the hardest human relational demand: forgiveness. Not as a feeling. Not as a spiritual achievement for the advanced believer. But as the structural necessity on which every healthy blended family must be built.

This is where the gospel stops being comfortable and starts being transformative.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER FIVE

Forgiveness as Foundation

The Cross and the Blended Home

“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

— **Ephesians 4:32 (NASB)**

THE IMPOSSIBLE COMMAND THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

Forgiveness Is Not Optional — It Is Structural

If you want to identify the single command in the New Testament most likely to produce immediate

resistance from a blended family, you do not have to look far. It is not the command to attend church regularly, or to tithe, or even to love your neighbor. It is the command embedded in Ephesians 4:32 — forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you — applied to the person who blew up the first marriage, who poisons the children against the stepparent, who violates the custody agreement, who made the choices that fracture every holiday, every birthday, every school graduation into a negotiation.

Forgiveness in the blended family is not optional. It is not a spiritual achievement reserved for the mature believer. It is the structural foundation on which every blended family either stands or eventually collapses. Without genuine forgiveness — not the performance of forgiveness, not the announcement of forgiveness, but the slow, cross-shaped work of actually releasing the debt — every new family structure is built on the unstable soil of suppressed bitterness. And suppressed bitterness does not stay suppressed. It surfaces in the children’s anxiety, the couple’s disconnection, and the quiet erosion of everything the new family was built to become.

THE CROSS DOES NOT MERELY

illustrate forgiveness.

It empowers it.

Because we have been forgiven an incalculable debt, we can forgive debts that feel impossibly large.

The cross does not merely illustrate forgiveness. This point cannot be made too strongly. The cross is not a visual aid for a moral lesson about the importance of letting things go. The cross is the actual mechanism by which the debt was paid — the specific, historical, bodily event in which the Son of God absorbed the full weight of human sin so that forgiveness could be not just commanded but empowered.

When Ephesians 4:32 commands us to forgive one another, it does not issue that command in a vacuum. It issues it on the basis of what God in Christ has already done. The grammar is essential: forgive, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. The forgiveness you are being asked to extend is not the originating act. It is a response to the act that has already been completed. The cross has already paid the debt you are being asked to release.

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

Clearing the Ground Before Building on It

Before the work of forgiveness can begin, a significant amount of clearing must be done. In blended families especially, forgiveness has often been weaponized — demanded prematurely, confused with reconciliation, or used to silence legitimate pain. The result is a deep and understandable resistance to the very word. What follows is not an invitation to perform forgiveness. It is a precise definition of what genuine forgiveness actually is — and is not.

FORGIVENESS IS NOT	FORGIVENESS ACTUALLY IS
<i>The erasure of what happened — pretending the wound never existed</i>	The honest acknowledgment of the wound, held without the power to destroy
<i>The automatic restoration of trust, which was broken and must be rebuilt</i>	The release of the debt, completely separate from whether trust is restored
<i>Pretending the offense was not serious or that it did not cause real harm</i>	The decision to stop allowing the offense to define your present and future
<i>Dependent on the offender’s repentance, remorse, or acknowledgment</i>	A unilateral act of the will, empowered by grace, regardless of the other person’s response
<i>A one-time event completed in a single moment of decision</i>	An ongoing posture of the heart, returned to as many times as the wound resurfaces
<i>Weakness, passivity, or allowing harmful behavior to continue unchallenged</i>	One of the most demanding acts of moral strength a human being can perform

Lewis Smedes’ definition remains the most precise in the pastoral literature: to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. This is not therapeutic wisdom dressed in spiritual language. It is a description of what the gospel does in the person who forgives. The debt is real. The wound is real. The offense is not minimized. But the one who chooses to release it discovers, sometimes to their own astonishment, that they are the one who has been imprisoned by the refusal to forgive — and the one who is freed by the act of releasing it.

Forgiveness does not change the past. It changes who has power over your present.

FORGIVING THE EX

The Hardest Forgiveness of All

Of all the forgiveness work the blended family is called to, none is more demanding — and none is more consequential for the health of the family — than forgiving the former spouse. This is the person who may have broken the covenant. Who may have been unfaithful, abusive, negligent, or simply devastatingly ordinary in their failure to be what the marriage needed. This is also, in most cases, still present in the family system through the children, through the custody arrangement, through the shadow they cast over every holiday and every parenting decision.

There is no escaping this person. Which means there is no escaping the necessity of forgiving them.

DR. ROBERT ENRIGHT — The Clinical Case for Forgiveness

Dr. Robert Enright of the University of Wisconsin, whose research on forgiveness spans more than three decades and is summarized in *Forgiveness Is a Choice* (2001), has produced some of the most clinically significant findings in the field: individuals who practice genuine forgiveness — not merely the announcement of it, but the sustained, process-based work of it — experience measurable improvements in anxiety levels, depression scores, hope, and overall relational functioning. The body keeps the score of unforgiveness. And the body benefits from its release. The gospel compels the work of forgiving the ex. The research confirms its necessity. Both are pointing in the same direction.

The gospel's basis for forgiving the ex is not that they deserve it. It is not that they have apologized, or that justice has been served, or that the damage has been repaired. It is that God in Christ forgave an incalculably larger debt, in which we were the offender, and that the moral logic of receiving that forgiveness requires extending it. Matthew 18:21–35 makes this unmistakably clear. The servant forgiven an enormous debt who refuses to forgive a much smaller one is not presented as a minor inconsistency. It is presented as a fundamental misunderstanding of what grace is.

What Forgiving the Ex Looks Like in Practice

THE PRACTICE	
Pray for them by name	<i>Pray for their specific needs, their wellbeing, and their own encounter with the gospel. Not as a performance — as a daily act of the will that reshapes the heart over time.</i>
Refuse to weaponize the children	<i>Never speak negatively about the ex to the children. Their relationship with their other parent is separate from your wound. Children should never be made to carry the weight of adult conflict.</i>
Release the need for justice	<i>The longing for the ex to acknowledge what they did, apologize fully, or receive consequences is understandable. Genuine forgiveness releases that outcome to God without requiring it as a precondition.</i>
Establish boundaries without bitterness	<i>Legal and relational boundaries with a difficult ex are appropriate and sometimes necessary. They can be established from a posture of settled forgiveness rather than active retaliation.</i>
Return to it as many times as needed	<i>The wound resurfaces. The bitterness tries to return.</i>

Forgiveness is not a one-time transaction but a recurring choice, made again each time the familiar anger rises.

FORGIVING OURSELVES

The Prisoner in the Mirror

The most overlooked dimension of forgiveness in the blended family is not the forgiveness of the ex-spouse. It is the forgiveness of oneself. Many members of blended families — particularly those who bear some responsibility for the breakdown of the first marriage — carry a crushing weight of self-condemnation that no amount of relational progress in the new family can lift. The new marriage is good. The stepchildren are slowly warming. The ex-spouse relationship is manageable. And still, somewhere beneath it all, the quiet voice: you should not have let this happen. You failed your children. You broke something that cannot be fully fixed.

This voice is not the voice of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit convicts with precision and leads to repentance, which leads to freedom. This voice is the voice of shame operating without theological resolution — rehearsing guilt that the cross has already addressed, pronouncing condemnation over a life that God has declared forgiven.

*“God is greater than our heart,
and knows all things.”*

— 1 John 3:20 (NASB)

The same gospel that forgives the world’s sins does not exempt you from its mercy.

1 John 3:20 is one of the most therapeutically and theologically significant verses in the New Testament for the blended family member who cannot forgive themselves: “God is

greater than our heart, and knows all things.” The heart that condemns us — that rehearses the failures, tallies the damage, and refuses to accept forgiveness for what it knows about itself — is not the final arbiter. God is greater than our heart. His knowledge is fuller, His mercy wider, His verdict final. And in Christ, His verdict is: forgiven.

Self-forgiveness is not the erasure of responsibility. The harm done in the first marriage was real. The impact on the children is real. Genuine self-forgiveness does not deny any of it. It does precisely what the gospel does: it holds the full reality of the failure and the full reality of the grace at the same time, and allows the grace to be larger.

† Forging the Biological Parent

For parents carrying the weight of what the divorce cost their children:

You cannot undo what happened. You can refuse to let shame prevent you from being fully present now. The child who needs you today does not need a parent who is still trying to pay a debt the gospel has already settled. They need a parent freed by grace to be completely, unhesitatingly present. Receive the forgiveness. Then give the child everything that forgiveness frees you to give.

♥ Forging the Stepparent

For stepparents who have said or done the thing they wish they could take back:

The blended family is one of the most pressure-filled family systems a human being can inhabit, and you entered it without adequate preparation for what it would ask of you. Grace does not excuse the harm. It absorbs it, addresses it, and refuses to make it the final definition of who you are. Confess what must be confessed. Make repair where repair is possible. And then receive the grace that is the only basis on which anyone in this family can move forward.

THE FORGIVENESS PROCESS

What the Journey Actually Looks Like

Forgiveness in the blended family is rarely a single dramatic moment of decision. It is, far more often, a sustained process — a direction of travel that must be chosen again and again as new triggers surface old wounds. Enright’s research identifies a four-phase process that maps closely to the biblical pattern of lament, release, grace, and renewal:

1	UNCOVER <i>Acknowledge the full reality of the injury without minimizing or catastrophizing it. Name what happened, name the harm it caused, and give yourself permission to feel the honest weight of it. This is not rehearsing the wound — it is identifying it clearly enough to bring it to the cross.</i>
2	DECIDE <i>Make the deliberate choice to pursue forgiveness — not as a feeling, but as a direction. This decision precedes the feelings by months, sometimes years. It is the act of the will that commits to the journey regardless of emotional readiness.</i>
3	WORK <i>This is the sustained, often painful middle phase: choosing, again and again, to see the offender as a broken human being who caused real harm rather than a monster who deserves permanent condemnation. It includes prayer, sometimes professional help, and the ongoing decision not to rehearse the wound.</i>
4	DEEPEN <i>The unexpected fruit of forgiveness: a deepened sense of meaning, a compassion that was not there before, and an awareness that the person who</i>

forgave has been changed by the process in ways that no amount of bitterness could have produced.

The gospel does not shortcut this process. It sustains it. Grace is not the substitute for the work of forgiveness; it is the fuel that makes the work possible when the emotional tank is empty. And the community of faith — the church as the body of Christ — is designed to walk alongside the person doing this work, bearing the burden that forgiveness sometimes requires.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” — Galatians 6:2 (NASB)

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”

— **Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget***

“Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.”

— **Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love***

Part Two is complete. The foundation has been laid — not with sentiment or optimism, but with the full weight of the gospel bearing on every plank.

PART TWO COMPLETE — THE FOUNDATION IS LAID

Chapter 3

The God Who Redeems — a God whose track record with broken families removes every excuse for despair

Chapter 4

Grace That Covers — a ragamuffin gospel that dismantles shame and releases the blended family to receive what it could never earn

Chapter 5

Forgiveness as Foundation — the cross-shaped structural necessity that makes genuine blended family life possible

What comes next is the work that the foundation makes possible. Part Three moves from theological bedrock to family architecture — the practical, gospel-saturated structures of a blended family that is not merely surviving but being built into something that honors God and shelters the people within it.

The foundation is solid. We are ready to build.

“Making All Things New”

PART THREE

Building the Gospel-Shaped Family

Theology must become architecture. Part Three moves from foundation to framework — the practical, gospel-saturated structures that a blended family must build to experience genuine cohesion, love, and lasting unity.

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 6	Two Becoming One (Again): Covenant, Commitment, and the Second Marriage
Chapter 7	The Stepparent's Cross: Sacrificial Love Without Biological Bond
Chapter 8	The Children of Grace: Understanding Kids in Blended Families
Chapter 9	When Two Worlds Collide: Navigating Two Households

“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.”

— Jeremiah 29:11 (NASB)

CHAPTER SIX

Two Becoming One (Again)

Covenant, Commitment, and the Second Marriage

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”

— Genesis 2:24 (NASB)

THE MYTH OF THE EASIER SECOND MARRIAGE

Experience Is Not the Same as Transformation

There is a lie that follows divorced people into their next relationship with the warmth and plausibility of a trusted friend.

It sounds like wisdom. It presents itself as hard-won insight. It says: the second marriage will be better, because now you know what not to do. You know the warning signs. You have done the work of therapy and reflection. You understand yourself and your patterns. The next time will benefit from the experience of the first time.

The statistics, with a patience born of decades of accumulated data, tell a different story. The divorce rate for second marriages in the United States is approximately 66% — one third higher than the already troubling rate for first marriages. For third marriages, the figure climbs above 73%. The pattern is not improvement. It is escalation. And the reason is not

that the people who remarry are less capable of love. It is that experience alone, without genuine transformation, does not address the roots of what broke the first marriage.

MARRIAGE TYPE	RATE	PASTORAL NOTE
First marriages end in divorce	~50%	<i>Still significant — but the crisis for blended families is measurably deeper</i>
Second marriages end in divorce	66%	<i>One-third higher than first marriages; experience alone does not protect</i>
Third marriages end in divorce	73%+	<i>The pattern escalates without intentional intervention and genuine transformation</i>
Blended families who received church-based support	~12%	<i>The pastoral gap that this book exists to help close (Fuller Youth Institute)</i>

The myth of the easier second marriage is not merely statistically false. It is theologically inadequate. It places its faith in human wisdom accumulated through failure, when the Scripture is insistent that the wisdom required for a covenant marriage is not the product of experience but of encounter — an ongoing encounter with the God who designed marriage, who holds it together, and who is the only reliable source of the grace that genuine covenant commitment requires.

What is needed is not more experience. It is deeper transformation.

WHAT COVENANT MEANS IN THE SECOND MARRIAGE

More Than a Promise — A Blood-Sworn Bond

The English word “marriage” has, for many people, become so saturated with cultural meaning — romantic, legal, social — that its theological weight has been largely lost. But the biblical concept underlying Christian marriage is not primarily romantic or even relational. It is covenantal. And covenant is a category that stands entirely apart from contract.

COVENANT IS NOT A CONTRACT
with escape clauses.

It is a blood-sworn commitment
modeled on God’s own covenant with Israel
— and with us in Christ.

In the ancient Near Eastern world, a covenant was not merely a solemn agreement. It was a binding commitment enacted through ritual, often involving the shedding of blood, that created an unbreakable bond between two parties. When God made His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, He walked through the pieces of slaughtered animals in the form of a smoking oven and a flaming torch — the ancient symbol of covenant ratification. The act communicated: may what happened to these animals happen to me if I fail to keep this promise.

This is the theological gravity behind the covenant of marriage. When a couple enters Christian marriage — especially a second marriage, carrying the scars and the wisdom and the grief of what a broken covenant costs — they are not entering a partnership of mutual convenience. They are enacting a binding, blood-sworn commitment modeled on the faithfulness of a God who has never once broken His covenant with His people.

A CONTRACT	A COVENANT
<i>Based on mutual performance and conditions being met</i>	Based on unconditional promise sustained by God’s own character

<i>Dissolves when one party fails to deliver</i>	Holds precisely when one or both parties fail — that is its point
<i>Protects individual interests and rights</i>	Calls each party to lay down individual interests for the other’s good
<i>Has exit strategies built into its structure</i>	Has no exit strategy — only the ongoing, grace-sustained work of renewal
<i>Requires a lawyer when it breaks down</i>	Requires the cross — and already has it

The second marriage that understands itself as covenant rather than contract does not merely survive difficulties — it interprets them differently. When the difficulties arrive, as they will, a contract couple asks: Is this worth continuing? A covenant couple asks: How do we navigate this together, because departure is not among the available options? The question itself shapes the entire trajectory of the relationship.

“The LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” — Malachi 2:14 (NASB)

GOSPEL-CENTERED MARRIAGE DISCIPLINES

Building the Covenant on Daily Practice

Covenant theology without covenant practice is architecture without load-bearing structure. The second marriage that takes seriously the weight of its commitment to one another and to God must build the daily habits, rhythms, and relational disciplines that keep the covenant alive and growing. What follows is not a checklist for performance. It is a description of what it looks like when the gospel takes up residency in the routines of a remarried couple.

† Daily Prayer Together

The couple that prays together is not just fulfilling a spiritual discipline. They are doing something structurally significant: they are inviting a third party into every conflict before it escalates, acknowledging before God and each other that this marriage belongs to Him, and creating a daily posture of humility and dependence that is the antidote to the pride that destroys most marriages.

Practical form: five minutes each morning before the day fragments. Not eloquent — honest. Name what is hard. Ask for what is needed. Listen together.

♥ Regular State-of-the-Family Conversations

A weekly or bi-weekly structured conversation — not crisis-driven, but proactive — in which the couple honestly reviews the condition of every relationship in the home. This is not a complaint session. It is a grace-saturated check-in, the kind that prevents small tensions from becoming family-fracturing conflicts.

Practical form: thirty minutes, same time each week. Two questions: What is going well? What needs attention? Lead with gratitude before moving to challenges.

★ Protecting the Marriage as the Axis

Dr. Ron Deal identifies one of the most counterintuitive truths in blended family research: in a biological family, the parent-child relationship is primary; in a blended family, the couple relationship must be primary. Not because the children matter less — they matter profoundly. But because a fractured couple center means a fractured family for everyone. The greatest gift the remarried couple gives their children is a marriage that is visibly, intentionally prioritized.

✓ Pre-Blending Counseling Specific to Stepfamilies

Generic premarital counseling is designed for first marriages entering an uncomplicated family structure. It does not address the specific architecture of the blended family: the children's grief and loyalty conflicts, the co-parenting relationship with the ex, the stepparent's role boundaries, or the 4–7 year cohesion timeline. Couples who enter remarriage with stepfamily-specific preparation are measurably more likely to navigate the complex middle stages successfully.

Resource: Ron Deal's Preparing to Blend curriculum is the gold standard for this preparation.

◆ **Shared Values and Non-Negotiable Rhythms of Grace**

A blended family without clearly articulated shared values is a family being run by two competing sets of implicit assumptions. Sitting down before the family is fully formed — and returning to it regularly — to name the values that will govern this household is not bureaucratic. It is an act of intentional covenant formation. What do we believe? How will we treat one another when it is hard? What does grace look like in this specific house?

RESEARCH: THE COUPLE AS THE ENGINE

The Single Most Predictive Variable

The research of Dr. Ron Deal, founder of FamilyLife Blended and the author of the most comprehensive body of work on stepfamily ministry in the church, converges on a single finding that has more practical implications for blended family health than any other: the quality of the couple relationship is the single most predictive variable in whether a blended family ultimately thrives or collapses.

DR. RON DEAL • The Smart Stepfamily (2014)

The health of the couple relationship is the single most predictive variable in blended family outcomes.

When the couple is strong in the Lord, the whole family has a gravitational center.

When the couple is fractured, every other relationship in the home suffers.

Deal’s finding is not merely a clinical observation. It has a direct theological explanation. In the design of the family, the couple relationship is the load-bearing wall — the structure on which every other relationship in the home depends for its stability. When that wall is strong, the whole house holds. When it is compromised, every other relationship bears the weight of the structural failure.

This is why the investment the remarried couple makes in their own relationship is not selfishness. It is the most family-centered act available to them. The stepchildren who eventually soften and open and begin to form genuine bonds with the stepparent do so most often in the context of watching a couple whose love is visible, whose commitment is evident, and whose marriage has the gravity of something that is not going anywhere.

SIGNS OF A STRONG COUPLE CENTER	SIGNS THE CENTER IS FRACTURING
✓ The couple prays, reads, and worships together regularly	⚠ <i>The couple is consistently triangulated by children or co-parenting conflicts</i>
✓ Conflict is addressed directly, quickly, and privately	⚠ <i>Conflicts are avoided, deferred, or relitigated in front of the children</i>
✓ The couple presents a unified front on household expectations	⚠ <i>Each parent defaults to their biological children in disputes</i>
✓ Date nights and couple-only time are protected and non-negotiable	⚠ <i>The couple’s only conversations are about logistics, children, or problems</i>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The couple actively celebrates each other in front of the family 	<p>⚠ <i>Affection and appreciation are expressed only in private, if at all</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Both partners actively seek counsel, community, and continued growth 	<p>⚠ <i>Outside support is seen as an admission of failure and is avoided</i></p>

The health of the couple is not merely measured in the absence of conflict. It is measured in the presence of the qualities that make covenant love visible: tenderness, humor, physical affection, genuine respect, and the willingness to repair quickly and fully when those qualities temporarily fail. The blended family watches all of this. The children — particularly the children who have already watched one marriage break — are watching with a specificity born of hard experience. What they see in the couple’s relationship either confirms their deepest fear or slowly, over years, begins to heal it.

“A great marriage is not when the perfect couple comes together. It is when an imperfect couple learns to enjoy their differences.”

— **Dave Meurer**

“Marriage is the mirror in which we most clearly see our need for grace — and the arena in which we most powerfully give it.”

— **Timothy Keller, The Meaning of Marriage**

The couple has been established as the engine of the blended family. But the engine must power a vehicle with multiple, complicated moving parts. Chapter 7 turns to the role that receives perhaps the least pastoral attention and carries perhaps the heaviest emotional weight in the entire blended family system: the stepparent.

Specifically, it addresses the person who chose to love a child who may not want to be loved by them — who committed to provide and protect and invest in someone who carries

the loyalty of another parent, who tests and resists and sometimes openly rejects. Chapter 7 calls this what it is: a cruciform vocation. And it gives it the theological dignity it deserves.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Stepparent's Cross

Sacrificial Love Without Biological Bond

“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

— John 15:13 (NASB)

THE HARDEST LOVE

A Vocation Nobody Warned You About

Nobody told you it would feel like this.

They told you it would be an adjustment. They told you to give it time. They may have even told you that children are resilient. What they did not tell you — what almost no one tells the stepparent before they walk through the door of this role — is that you are about to attempt one of the most theologically demanding acts available to a human being: loving a child who may not want your love, who has a complicated relationship with the very fact of your existence, and who has absolutely no obligation, biological or emotional, to make it easy for you.

No role in family life is more underappreciated. No role is more necessary. And no role, properly understood, more closely resembles the posture of the cross.

CRUCIFORM LOVE

Giving without receiving.

Serving without recognition.

Dying to self. Daily.

This is not a description of a dysfunctional person. It is a description of a disciple.

John 15:13 establishes the theological ceiling of human love: laying down one's life for another. But the stepparent does not lay their life down in a single dramatic moment. They lay it down in the accumulated, unremarkable acts of daily self-denial: showing up to the recital even when they were not acknowledged in the program. Preparing the meal for the child who did not thank them and would rather be at the other house. Absorbing the accusation that they are "not my real parent" with enough grace that the child is not damaged by witnessing an adult shatter under the weight of it.

This is not martyrdom. It is discipleship. And the God who called His own Son to the cross without guarantee of immediate welcome from those He came to save is not unmoved by the stepparent who shows up, again, on a Tuesday, choosing this family one more time.

The stepparent does not carry the cross once. They pick it up every morning.

4-7

years is the average time for a blended family to reach genuine cohesion — a timeline the stepparent must survive before the fruit of their investment becomes visible (Dr. Patricia Papernow)

70%

of stepfamilies report that the stepparent's role difficulty was significantly greater than they anticipated before entering the relationship (National Stepfamily Resource Center)

THE JOURNEY FROM STRANGER TO TRUSTED FRIEND

Dr. Papernow's Seven Stages — With Pastoral Commentary

Dr. Patricia Papernow's seven-stage model of stepfamily development is the most clinically validated and practically useful framework available for understanding the arc of the stepparent's journey. It is not a prescription for how things should go. It is a map of how they actually do go — in family after family, culture after culture, decade after decade of research. Understanding this map is itself a pastoral act: it gives the stepparent permission to be exactly where they are, and it names the terrain ahead with enough honesty to make the journey navigable.

The two middle stages — Mobilization and Action — are highlighted because they are the stages where most stepfamilies dissolve. They are also, not coincidentally, the stages where the gospel's long-suffering patience is most specifically and urgently needed.

#	STAGE	PHASE	PASTORAL DESCRIPTION
1	FANTASY	<i>Early</i>	Everyone enters with hope and unrealistic expectations. The stepparent imagines a warm, grateful family; the children imagine life will return to what it was. Both are about to be disoriented.
2	IMMERSION	<i>Early</i>	Reality lands. The stepparent feels like an outsider in their own home. The stepchildren's loyalty to the absent parent is more visible than any affection for the new one. Confusion and quiet hurt begin.
3	AWARENESS	<i>Early</i>	Each person begins to name their actual experience. The stepparent recognizes the structural complexity; the children begin to articulate their grief. This is painful — and necessary.
4	MOBILIZATION	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Conflict surfaces openly. The stepparent begins to push for their place in the family. Children resist. The</i>

			<i>biological parent is caught between loyalties. This is the stage where most stepfamilies dissolve.</i>
5	ACTION	<i>Middle</i>	<i>The couple begins to align. The biological parent steps into clearer leadership support. Small wins accumulate. Trust begins its slow, fragile development between stepparent and stepchild.</i>
6	CONTACT	<i>Later</i>	Genuine connection forms. The stepparent and stepchildren develop their own authentic, imperfect relationship — not a replacement of the biological bond, but a real one in its own right.
7	RESOLUTION	<i>Later</i>	The family reaches a new, stable identity. Roles are clear. Relationships have depth. The family is not what anyone originally imagined — it is something that has been forged by time and grace.

The stepparent who understands Papernow’s framework does not interpret the difficulty of Stage Four as evidence that the family has failed. They interpret it as evidence that the family has reached the precise point where most families give up — which means they are, in fact, exactly on schedule. The question the gospel asks at Stage Four is the same question it asks at every stage of the spiritual life: will you trust the process long enough to reach what is on the other side?

“And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.” — Galatians 6:9 (NASB)

THE STEPPARENT'S GOSPEL POSTURE

Five Principles That Change Everything

The gospel does not only sustain the stepparent emotionally. It provides a specific, practical orientation to the role that, when genuinely adopted, transforms both the stepparent's experience and the family's trajectory. What follows are not techniques. They are postures — ways of inhabiting the role that flow from the gospel's deep logic of servant leadership, patient love, and cruciform investment.

01 ♥ Lead with Presence, Not Authority

The stepparent who arrives attempting to lead by authority — establishing rules, issuing corrections, asserting their role — will be met with resistance that intensifies in proportion to the assertiveness. The stepparent who leads with presence — who simply shows up, consistently and warmly, without demanding recognition — creates the conditions in which influence is eventually, voluntarily extended.

⚠ **The trap:** *Demanding respect before it has been earned produces performance, not relationship, and resentment, not affection.*

02 † Support the Biological Parent's Leadership

The most dangerous dynamic in blended family discipline is the competition between the biological parent and the stepparent for authority over the children. The stepparent who undermines the biological parent's leadership — even when that parent makes decisions the stepparent disagrees with — fractures the couple relationship and increases the children's resistance to both. The stepparent's role is ally, not rival.

⚠ **The trap:** *Stepping around the biological parent to establish direct authority with their children will consistently backfire, regardless of how justified it feels.*

03 ★ Build Connection One-on-One

Forced family time — the compulsory togetherness of family meals, outings, and activities designed to accelerate bonding — more often produces performance anxiety and resentment than genuine connection. The research consistently shows that the most durable stepparent-stepchild bonds are built in small, voluntary, one-on-one contexts: a shared errand, a mutual interest, a fifteen-minute conversation that goes somewhere neither of them expected.

⚠ The trap: *Trying to manufacture family warmth before the individual relationships are ready produces the emotional equivalent of forcing a bloom before the root system is established.*

04 ◆ Give Children the Gift of Their Own Timeline

Children in blended families are not withholding affection from the stepparent out of cruelty. They are protecting what is real to them: their loyalty to an absent parent, their grief for a family that no longer exists, their need to not be forced into feelings they have not yet authentically developed. The stepparent who gives children the unhurried gift of their own timeline — who does not demand or even visibly hope for affection that has not yet emerged — creates the conditions in which that affection eventually grows.

⚠ The trap: *Asking children to signal more warmth than they feel to reassure the stepparent places the child's emotional labor in service of the adult's need. This is an inversion of the appropriate relationship.*

05 ✓ Maintain Your Own Spiritual Health

The stepparent who is spiritually depleted cannot give what they do not have. The demands of cruciform love — patient, consistent, unreciprocated investment in a child who may actively resist it — cannot be sustained by willpower alone. They require a daily return to the source: prayer, Scripture, community, and the honest acknowledgment to God and trusted others of what this role actually costs. A

stepparent who is spiritually healthy can endure what would otherwise be intolerable.

THE LOVE THE STEPPARENT IS CALLED TO

Agape, Not Storge — Chosen, Not Automatic

One of the most liberating insights available to the struggling stepparent is a simple distinction between the Greek words the New Testament uses for love. Storge is the natural parental affection that flows automatically between biological parents and their children — the love that does not require cultivation because it is built into the relational architecture. No one tells a biological parent to love their newborn. The love is simply there.

The stepparent is not called to storge. They cannot manufacture it on command, and the shame they feel for not immediately feeling what they expected to feel is, in large part, the shame of failing to produce a feeling that was never theirs to produce in the first place. What the stepparent is called to is something older, harder, and more theologically profound.

AGAPE LOVE — THE LOVE THE STEPPARENT IS CALLED TO

The New Testament has multiple words for love. Eros is romantic desire. Philia is the warm affection of friendship. Storge is the natural attachment between family members, particularly parents and children. And agape is something categorically different from all three.

Agape is not a feeling. It is a decision of the will, sustained by the Spirit, oriented entirely toward the other person's ultimate good regardless of what is returned. This is precisely the love C.S. Lewis defines as "a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good as far as it can be obtained." It requires no warmth of feeling to be activated. It is not dependent on reciprocation. It does not calculate.

This is the love the stepparent is called to. Not the storge they cannot manufacture on command. Not the philia that requires time to develop. But

agape — the deliberate, cross-shaped, Spirit-sustained decision to will the child’s good whether or not the child ever acknowledges it.

This reframe is not a license to remain emotionally distant from stepchildren. It is the opposite. It is the permission to show up fully — choosing this child, investing in this child, willing this child’s good with every decision — without requiring the warmth of feeling that they cannot produce and without collapsing under the shame of its absence. The love that shows up without feeling, day after day, and makes the choice again and again, is frequently the love that eventually produces the feeling. But even if it does not, it has honored the calling.

1 Corinthians 13 — The Stepparent’s Translation

1 CORINTHIANS 13	THE STEPPARENT’S TRANSLATION
<i>Love is patient</i>	The stepparent who waits, year after year, for a child who is not ready to receive them
<i>Love is kind</i>	The stepparent who shows up, quietly and consistently, whether the kindness is acknowledged or not
<i>Love is not jealous</i>	The stepparent who does not compete with the biological parent for the child’s affection
<i>Love does not brag</i>	The stepparent who never demands credit for the investment they have made
<i>Love is not arrogant</i>	The stepparent who does not leverage authority but earns influence through relationship
<i>Love bears all things</i>	The stepparent who absorbs rejection without retaliating and continues to show up

Love endures all things

The stepparent who is still present, still faithful, still choosing this family in year seven

1 Corinthians 13:4 opens the love chapter with two words that map with uncanny precision onto the stepparent’s daily experience: patient and kind. Not passionate. Not warm. Patient — able to wait without demanding acceleration. Kind — choosing to treat the other person well regardless of how they are being treated in return. These are not the affective qualities of storge. They are the volitional qualities of agape. And they are available to every stepparent in every difficult season, precisely because they do not depend on feeling but on the Spirit who enables what the flesh cannot sustain.

“Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered.” — 1 Corinthians 13:4–5 (NASB)

MAINTAINING YOUR OWN SPIRITUAL HEALTH

You Cannot Give What You Do Not Have

The stepparent who attempts to sustain cruciform love without a living connection to the source of that love will eventually run dry. This is not a character failure. It is a spiritual law. The vine and the branches model of John 15 — the same passage that opens this chapter with the command to lay down one’s life — establishes a prior condition for that kind of love: abiding in Christ. Without abiding, the branches can do nothing. Including sustain the kind of long-suffering, patient, agape love that the stepparent’s role demands.

THE STEPPARENT’S SPIRITUAL HEALTH INVENTORY

Daily time in Scripture and prayer

Not as religious performance but as the daily return to the source that replenishes what the role depletes. Even ten unhurried minutes before the household wakes changes the tone of everything that follows.

Honest community with people who know the real situation

The stepparent who carries the weight of this role alone — never naming it honestly to anyone outside the marriage — is bearing a burden the body of Christ was designed to share. Find two or three people who can hold the real story.

Regular one-on-one time with the spouse

The stepparent's primary spiritual support in the blended family is their spouse. Protecting that relationship — with regular, couple-only time that is not about the children or logistics — is spiritual maintenance, not selfishness.

Permission to name the difficulty without guilt

The stepparent who cannot admit how hard this is will find the difficulty metastasizing into resentment. Naming what is hard to God, to a trusted counselor, and to the spouse is not weakness. It is the honesty that prevents suppressed pain from finding destructive expression.

A long-term perspective anchored in God's faithfulness

The stepparent in year two cannot see year seven. But Galatians 6:9 promises that the harvest comes in due time for those who do not grow weary. The long-term perspective is not optimism — it is faith in a God who keeps His promises across timelines that exceed our patience.

“Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good as far as it can be obtained.”

— C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

“Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant.”

— 1 Corinthians 13:4 (NASB)

Chapter 7 has addressed the most demanding adult role in the blended family with the theological seriousness and pastoral compassion it deserves. The stepparent’s cross is real. The calling is cruciform. And the God who called His Son to a cross without immediate reciprocation is fully acquainted with the role.

But the blended family is not composed only of adults navigating complicated roles. Chapter 8 turns to the members of the family who are most affected, least consulted, and most frequently misunderstood: the children. What they actually need, what they are actually experiencing, and how the gospel’s grace specifically addresses the world a child inhabits in a blended family is the territory we enter next.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Children of Grace

Understanding Kids in Blended Families

“Children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward.”

— Psalm 127:3 (NASB)

WHAT CHILDREN ACTUALLY NEED

Not Programs. Not Performances. This.

The child is not confused about what is wrong.

She may not have the language for it. He may express it only in behavior — in the door slammed, the grade dropped, the dinner eaten in silence, the refusal to acknowledge the stepparent’s presence in a room. But the child in a blended family knows exactly what has happened. Their world broke. And the adults around them are trying very hard to build a new one while the rubble of the old one is still underfoot.

What the child needs in this situation is not more family activities designed to accelerate bonding, not a carefully curated set of new holiday traditions, and not a family meeting where the agenda is “How we are going to make this work.” What the child needs — before any of those things can have any traction at all — is three things, in order: felt safety, consistent love, and permission to grieve. Everything else is architecture built on those foundations or it is architecture built on sand.

WHAT CHILDREN IN BLENDED FAMILIES ACTUALLY NEED

Not programs. Not activities.

Not even family meetings.

Felt safety. Consistent love. Permission to grieve.

In that order. Before anything else can be built on top of it.

Felt safety is not the same as physical safety, though it includes it. It is the child's internal experience of being in a relational environment that is stable enough to be trusted, predictable enough not to require constant vigilance, and honest enough to be navigated without decoding the hidden currents of adult emotion. Children in blended families who do not have felt safety spend enormous emotional energy on threat detection rather than development. They cannot learn well, attach well, or trust well when their nervous system is managing an environment it does not yet understand.

Consistent love is not the same as perfect love. It is the kind of love that shows up in the same form at approximately the same time in approximately the same way — not because the adult feels it with equal intensity every day, but because the adult has decided to express it regardless of the fluctuation of feeling. This is, again, agape love applied to children: the steady, reliable presence of an adult who has decided that this child is worth showing up for.

Permission to grieve is the gift that costs the adult the most, because it requires them to hold their own hope for the new family loosely enough to make room for the child's honest experience of loss. A child who is permitted to grieve what has been lost does not grieve forever. A child whose grief is suppressed in the name of the new family's happiness finds other, usually more destructive, ways to express it.

25 yrs

Dr. Judith Wallerstein's longitudinal study tracked children of divorce from the 1970s into adulthood, finding that the emotional impact surfaces most acutely not in childhood but in the adult relationships children form decades later

DR. JUDITH WALLERSTEIN — The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce (2000)

Wallerstein’s landmark 25-year longitudinal study tracked the long-term outcomes of children of divorce from the 1970s into adulthood. Her findings upended the prevailing cultural assumption that children are resilient enough to recover from family breakdown without lasting effect. The study found that many children carried the emotional consequences of divorce into their own adult relationships — surfacing not primarily in childhood but in young adulthood, as they began to form their own intimate partnerships.

The pastoral implication is not despair but intentionality: children in blended families are not just in need of a stable household. They are in need of intentional, gospel-centered healing that addresses the emotional and relational wounds of family breakdown directly — and does so across the full arc of their development, not just in the early years.

The child’s grief is not an obstacle to the new family. It is the road through which the new family must travel to reach genuine connection.

AGE-SPECIFIC NEEDS IN THE BLENDED FAMILY

Meeting Each Child Where They Actually Are

One of the most common pastoral failures in addressing children in blended families is treating “the children” as a monolithic category. A five-year-old and a fifteen-year-old living in the same blended household are having categorically different experiences, navigating categorically different developmental tasks, and requiring categorically different responses from the adults around them. What follows maps the four primary developmental stages to their specific needs, with the gospel’s application to each.

Ages 0–5 • Early Childhood

▶ **Core need:** *Stability, routine, and secure attachment to primary caregiver*

These children cannot yet articulate their loss, but they feel it in their bodies: disrupted sleep, regression, clinginess, heightened distress at transitions. Their deepest need is a caregiver who is consistently present and emotionally regulated — a living embodiment of the God who says “I will never leave you.”

⚠ Caution: *Do not underestimate the impact of family disruption on children who appear “too young to understand.” They understand everything their nervous system can register.*

Ages 6–12 • Middle Childhood

▶ **Core need:** *Clear, consistent boundaries and loyalty permission*

Children in this stage are old enough to feel the loyalty conflict acutely and young enough to be destroyed by it. They need explicit, repeated, genuine permission to love both parents simultaneously — permission that comes not just from words but from the adults’ behavior. When the biological parent and stepparent actively support the child’s relationship with every caregiver, the loyalty bind begins to loosen.

⚠ Caution: *Children at this stage are deeply attuned to whether adults’ words and behavior match. Permission given verbally but withdrawn through subtle resentment is perceived immediately and trusted not at all.*

Ages 13–18 • Adolescence

▶ **Core need:** *Autonomy, identity, and the right to process anger without punishment*

The adolescent’s developmental task — identity formation, individuation, and the testing of authority — collides directly with the blended family’s complexity. Their anger is often the most legitimate emotion in the room, and the most frequently punished. The gospel’s invitation to honest lament — the permission of the Psalms to say to God exactly how bad it is — offers adolescents a model for honest emotional expression that is neither destructive nor suppressed.

⚠ Caution: *Adolescents in blended families who are required to suppress their anger do not eliminate it. They redirect it — into risk behavior, relational withdrawal, or the delayed processing that Wallerstein identified in young adulthood.*

Adult Children • Young Adults & Beyond

▶ **Core need:** *Respect for grief, no forced “happy family” performance*

Adult children are frequently forgotten in conversations about blended family dynamics — assumed to be old enough to handle the transition without support. They are not. They carry their own grief about the restructured family and their own complicated feelings about the stepparent’s presence. What they need most is not inclusion in a manufactured family warmth they do not feel, but genuine respect for their process and honest acknowledgment that their loss is real regardless of their age.

⚠ **Caution:** *The adult child required to perform acceptance they do not feel — particularly at holidays and family milestones — often distances themselves from the family entirely. Forcing the performance loses the relationship.*

Three observations apply across all developmental stages. First, children need the adults in their life to be emotionally regulated — not perfect, but stable enough that the child is not managing the adult’s emotional state in addition to their own. Second, children need their experience named by a trusted adult rather than corrected or minimized. Third, children in blended families consistently identify honesty as the quality they most need from the adults around them: honest acknowledgment of what has changed, honest permission to feel what they feel, and honest presence rather than performed happiness.

LOYALTY CONFLICTS AND THE GOSPEL SOLUTION

The Bind, the Wound, and the Way Through

Of all the specific dynamics that affect children in blended families, the loyalty bind is the most damaging and the most theologically interesting. It is the dynamic in which a child experiences love for the stepparent as a betrayal of the biological parent — or is made to feel that way, explicitly or implicitly, by the adults in their life.

The loyalty bind does not always arrive as an overt statement. It is often communicated through tone, through the adult’s visible discomfort when the child mentions the other household warmly, through the silence that follows a positive comment about the

stepparent, through the subtle but unmistakable sense that choosing to enjoy the new family means choosing against the old one. Children are exquisitely attuned to these signals. They read them with an accuracy that adult self-deception rarely manages to deceive.

THE LOYALTY BIND

The unspoken message the child hears:

“If you love them, you are betraying me.”

No child should be asked to carry this weight.

It is not a relational problem. It is a theological one — and the gospel alone resolves it.

The gospel offers the only adequate theological resolution to the loyalty bind, and it begins with a single, radical claim: love does not divide. It multiplies. This is not sentimentality. It is a direct implication of the nature of agape love as the New Testament describes it — a love that does not operate on a zero-sum economy, that does not run out because more of it is given, that does not diminish in one direction because it flows in another.

A child who loves a stepparent is not loving the biological parent less. A child who is happy in the new household is not betraying the happiness they once had in the old one. The loyalty bind is grounded in a theology of scarcity — the conviction that love is a fixed quantity that must be rationed and protected. The gospel replaces scarcity theology with abundance theology, and the freedom this offers to children in blended families is not merely therapeutic. It is soteriological. It is the announcement of a different economy, operating on different rules, governed by a different kind of love.

Scarcity Theology vs. Gospel Abundance

THE THEOLOGY OF SCARCITY

THE GOSPEL'S THEOLOGY OF
ABUNDANCE

<i>Love is a fixed quantity — giving more to one means less for another</i>	Love multiplies when given freely — a child loving a stepparent does not reduce their love for the biological parent
<i>Accepting the stepparent is disloyalty to the absent parent</i>	Receiving care from multiple adults is abundance, not betrayal
<i>If you are happy in the new family, you are betraying the old one</i>	Children are permitted to experience joy and stability in the blended home without it being a verdict on the past
<i>Having two homes means being torn in two</i>	Having two homes can mean being held and loved in two places simultaneously
<i>The child must choose which family is their “real” one</i>	The child belongs fully to every family that has loved them — none of these relationships is fictional

The adults in the blended family are the primary conveyors of whichever theology the child inhabits. When biological parents speak positively about the stepparent in the child’s presence, they are preaching abundance theology. When they honor the child’s relationship with the other household without visible resentment, they are preaching abundance theology. When they give explicit, repeated, verbal permission for the child to love everyone who loves them — and back it up with consistent behavior — they are dismantling the loyalty bind at its root.

“If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” — 1 Corinthians 13:1 (NASB)

GOSPEL-CENTERED PRACTICES FOR THE CHILDREN IN YOUR HOME

What This Looks Like on a Wednesday

The theology of abundance, the permission to grieve, and the developmental sensitivity this chapter describes must eventually land in the specific, daily, ordinary interactions of the blended household. What follows are six practical expressions of gospel-centered care for children in blended families — not techniques to be applied strategically, but postures of grace made concrete.

<p>Name the loss out loud</p> <p><i>Tell the child: “I know this has been hard. It’s okay to miss what things were like before.” Do not require them to volunteer the grief. Name it first and create the space.</i></p>	<p>Give loyalty permission explicitly</p> <p><i>“You can love your dad and love living here. Those aren’t the same thing and they don’t compete.” Say this as many times as the child needs to hear it.</i></p>
<p>Follow the child’s pace, not yours</p> <p><i>Do not manufacture bonding moments or require displays of affection that the child has not freely initiated. Presence without demand is the most powerful relational offer available.</i></p>	<p>Speak well of the other household</p> <p><i>Even when it costs you something. Especially when it costs you something. The child is watching to see if the love here is big enough to include what they love there.</i></p>
<p>Normalize professional support</p> <p><i>Children in blended families often benefit significantly from a few sessions with a counselor who specializes in family transitions. This is not a failure — it is a resource.</i></p>	<p>Pray for and with the child by name</p> <p><i>Short, honest prayers that acknowledge the difficulty and express trust in a God who is near to the brokenhearted communicate more than most conversations. Children remember being prayed for.</i></p>

“Children are not a distraction from more important work. They are the most important work.”

— C.S. Lewis

“We must be willing to let children grieve what they have lost, rather than requiring them to celebrate what we have gained.”

— Patricia Papernow, *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships*

Chapter 8 has looked at the blended family’s most vulnerable members with the care and theological attention they deserve. The children are not footnotes to the blended family’s story. They are its most important chapter.

But the blended family does not exist in a closed system. It exists within the wider ecosystem of two households, one or two ex-spouses, competing parenting philosophies, and the logistical reality of children who move between worlds every week. Chapter 9 enters this territory — the two-household reality that shapes every blended family’s daily life — and asks what gospel-shaped co-parenting actually looks like when the other household is not cooperating, the ex is not peaceful, and the gospel’s demands feel genuinely impossible.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER NINE

When Two Worlds Collide

Navigating Two Households

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”

— **Romans 12:18 (NASB)**

THE TWO-HOUSEHOLD REALITY

The Ecosystem Nobody Warned You About

The blended family does not end at the front door.

It extends, invisibly and influentially, into another household — one governed by a different adult, a different set of rules, a different parenting philosophy, and often a history of relational pain that has not been fully resolved. Every blended family exists within this wider ecosystem, whether it acknowledges it or not. The child who moves between the two households carries both worlds with them at all times, and the quality of the relationship between those two worlds is one of the most powerful forces shaping that child’s daily experience.

Research on post-divorce family systems is unequivocal on this point: the quality of the co-parenting relationship between biological parents is the single greatest predictor of children’s long-term wellbeing after divorce. Not the quality of the individual households. Not the financial stability of either home. Not even the presence of a warm and committed stepparent. The relationship between the two biological parents, conducted in the space between the two households, shapes the child’s experience more directly than almost any other variable.

The children are not caught between two households. They are carrying both households within them.

#1 factor

The co-parenting relationship between biological parents is identified by multiple longitudinal studies as the single greatest predictor of children’s long-term wellbeing following divorce — above household income, above parental re-partnering, above school stability

This finding has a direct pastoral implication that most blended family conversations miss: the work of healing the blended family is not confined to the household. It extends to the relationship between the two households. And that relationship — the co-parenting relationship with the person who may have caused the most harm — is precisely where the gospel’s demands are most specific, most demanding, and most transformative.

GOSPEL-SHAPED CO-PARENTING

Loving an Enemy in Real Time, Every Week

Romans 12:18 does not say: be at peace with all men who deserve it, or with all men who are making it easy, or with all men who have apologized for what they did. It says be at peace with all men — bounded by the realistic qualifier “if possible, so far as it depends on you,” but absolute in its directional intent. The co-parenting relationship with the former spouse is one of the most specific and demanding applications of this command available in ordinary life.

GOSPEL-SHAPED CO-PARENTING

Co-parenting with an ex-spouse requires

a level of intentional grace that is humanly impossible apart from the gospel.

*It means modeling for children what it looks like
to love an enemy — literally.*

The gospel’s logic for this demand is not obscure. Matthew 5:44 establishes it with unmistakable clarity: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. In the blended family, this is not a theoretical exercise in the Sermon on the Mount. It is a weekly, logistical, unavoidable encounter with a specific person who may have broken the covenant, undermined the parenting, manipulated the children, or made every handoff a renewal of hostility.

What the gospel offers to this situation is not a removal of the difficulty. It is a reframe of the purpose. The co-parenting relationship is not a residual obligation from a failed marriage. It is the arena in which the children watch, week after week, whether the gospel is powerful enough to produce peaceable behavior in the adults who claim it. The children are not fooled by performance. But they are profoundly shaped by what is genuine.

ROMANS 12:18 — A PHRASE-BY-PHRASE PASTORAL UNPACKING

“If possible”

Peace with a hostile ex may not always be possible. The text acknowledges this with pastoral realism. There is no requirement to achieve what the other party refuses to pursue.

“So far as it depends on you”

Your responsibility is bounded by your own choices and posture. You cannot control the ex’s behavior. You are accountable only for yours — and that accountability is total.

“Be at peace”

The goal is peace, not victory, not justice, not validation. Peace for the sake of the children who move between these two worlds every week and carry the atmosphere of both households with them wherever they go.

“With all men”

The scope is universal — including the person who made this hardest. The gospel does not create exceptions for the ex-spouse who was most harmful. It includes them in the peaceable posture being called for.

CO-PARENTING, PARALLEL PARENTING, AND EVERYTHING BETWEEN

Meeting the Situation Where It Actually Is

Not all co-parenting situations are the same, and pastoral wisdom requires honesty about the spectrum. The gospel’s call to pursue peace does not mean requiring every blended family to achieve cooperative co-parenting regardless of the other party’s behavior or the safety implications of direct contact. What it does mean is that the posture of the heart — the orientation toward the other parent’s wellbeing and toward the children’s good — remains peaceable even when the structure of the co-parenting arrangement must adapt to protect everyone involved.

THE CO-PARENTING SPECTRUM

Cooperative — Co-Parenting • *Best case*

Both parents communicate openly, make joint decisions about the children's welfare, and present a reasonably unified front. Children move between households without being caught in adult conflict. This is the gold standard — and achievable when both parties are emotionally mature and child-focused.

† **Gospel note:** *Requires the full range of gospel disciplines: forgiveness, humility, and the consistent prioritization of the child's needs above personal wounds.*

Business-Like — Co-Parenting • Functional

Communication is structured, bounded, and focused exclusively on logistical and child-welfare matters. Emotional content is minimal or absent. Decisions are made through agreed channels rather than spontaneous interaction. Most blended families operate here, and it is entirely sufficient.

† **Gospel note:** *Requires the discipline of emotional regulation: the ability to communicate with someone who has caused harm without allowing the history to contaminate the transaction.*

Parallel — Parenting • High-conflict

When direct communication with the ex-spouse is consistently harmful to the children or to the co-parenting adults, a parallel parenting arrangement reduces contact to a minimum. Each parent operates independently in their own household. Communication is written, minimal, and child-focused only.

† **Gospel note:** *Not a failure — a mercy. When direct engagement consistently escalates conflict that harms the children, reducing contact is the loving, protective choice. Forgiveness does not require proximity to the person forgiven.*

The movement from cooperative co-parenting to parallel parenting is not a failure of the gospel. It is often a mercy. When direct communication with a hostile or manipulative ex-spouse consistently escalates conflict that harms the children, reducing contact to a structured minimum is the protective, love-shaped choice. Forgiveness does not require ongoing exposure to someone who uses the co-parenting relationship as a vehicle for continued harm. It requires the release of bitterness — which can be maintained at any distance.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” — **Matthew 5:9**
(NASB)

PRACTICAL CO-PARENTING DISCIPLINES

Five Practices That Protect the Children and Honor the Gospel

The theology of gospel-shaped co-parenting must land in specific, daily, practical habits. What follows are the five most consequential co-parenting disciplines — each grounded in both the research on children’s wellbeing and the gospel’s specific demands on how we treat those who have harmed us.

01 ✉ **Establish Structured Communication Channels**

The single most effective structural change available to high-conflict co-parenting situations is the shift from informal, emotionally loaded communication to a structured, platform-based channel. App-based co-parenting tools (see table below) create a record, reduce impulsive emotional responses, and keep the communication focused on the children’s practical needs where it belongs. When communication is structured, the emotional temperature drops measurably.

⚠ Never: *Texting, especially when emotions are running high, removes the structural guardrails that keep co-parenting communication functional. The informality of text enables the informality of hostility.*

02 ♥ **Protect Children from Adult Content — Absolutely**

Children must never be used as messengers between households, as intelligence sources about the other parent, or as emotional support for the adult who is struggling with the co-parenting relationship. This is not a guideline. It is an absolute prohibition, grounded both in the research on children’s wellbeing and in the gospel’s protection of the vulnerable. A child who is placed in the middle of adult conflict is a

child whose development is being sacrificed on the altar of the adult's unprocessed pain.

03 ★ Create Consistency Across Households Where Possible

Children who move between households with wildly divergent rules, bedtimes, screen time policies, and homework expectations spend enormous energy recalibrating to two different systems and learning to exploit the gaps between them. Where the two households can agree on basic consistency — not identical, but compatible — the children benefit measurably. This requires adults to prioritize the children's stability above the satisfaction of imposing their own household's philosophy on the other.

⚠ Never: *Using household consistency as a competition — “my rules are better than theirs” — is a form of using the children as proxies in the ongoing adult conflict.*

04 † Speak Respectfully About the Other Household

The child who hears a parent speak critically, dismissively, or contemptuously about the other household is being given an impossible choice: loyalty to the parent in front of them or loyalty to the parent being criticized. This is precisely the loyalty bind described in Chapter 8, activated by adult speech. The discipline of speaking respectfully about the other household — not falsely, not pretending problems do not exist, but choosing to protect the child from adult editorial — is one of the most powerful acts of love available to a co-parenting adult.

05 ◆ Know When to Engage a Mediator or Attorney

When co-parenting communication has broken down entirely, when the safety of the children is at risk, or when the structure of the co-parenting arrangement needs legal clarification, engaging professional support is not a failure of the gospel. It is wisdom. The gospel does not forbid the use of legal structures to protect children from harm.

Proverbs 11:14 notes that in the abundance of counselors there is victory. A family law mediator, a co-parenting coordinator, or an attorney who understands the blended family’s specific needs can provide the structural resolution that individual effort alone cannot achieve.

Recommended Communication Platforms

PLATFORM	BEST USE & NOTES
OurFamilyWizard	<i>Shared calendar, message log, expense tracking, and documented communication. Widely used in family court and highly recommended when conflict is high.</i>
TalkingParents	<i>Fully recorded and time-stamped messaging platform. Every message is preserved and unalterable — valuable when documentation may be needed legally.</i>
Cozi	<i>Simpler shared calendar and to-do platform; less comprehensive than OFW but sufficient for lower-conflict situations.</i>
Email (dedicated address)	<i>A co-parenting-only email address, checked regularly but not compulsively, creates natural structure and documentation without the immediacy of texting.</i>
Structured text protocol	<i>When apps are unavailable, a mutually agreed protocol for texting — child-related only, response within 24 hours, no emotional content — creates workable structure.</i>

ABSOLUTE PROHIBITIONS — PROTECT THE CHILD AT ALL COSTS

- ✗ Using children as messengers between households — ever, for any reason
- ✗ Asking children what happens at the other house or what the other parent said
- ✗ Discussing adult financial or legal matters in the presence of children
- ✗ Sending emotional or hostile messages through the children’s belongings (notes in backpacks, etc.)
- ✗ Requiring children to keep secrets from either parent
- ✗ Expressing anger, grief, or bitterness about the other parent in ways the child can hear or sense
- ✗ Making the child feel responsible for managing the adult’s emotions about the other household

WHEN THE OTHER HOUSEHOLD WON’T COOPERATE

Bounded Peace in an Unbounded Conflict

This section must be written because the pastoral idealism of gospel-shaped co-parenting can, without careful qualification, become a form of spiritual abuse when applied to situations involving persistent hostility, manipulation, narcissistic behavior, or genuine danger. The gospel’s call to pursue peace does not require enduring abuse, enabling harm, or placing children in the path of a parent who is actively dangerous to them.

Romans 12:18 is written with a pastoral realism that is often overlooked: “if possible.” Paul is not pretending that peace is always achievable. He is acknowledging that it sometimes is not — and that the moral responsibility for its absence lies with the party who refuses it, not with the party who pursued it faithfully. The person who does everything within their own sphere of control to co-parent peacefully, and who is met with continued hostility, has fulfilled the command. They are not required to achieve an outcome that depends on the other person’s cooperation.

What they are required to maintain is the posture of the heart. The internal orientation toward the ex’s wellbeing — not warmth, not trust, not proximity, but the absence of active ill-will and the presence of prayer — is what the gospel requires regardless of the external

structure of the co-parenting arrangement. A parallel parenting arrangement can be entered and maintained from a posture of settled forgiveness. The structure adapts to the reality; the heart posture does not.

“You may be done with the past, but the past is not done with you — and it must be faced with the grace of God, not suppressed.”

— **Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son***

The blended family that navigates the two-household reality with gospel-shaped intentionality — pursuing peace where it is possible, maintaining the posture of the heart where it is not, protecting the children above all other considerations, and returning again and again to the cross as the source of the grace that makes any of this possible — is doing something the world has no adequate category for. It is doing something that can only be explained by the power of the gospel operating in the lives of imperfect, wounded, willing people.

Part Three is complete. The theology of Parts One and Two has become architecture. The foundations are laid. The framework is built.

PART THREE COMPLETE — THE GOSPEL-SHAPED FAMILY IS FRAMED	
Chapter 6	Two Becoming One (Again) — covenant theology applied to the second marriage; the couple as the engine
Chapter 7	The Stepparent’s Cross — cruciform love without biological bond; agape as the calling

Chapter 8	The Children of Grace — felt safety, permission to grieve, and the loyalty bind resolved by abundance theology
Chapter 9	When Two Worlds Collide — the two-household reality navigated with gospel-shaped co-parenting and bounded peace

Part Four enters the territory that the framework must now address directly: the specific wounds that do not resolve simply because the structure is sound. The father wound. The communication crisis. The enemy who is still in the picture and still not playing nicely. These are not abstract challenges — they are the daily reality of blended family life, and the gospel has specific, targeted medicine for each one.

The building is framed. Now we address what is broken inside the walls.

“Making All Things New”

PART FOUR

Healing the Wounds

Blended families carry wounds that go deep — wounds of abandonment, fatherly absence, fractured trust, and lingering bitterness. Part Four names these wounds honestly and applies the healing power of the gospel directly to each one.

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 10	The Father Wound: Absent Fathers, Stepfathers, and the Healing of Sonship
Chapter 11	Healing Through Honest Communication: The Gospel Speaks Truth in Love
Chapter 12	When the Ex Doesn't Play Nice: Loving Your Enemy in Real Time

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

— **Psalm 147:3 (NASB)**

CHAPTER TEN

The Father Wound

Absent Fathers, Steppathers, and the Healing of Sonship

“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are.”

— 1 John 3:1 (NASB)

THE STATISTICS OF FATHERLESSNESS

A Crisis the Church Cannot Afford to Ignore

There is a wound so pervasive, so deeply woven into the fabric of the blended family’s experience,

that it functions less like a presenting problem and more like the water in which every other issue swims. It is present in the stepchild who tests the stepparent’s commitment with escalating behavior. It is present in the man who cannot receive his wife’s love without chronic suspicion of its permanence. It is present in the woman whose relational patterns repeat, generation after generation, the particular shape of what she never received from her father. It is the father wound. And in the blended family, it is almost always in the room.

18.4M

children in the U.S. live without a biological father in the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023)

63%

of youth suicides involve fatherless homes (National Principals Association)

71%

of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes (National Fatherhood Initiative)

These statistics are not presented to produce guilt in the parents who are doing their best in the aftermath of family breakdown. They are presented because the church cannot provide what it does not diagnose. The father wound is not a peripheral pastoral concern. It is one of the most consequential wounds in the social landscape of our time, and the blended family — with its specific complexity of biological and step-fathers, of absent and present, of lost and found — is where that wound is most acutely present and most directly addressable.

The father wound is both a presenting issue and the hidden driver of nearly every relational conflict in the blended home.

THE FATHER WOUND DEFINED

More Than an Empty Chair

The father wound is not, at its core, merely the physical absence of a father. It is more precise and more devastating than that: it is the absence of the experience of being unconditionally loved, seen, and secure in the presence of a father figure. A child can grow up in a home where the father is physically present and still carry a profound father wound if that father was emotionally unavailable, conditionally affectionate, harsh, or dismissive. The wound is not about geography. It is about experience.

In the blended family, the father wound presents in multiple, overlapping forms. The child whose biological father left through divorce carries a different wound than the child whose father died. The adult who was raised by a harsh father carries a different wound than the adult whose father was simply disengaged. But all of these wounds share a common root: the core relational experience that the father’s love was not safe, not certain, and not sufficient.

THE LAYER	PASTORAL DESCRIPTION
Absence	The physical, daily absence of the father from the home. The empty chair at breakfast, the phone that does not ring, the games

	<p>he did not watch. This is the most visible layer of the father wound, but rarely the deepest.</p>
Emotional Unavailability	<p>A father may be physically present but emotionally inaccessible — unable to name his own feelings, unable to affirm his child, present in the house but absent in the relationship. Research identifies this as equally damaging to the child’s development as physical absence.</p>
Conditional Love	<p>The experience of a father whose love and attention were contingent on performance — grades, behavior, achievement, obedience. The child who grows up under conditional love learns to earn what should be given, and carries that relational framework into every subsequent relationship.</p>
Abandonment	<p>The father who left — through divorce, addiction, incarceration, or choice — creates an abandonment wound that shapes the child’s internal working model of every relationship: people leave. Love cannot be trusted. Getting close means getting hurt.</p>
Paternal Harshness	<p>The father whose presence was characterized by criticism, contempt, rage, or abuse. The father wound inflicted by harshness is often more acutely painful than the wound of absence, because it includes the violation of what was supposed to be a safe relationship.</p>
Death	<p>Paternal bereavement carries its own specific grief: the loss of a father who was present and loving, whose death leaves a wound that grief counselors identify as distinct from other father wound presentations. The child grieves not a failure of the relationship but the ending of it.</p>

What unites all six presentations is their impact on the internal working model — the unconscious template for how relationships function. Bowlby’s attachment research, discussed in Chapter 2, identifies this template as the lens through which every

subsequent relationship is interpreted. The person carrying a father wound does not merely have painful memories. They have a shaped expectation that informs every encounter with authority, every experience of intimacy, and every moment in which their own adequacy is tested.

HOW THE FATHER WOUND PRESENTS ACROSS THE FAMILY SYSTEM	
In Children	<i>Hypervigilance, testing behavior, explosive anger, emotional withdrawal, self-sabotage, seeking father figures in inappropriate places, deep-seated shame, and an inability to trust authority figures.</i>
In Adult Men	<i>Chronic performance anxiety, inability to receive affirmation without suspicion, rage triggered by perceived rejection, emotional unavailability with their own children, and a compulsive need to either over-achieve or disengage.</i>
In Adult Women	<i>Repeated attachment to unavailable partners, difficulty setting boundaries, excessive need for approval, fear of abandonment driving preemptive relational withdrawal, and shame about their own value and lovability.</i>
In Blended Families	<i>The father wound in one generation becomes the unexamined driver of relational conflict in the next. A stepparent with an unhealed father wound will struggle to provide the</i>

secure, consistent presence their stepchildren need. A spouse with an unhealed father wound will interpret normal marital conflict through the distorted lens of abandonment.

THE GOSPEL'S ANSWER: ABBA, FATHER

The Adoption That Heals What No Human Father Could

The gospel's answer to the father wound is not therapeutic. It does not offer a better father-figure program or a twelve-step process for healing the wound through human relationship. It offers something more radical and more permanent: adoption into the family of the only Father who has never failed a child, never left a child, and never made a child earn what He gives freely.

ROMANS 8:15

“Abba! Father!”

You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again,

but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons.

The Father wound is ultimately and finally healed here.

The word Abba in Romans 8:15 is the Aramaic word for father — not the formal, distanced word for a paternal authority figure, but the intimate, familiar word that a child uses for the father they run to, the father who is safe. Jesus used this word in Gethsemane, in the moment of His most acute suffering (Mark 14:36). Paul uses it here to describe the cry that the Spirit of God enables in every adopted child of God.

This is not a metaphor for emotional warmth. It is a theological description of legal standing. The believer who cries Abba is crying from the position of a fully adopted child —

one who has been placed, permanently and irrevocably, in the family of a Father who does not wound.

THE THEOLOGY OF DIVINE ADOPTION

The Greek word translated “adoption” in Romans 8:15 is *huiothesia* — literally, the placing of a son. In Roman legal context, adoption conferred full legal standing, complete inheritance rights, and the abolition of all previous legal obligations. An adopted son was, in every legal and relational sense, as fully the father’s son as any biological child.

Paul chooses this precise legal term to describe what happens to every believer in Christ. We are not merely forgiven. We are placed — legally, covenantally, irreversibly — as sons and daughters into the family of the God who does not wound. This adoption cannot be revoked. It does not depend on performance. It is not contingent on the believer’s ongoing worthiness. It is the permanent legal standing of everyone in Christ.

For the person carrying a father wound, this is not merely good theology. It is the specific, targeted, precisely calibrated answer to the deepest question the wound has been asking: Am I wanted? Am I seen? Will I be left? The answer of the gospel, in the language of adoption, is: you have been placed. Permanently. In a family where the Father runs toward you.

The healing of the father wound through the gospel is not instantaneous. It is the work of a lifetime of learning to bring the wound to the Father and discovering, again and again, that He does not flinch at it. It is the work of prayer, of Scripture, of community, and of the specific kind of sanctification that comes from having one’s distorted image of fatherhood slowly, persistently corrected by the actual fatherhood of God.

But it is real healing. Not the management of a wound, but the transformation of the identity that the wound produced. The person who was abandoned by their father and who has received the spirit of adoption begins — slowly, imperfectly, with many setbacks — to live from a different identity: not the abandoned child, but the placed son. Not the one whose father left, but the one whose Father runs toward them.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” — Luke 15:20 (NASB)

THE STEPFATHER AS REDEMPTIVE PRESENCE

An Embodied Image of the Fatherhood of God

Within the gospel’s framework, the stepfather’s role takes on a theological dignity that ordinary culture cannot offer. He is not a replacement for what was lost. He is not a consolation prize for a child whose father was absent. He is something more specific and more sacred: a redemptive presence — a tangible, embodied image of the fatherhood of God in the life of a child who may have had no other adequate experience of what a father’s love looks and feels like.

This is not a small calling. It is one of the most theologically significant roles available to a man. The stepfather who shows up consistently, who loves with agape rather than waiting for storge to arrive, who protects and provides and teaches and names and stays — is doing in miniature what God does in fullness: choosing a child who did not choose him, and loving that child with a love that does not require reciprocation to sustain itself.

THE STEPFATHER AS REDEMPTIVE PRESENCE

While no stepfather can fill the void

left by a biological father’s absence,

a gospel-driven stepfather can become

a tangible, embodied image

of the fatherhood of God.

The model for this calling, as we saw in Chapter 3, is Joseph of Nazareth. But the principles of his model are worth naming specifically in the context of the father wound, because it is in the life of a child carrying that wound that the stepfather’s gospel-shaped fatherhood has its most transformative potential.

**JOSEPH'S MODEL — FIVE ACTIONS THAT
DEFINE THE GOSPEL STEPFATHER**

He Named the Child

The act of naming was the legal claim of fatherhood. Joseph named Jesus at God's instruction, making the covenant claim of fatherhood without biological warrant. This is the stepfather's highest calling: to claim the child covenantally.

He Protected the Family

When Herod threatened, Joseph moved. He did not deliberate, defer, or wait for biological paternal instinct to activate. He acted from covenant responsibility, not from blood. The stepfather who protects is exercising a calling, not a biological drive.

He Taught the Trade

Jesus learned carpentry from Joseph. The stepfather who teaches — skills, character, faith, the daily disciplines of a life well-lived — is doing what Joseph did: investing the irreplaceable capital of presence and formation in a child who will carry it for a lifetime.

He Remained

After the Magi, after Egypt, after Nazareth — Joseph stayed. The stepfather's most powerful testimony to the child is simply this: I did not leave. Whatever the difficulty, whatever the lack of reciprocation, whatever the

He Was Chosen by God

biological parent's interference — I am still here.

Matthew 1 does not present Joseph as a default option when no biological father was available. He was chosen — selected by God for the specific role of fathering the Son of God. The stepfather who enters his role with this theology understands that his presence is not a consolation prize. It is a divine appointment.

Brennan Manning's insight is the most precise pastoral commentary on the stepfather's role available in the theological literature: the man who knows he is beloved by a Father who will never leave him becomes capable of fathering others the same way. The stepfather who has received his own healing — who has brought his own father wound to the Abba of Romans 8:15 and begun to live from the identity of the adopted son — is the stepfather most equipped to become a redemptive presence for the child in his home.

He cannot give what he does not have. But what he has, received freely from the Father who adopts without condition, he can give with a generosity that transcends biology, that outlasts resistance, and that — in the fullness of time — may become the most significant act of any man's life.

“The father heart of God is the most transforming truth I know. When a man knows he is beloved by a father who will never leave him, he becomes capable of fathering others the same way.”

— Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Chapter 10 has addressed the deepest wound in the blended family's landscape with the theological depth and pastoral tenderness it demands. The father wound is real. The statistics are staggering. And the gospel's answer — adoption into the family of Abba, Father — is the only healing that reaches the root.

Chapter 11 moves from the wound that lives in silence to the damage done by words. Communication — or the failure of it — is the terrain on which most blended family conflicts play out in real time. What the gospel says about truth-speaking, truth-receiving, and the kind of communication that builds rather than destroys is the territory we enter next.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Healing Through Honest Communication

The Gospel Speaks Truth in Love

“But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

— **Ephesians 4:15 (NASB)**

THE COMMUNICATION CRISIS IN BLENDED FAMILIES

The Four Patterns That Predict Failure

Words do more damage in the blended family than almost anything else.

Not because the people in blended families are uniquely cruel or uniquely careless, but because the pressure cooker of competing loyalties, suppressed grief, unresolved wounds, and daily logistical complexity creates the conditions in which words are more likely to be spoken from the reactive, unprocessed places of the human psyche than from the measured, grace-saturated places the gospel calls us to inhabit. The blended family has more potential flashpoints per square foot than almost any other family system. And every flashpoint is a communication event.

Dr. John Gottman’s decades of research at the University of Washington produced one of the most precisely validated predictive models in relationship science: the identification of four communication patterns — which he called the Four Horsemen — that, when present in a relationship, predict its dissolution with an accuracy rate Gottman reported at over 90%. These four patterns are not exotic or unusual. They are the default communication behaviors of human beings under stress. And in the blended family, stress is the default condition.

In blended families, the stakes of poor communication are multiplied across every relationship in the home. Children watch. Patterns replicate. Wounds compound.

The Four Horsemen in the Blended Home

× Criticism

Definition: *Attacking the other person’s character or personality rather than addressing a specific behavior.*

In blended families: Manifests as character attacks between spouses (“You always take your kids’ side”), between parents and stepchildren (“You’re just like your father”), and in the internal narrative adults develop about the ex-spouse that contaminates every co-parenting interaction.

Gospel antidote: *The gentle startup: address the behavior specifically (“I feel hurt when...”) rather than the person globally (“You always...” or “You never...”).*

× Contempt

Definition: *Treating the other person as beneath consideration — the most toxic of the four patterns and the single strongest predictor of relationship dissolution.*

In blended families: In blended families, contempt is often triangulated: a parent’s contempt for the ex-spouse, expressed in the child’s presence, becomes a devastating message about the child’s own worth. The child who is made of two parents absorbs contempt for either parent as contempt for half of themselves.

Gospel antidote: *Cultivating genuine admiration and respect for the other person’s humanity, grounded in the gospel’s insistence that every person carries the image of God regardless of how badly they have behaved.*

× Defensiveness

Definition: *Responding to perceived attack by counter-attacking or playing the victim rather than receiving the feedback.*

In blended families: Common when the stepparent's role is challenged, when parenting decisions are questioned by the biological parent, or when children raise legitimate grievances that the adults experience as unfair criticism of the new family they have worked so hard to build.

Gospel antidote: *Taking responsibility for what is true in the other person's concern, even when the delivery was imperfect. "I hear that you're frustrated. Let me think about whether you have a point."*

✕ Stonewalling

Definition: *Withdrawing from the interaction entirely — physically or emotionally — as a way of avoiding conflict that has become overwhelming.*

In blended families: Extremely common in blended families where one or both partners carry avoidant attachment patterns from the family of origin or the previous marriage. The stonewall protects the stonewaller but communicates to the other person that they are not worth engaging — and produces the escalation it was designed to prevent.

Gospel antidote: *Physiological self-soothing: when flooded, take a genuine break (minimum 20 minutes, during which no conflict rehearsal) and return to the conversation from a regulated place.*

GOSPEL-SHAPED COMMUNICATION

Truth in Love Toward Growth in Christ

Ephesians 4:15 offers what is simultaneously the simplest and the most demanding communication framework in all of human literature. Four elements, each essential, none sufficient without the others. Together, they constitute a communication theology that is not a technique to be applied but a relational posture to be inhabited — one that flows from the gospel's deep logic of incarnation, humility, and the Spirit's indwelling presence.

EPHESIANS 4:15 — THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF GOSPEL COMMUNICATION

“Truth”: *What is said must correspond to reality. Not partial truth. Not silence that protects the adult at the child’s expense. Not the managed version of events. Truth.*

“In Love”: *The manner of the truth matters as much as the content. Truth spoken in contempt is not gospel communication. It is weaponized information.*

“To Grow”: *The purpose of gospel communication is not self-expression, emotional release, or winning the argument. It is the growth of the other person and the relationship.*

“In Christ”: *The source and standard of gospel communication is not a human communication model — it is the incarnate Word who is Himself the perfect expression of truth and love simultaneously.*

THE TRINITARIAN MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

Ephesians 4:15’s formula — truth, in love, toward growth, in Christ — is not primarily a communication technique. It is a description of how the triune God Himself communicates. The Father speaks truth to Israel through the prophets — sometimes corrective, always covenantal, never contemptuous. The Son is Himself the incarnate Word, the perfect and complete communication of everything God has to say, expressed in the medium of a human life lived in love. The Spirit speaks truth into the hearts of believers without compulsion, without manipulation, without contempt — illuminating, convicting, comforting.

When Paul calls the blended family to speak truth in love toward growth in Christ, he is not asking them to adopt a better communication style. He is asking them to communicate as image-bearers of the God who communicates this way. This is a calling, not a technique. And it requires not just practice but the indwelling Spirit who makes it possible.

The practical implication of grounding communication in Ephesians 4:15 rather than in a human communication model is significant. Human communication models can be

learned and forgotten. They can be applied strategically and abandoned under pressure. The gospel's communication framework is different: it does not merely change what people say, it changes who is doing the speaking. The Spirit who enables truth-in-love communication is not a technique. He is a Person. And the family that genuinely invites His presence into its conversations is not just communicating better — it is being transformed by a different kind of communication entirely.

FOUR GOSPEL COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINES

What This Looks Like in the Blended Home

The four gospel communication disciplines that follow are not Ephesians 4:15 translated into techniques. They are practices that create the conditions in which the Spirit can do the deeper work of transformation. They are the equivalent of spiritual disciplines in the domain of communication: not the source of the grace, but the channels through which grace flows.

01 † Confess Quickly — Do Not Let the Sun Go Down on Your Anger

Ephesians 4:26 is one of the most practically demanding commands in the New Testament for blended family members, who have more legitimate sources of daily anger than most family configurations. The command is not to suppress the anger — it is to resolve it before it is allowed to calcify into the bitterness that Ephesians 4:31 identifies as the next stage. Quick confession does not mean pretending the offense was minor. It means refusing to let the offense establish tenancy in the relationship.

► **Practical form:** *Tonight, before sleep: "Is there anything I said or did today that hurt you and that I haven't acknowledged? I want to clear it before tomorrow."*

02 ♥ Listen to Understand Before You Speak to Be Understood

Stephen Covey's principle is rooted in a deeper biblical anthropology: the tongue is unruly and the human tendency is to speak from the overflow of the heart before the heart has done adequate processing. James 1:19 — "Let everyone be quick to hear,

slow to speak” — is not a communication technique. It is a description of what love looks like in real time. In the blended family, where every person in the room has a different history and a different stake in the conversation, the discipline of listening first changes the entire dynamic of every difficult exchange.

► **Practical form:** *Before responding to an upset family member: repeat back what you heard them say and ask if you got it right. Do not proceed to your response until they confirm you understood them.*

03 ★ Name Your Emotional State Before Addressing the Other Person’s Behavior

The most disarming sentence available in a blended family conflict is the one that begins with “I feel.” Not “You make me feel” — which is a character accusation wearing the costume of an emotional disclosure. But “I feel hurt” or “I feel dismissed” or “I feel afraid that.” This is not vulnerability as emotional manipulation. It is the honest naming of internal experience that creates the conditions for the other person to respond with empathy rather than defense. Gottman’s research identifies this “gentle startup” as the single most effective shift available in conflict de-escalation.

► **Practical form:** *“When that happened, I noticed I felt _____. I want to tell you about it because I don’t want it to sit between us.”*

04 ◆ Invite God into Every Difficult Conversation Before It Begins

This discipline is the most countercultural and the most transformative. Before the hard conversation — the custody discussion, the stepparent’s concern about the child, the disagreement about household expectations — thirty seconds of honest prayer together changes the entire architecture of the exchange. It is not a religious ritual. It is an acknowledgment that the two people about to have a difficult conversation are not adequate on their own, and that a third party with perfect wisdom and perfect love is available to speak into it.

► **Practical form:** *“Before we get into this, can we just ask God to help us hear each other well?” Thirty seconds. No eloquence required.*

THE ANGER QUESTION

What to Do with the Most Honest Emotion in the House

Blended families produce anger. This is not a sign of failure. It is a sign of stakes. People who do not care do not get angry. The anger present in the blended family — the stepparent’s anger at being perpetually undervalued, the child’s anger at a world that changed without their consent, the spouse’s anger at the ex’s continued interference, the biological parent’s anger at being caught between their children and their new partner — is real, legitimate, and in urgent need of a theological framework.

Ambrose Bierce’s aphorism — “Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret” — is not a counsel of suppression. It is a counsel of timing and processing. The goal is not to eliminate the anger but to direct it through the appropriate channels before it enters the communication stream.

THE APPROACH TO ANGER	THE RESULT
<i>Anger expressed immediately without processing</i>	<i>Emotional explosion that damages the relationship and requires repair before the actual issue can even be addressed</i>
<i>Anger suppressed entirely</i>	<i>Underground bitterness that surfaces as stonewalling, passive aggression, or the catastrophic blowup that arrives without warning</i>
Anger named as information (“I’m feeling angry because...”)	The honest, non-weaponized use of emotional data to communicate something true about the impact of the other person’s behavior
Anger brought to God before it is brought to the person	The Psalmic model: take the raw emotion to God first, receive perspective, then re-enter the human conversation from a regulated place

The Psalms offer the model: lament. The psalmist brings the anger, the grief, the legitimate complaint, and the righteous indignation directly to God before bringing it to any human being. The lament is not suppressed — it is expressed fully in the presence of the One who can actually hold it without being damaged by it and without retaliating. What emerges from that encounter is not a sanitized absence of feeling but a regulated, oriented, gospel-grounded person capable of re-entering the human conversation from a different place.

“How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?” — Psalm 13:1 (NASB)

FAMILY MEETINGS AS SACRED SPACE

The Weekly Enactment of the Family’s Core Values

The family meeting is one of the most practical and most underutilized tools available to the blended family. Not a court of appeals for grievances, not a performance review of the week’s behavior, but a brief, structured, grace-saturated rhythm of honest communication that prevents small tensions from becoming family-fracturing conflicts. When led in a spirit of gospel humility and opened with the acknowledgment that this family belongs to God, the weekly meeting becomes something more than a household management tool. It becomes a weekly enactment of the family’s deepest convictions about who it is and whose it is.

The key word is brief. A family meeting that goes forty-five minutes and becomes a vehicle for unresolved adult conflict does more damage than no meeting at all. The optimal structure is twenty to thirty minutes, once per week, same time, same format. Consistency creates safety. Safety creates honesty. Honesty creates connection.

THE GOSPEL FAMILY MEETING — A FIVE-ELEMENT STRUCTURE

† Open with Prayer

Two to three sentences, honest and brief. Acknowledge that this family belongs to God and that the meeting is a space for grace, not performance. Even reluctant family

members sense the difference between a family meeting that starts with God and one that starts with an agenda.

♥ **Gratitude Round**

Every person at the table names one thing they are grateful for from the past week. No exceptions, no exemptions. This is not forced positivity — it is the deliberate orientation of the family’s attention toward what is working before addressing what is not.

★ **What’s Going Well**

Each person shares one relational or household thing that is going well. This keeps the meeting from becoming a complaint session and establishes the pattern that honest family communication includes celebration, not only correction.

◆ **What Needs Attention**

One or two issues raised — kept brief, kept specific, kept out of the arena of blame and character judgment. The question is not “What did you do wrong?” but “What do we need to address together?” The distinction is everything.

✓ **Close with Blessing**

The parent or stepparent speaks a brief, direct blessing over each child by name. Not a prayer over the group — a word spoken to each person specifically. This is the most countercultural and most powerful moment in the family meeting.

The closing blessing deserves additional comment because it is the element most likely to be omitted and the element with the most transformative potential. The research on paternal and parental blessing — documented extensively by John Trent and Gary Smalley in *The Blessing* — demonstrates that children who receive explicit, specific, spoken blessing from the adults in their life develop measurably stronger identity, resilience, and capacity for healthy relationship. For children in blended families, who often carry the unspoken suspicion that they are the collateral damage of adult decisions, a word spoken

directly to them by name — “I see you. I’m proud of who you are. You belong here” — is not sentimental. It is spiritual surgery.

COMMUNICATION HEALTH CHECK

Five Diagnostic Questions for Every Blended Family

Before closing this chapter, five diagnostic questions. These are not performance metrics. They are honest invitations to assessment — the kind of assessment that the family willing to look honestly at its communication patterns can use as the starting point for intentional change.

COMMUNICATION HEALTH CHECK — FIVE DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

After hard conversations, do we feel closer or more distant?

Conversations that consistently produce distance — regardless of “resolution” — are producing the wrong outcome. Gospel communication creates connection even through disagreement.

Do our children feel safe to bring their honest experience to us?

A family where children consistently conceal their real emotional state from the adults has a communication culture problem, not a child problem.

Do we confess quickly, or do we allow unresolved conflict to accumulate?

Ephesians 4:26 is not a general guideline — it is a time-bounded command. Unresolved anger becomes bitterness. Bitterness becomes contempt. Contempt predicts divorce (Gottman).

Do we speak respectfully about absent family members — including the ex?

The communication culture of the blended home extends beyond the household. What is spoken about the other household in this home is heard, filed, and internalized by every child present.

Do we regularly name what is working, or only what is broken?

Families that communicate only in problem-solving mode lose the relational fabric that makes problem-solving possible. Celebration and gratitude are not optional — they are structural.

“Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.”

— Ambrose Bierce

Chapter 11 has given the blended family both a theology and a toolkit for gospel-shaped communication. Words, spoken in truth and love, toward growth, in Christ, are not the complete answer to every blended family wound — but they are the medium through which most healing either begins or is indefinitely deferred.

Chapter 12 addresses the most difficult communication challenge in the entire blended family landscape: not the difficult conversation with a spouse or stepchild, but the ongoing relationship with the person who is not in the household and is not cooperating with anyone’s healing. The ex who is actively hostile. The co-parent who is weaponizing the children. The enemy who is not hypothetical but specific, named, and present at every school event. Chapter 12 takes Matthew 5:44 seriously as a co-parenting directive.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER TWELVE

When the Ex Doesn't Play Nice

Loving Your Enemy in Real Time

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

— **Matthew 5:44 (NASB)**

THE MOST DIFFICULT SERMON IN THE BIBLE

The Enemy Is Not Hypothetical

Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount to a crowd that had never met your ex-spouse.

He did not have them in mind as the specific illustration of Matthew 5:44. But He might as well have. Because in the blended family, the command to love your enemies is not an exercise in theological abstraction or a spiritual discipline practiced from a safe distance. It is a weekly, logistical, unavoidable, sometimes-at-the-school-parking-lot encounter with a specific named person who has caused specific named harm and who may be, at this very moment, actively engaged in causing more.

No command in the New Testament is more tested in the blended family context than this one. The enemy of Matthew 5:44 is the person who blew up the first marriage, or who left, or who blamed you for everything, or who is now systematically undermining your relationship with your children. They are the person who shows up at the school play not as a distant figure but as a presence in the same row, breathing the same air, capable of making the next ninety minutes either a minor miracle of civil behavior or a confirmation of every worst fear about how this co-parenting arrangement was always going to go.

MATTHEW 5:44

***“Love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you.”***

The enemy is not hypothetical.

They show up at the school play. They are specific, named, and present.

This chapter does not offer an easy application of Matthew 5:44. It offers a pastoral realism about what the command actually means, what it does not mean, and what it looks like in specific practice when the person you are called to love is genuinely making your life, and your children’s lives, harder every week.

The first and most important clarification is the distinction between love and trust. Jesus commanded love. He did not command trust. He did not command the elimination of appropriate boundaries. He did not command the performance of a warmth that would be dishonest and dangerous. He commanded agape — and understanding what agape actually requires is the difference between a command that feels impossible and a command that is merely extremely demanding.

Loving an enemy does not require trusting them. But it does require something harder: choosing their ultimate good while they are still behaving badly.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LOVE AND TRUST

Agape Without Naïveté

The conflation of love and trust is one of the most damaging theological confusions available to the blended family member trying to navigate a hostile co-parenting relationship. If love requires trust, then the command to love the hostile ex-spouse requires a relational vulnerability that is genuinely dangerous. If love and trust are distinct — which they are — then love can be extended, maintained, and practiced toward a person who has

forfeited the right to trust, without requiring the blended family to expose itself or its children to ongoing harm.

LOVE (AGAPE)	TRUST
Is commanded unconditionally by Jesus	<i>Must be earned through consistent, demonstrated behavior over time</i>
Is a choice of the will, not a feeling	<i>Is a reasonable response to a track record of reliability and safety</i>
Does not require the other person's repentance	<i>Requires evidence that the harmful pattern has genuinely changed</i>
Means choosing their ultimate good and praying for their transformation	<i>Means being willing to be vulnerable with someone who has earned that access</i>
Can coexist with clear legal and relational boundaries	<i>Cannot be manufactured or demanded — it grows or it doesn't</i>
Is possible even while maintaining protective distance	<i>May never be restored, and that is sometimes appropriate and right</i>

The practical implication of this distinction is liberating: you are not required to feel warmly toward your ex in order to love them. You are not required to extend access that endangers your children in order to comply with Matthew 5:44. You are not required to pretend that what they are doing is not harmful or to absorb their behavior without appropriate protective response.

What you are required to do is specific: choose their ultimate good. Pray for their transformation. Refuse to allow their behavior to corrupt your character, your children's perception of them, or your own capacity for agape love. That is the command. It is not small. But it is bounded, and it is achievable through the Spirit who enables what the flesh alone cannot sustain.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” — Romans 12:21 (NASB)

NAMING WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING

Pastoral Honesty About Hostile Co-Parenting

Before applying the gospel’s strategy for loving the enemy, the chapter must do the pastoral work of naming what hostile co-parenting actually looks like — not in abstract, but in specific, recognizable forms. Many blended family members who are experiencing genuine harm have been gaslit into believing that their response to it is the problem. Naming these behaviors is not persecution of the ex. It is the honest identification of patterns that harm children and that require both gospel-shaped love and appropriate protective response.

RECOGNIZING HOSTILE CO-PARENTING BEHAVIORS	
Parental Alienation	<i>Systematically working to damage the child’s relationship with the other parent through negative commentary, loyalty tests, and the subtle or overt message that the child’s relationship with the other household is a betrayal.</i>
Custody Violation	<i>Failing to honor the custody agreement — whether through withholding visitation, early returns, late pickups, or unilateral schedule changes — creating logistical disruption and relational instability for the children.</i>
Financial Weaponization	<i>Using child support, expense reimbursement, and financial matters as instruments of conflict</i>

	<i>rather than as tools for the children’s welfare. The children’s financial needs become proxies for unresolved adult grievance.</i>
Communication Sabotage	<i>Using the children to communicate hostile messages, monitoring the children’s communications with the other household, or making direct communication between the co-parents so toxic that children are inevitably caught in the fallout.</i>
New Partner Interference	<i>Expressing hostility toward the stepparent directly or through the children, making the children’s relationship with their stepparent a vehicle for the ex’s unresolved anger about the new relationship.</i>
Legal Harassment	<i>Using the legal system not to protect the children’s genuine interests but as an instrument of ongoing conflict — repeated motions, false allegations, and litigation as a substitute for the power lost in the marriage’s dissolution.</i>

The recognition of these patterns does not justify bitterness, retaliation, or the contamination of the children’s relationship with the other parent. It justifies appropriate response: legal boundaries, documented communication, professional mediation, and the kind of calm, consistent, gospel-grounded posture that neither capitulates to the hostility nor mirrors it. The goal is not to defeat the enemy. The goal is to protect the children and to maintain the kind of character that the gospel produces — regardless of what the other party is doing.

PRACTICAL GOSPEL STRATEGIES

Five Practices That Embody Matthew 5:44

The five strategies that follow are not passive spiritual exercises practiced in isolation from reality. They are active, intentional, gospel-grounded postures that shape both the internal orientation and the external behavior of the blended family member navigating a hostile co-parenting relationship. Together, they constitute the practical embodiment of Matthew 5:44 in the specific context of blended family life.

01 † Pray for Your Ex — By Name, By Need, By the Gospel

The command to pray for those who persecute you is not optional and not metaphorical. It is a daily discipline that reshapes the heart of the person who prays as much as — and often more than — it affects the person being prayed for. Research by Dr. Frank Fincham at Florida State University demonstrates that prayer for a partner (and by extension, a co-parent) is associated with measurable reductions in resentment and improvements in forgiveness over time. The gospel compels it; the neuroscience confirms it.

⚠ Watch for: *Praying in a way that rehearses grievances rather than genuinely extending agape to the ex's actual needs. The prayer must be honest, not theatrical.*

02 ♥ Refuse to Speak Negatively About Them to Your Children

This is the discipline that costs the most and protects the most. Every critical word spoken about the ex in the child's presence places the child in an impossible relational position — the loyalty bind — and damages not only the child's relationship with the absent parent but also, eventually, the child's relationship with the parent doing the speaking. Children who grow up hearing one parent consistently malign the other eventually recognize the pattern. The recognition does not typically produce gratitude.

⚠ **Watch for:** *The subtle versions: the knowing look, the heavy sigh, the incomplete sentence that communicates everything without technically saying anything. Children read all of it.*

03 ★ Establish and Maintain Clear Legal Boundaries

Legal boundaries are not a failure of forgiveness. They are the appropriate structural response to an environment where trust has been forfeited and children's safety requires documentation and protection. A well-crafted custody agreement, a co-parenting app that creates a written record, and an attorney who understands the specific dynamics of the blended family are not the opposite of the gospel's call to love — they are the embodiment of the wisdom that love requires when dealing with a relationship that has lost the capacity for good-faith engagement.

04 ◆ Seek Professional Co-Parenting Mediation When Direct Communication Breaks Down

The point at which direct co-parenting communication has become consistently harmful is the point at which the introduction of a neutral third party — a co-parenting coordinator, a family mediator, or a court-appointed parenting coordinator — is not weakness but wisdom. Proverbs 11:14 notes that in the abundance of counselors there is victory. The professional who helps structure the co-parenting relationship reduces the children's exposure to adult conflict and creates accountability for both parties that informal arrangement cannot produce.

05 ✓ Anchor Your Identity in What God Says About You — Not What Your Ex Says

The hostile ex-spouse has a version of you that is almost certainly shaped more by their wound than by any accurate observation. Their characterization of you — communicated through the children, through the legal process, through the social network of mutual acquaintances — is not objective data. It is grief and rage and shame in narrative form. Receiving it as your identity is the most dangerous thing you

can do for yourself and for the family you are trying to build. The gospel's verdict on who you are is immovable and is not subject to revision by your ex's testimony.

PRAYING FOR THE ENEMY

A Practical Framework for the Hardest Prayer

Of all five strategies, the practice of praying for the ex is simultaneously the most difficult and the most transformative. It is difficult because it requires the blended family member to extend genuine spiritual goodwill toward a person who may be actively causing harm. It is transformative because the act of praying for another person — really praying for them, not praying about them — fundamentally reshapes the relationship of the one who prays to the one being prayed for.

A FRAMEWORK FOR PRAYING FOR THE EX — BY NAME, BY NEED, BY THE GOSPEL

- ▶ **By Name:** Use their actual name in prayer. Not “that person” or “my ex.” Their name. The use of their name in prayer acknowledges their full humanity before God and begins to erode the dehumanization that bitterness produces.
- ▶ **By Need:** Pray for something specific you know about their actual life — their health, a struggle they are facing, their wellbeing. Not a spiritual performance, but the honest extension of agape to a specific person's specific need.
- ▶ **By the Gospel:** Pray for their encounter with the grace of God. Not as an abstract hope but as the specific thing that would address the wound that is driving their behavior. Hostile ex-spouses are, almost always, deeply wounded people. Pray for their healing with the same specificity you would want someone to pray for yours.

The testimony of blended family members who have sustained this practice across months and years is remarkably consistent: they do not necessarily report that the ex's behavior improved. They report that their own capacity for agape love increased, their resentment lost its grip, and their children began to sense a different quality of peace in the household

— a peace that was not dependent on the other household’s cooperation but was rooted in something the hostility could not reach.

You cannot pray for someone every day, by name, for their genuine good, and maintain an equal intensity of hatred for them. The prayer changes you even when it cannot change them.

ANCHORING YOUR IDENTITY

Two Verdicts, One Choice

The final and in some ways most important strategy is the discipline of identity anchoring — the daily, intentional choice to receive your identity from the God who knows you completely rather than from the ex-spouse who knows you partially and is currently motivated to characterize you unfavorably.

ANCHORING YOUR IDENTITY: TWO VERDICTS, ONE CHOICE	
What God says	You are beloved, chosen, adopted, forgiven, redeemed, called, and held — none of which the ex’s opinion can alter or revoke.
What the ex says	<i>You are inadequate, unreasonable, difficult, bitter, or whatever the specific vocabulary of their hostility. This is not an objective assessment. It is a wound speaking.</i>
The difference	One of these verdicts was delivered by the God who created you, knows you completely, and paid the

ultimate price to restore you. The other was delivered by a person in pain. You get to choose which one you build your identity on.

Romans 8:1 declares: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (NASB). The no condemnation of that verse is not qualified by the ex’s co-parenting behavior, by the legal proceedings, by the things the children have been told, or by the whisper network of mutual acquaintances who have only heard one side. The verdict of the gospel is issued by the only judge whose verdict is final. And that verdict is: no condemnation. Beloved. Mine.

The blended family member who builds their identity on that verdict is not invulnerable to the hostility of a difficult ex-spouse. But they are no longer subject to it. They can receive it, acknowledge the pain of it, and return to the only verdict that matters — every single time the wound is reopened.

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness;

only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate;

only love can do that.”

— Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love

Part Four is complete. The wounds have been named. The father wound has been met with the adoption of Abba. The communication crisis has been met with the truth-in-love theology of Ephesians 4:15. The hostile enemy has been met with the agape of Matthew 5:44 and the identity security of Romans 8:1.

PART FOUR COMPLETE — THE WOUNDS HAVE BEEN NAMED AND ADDRESSED	
Chapter 10	The Father Wound — the deepest wound in the blended family’s landscape, met by the adoption of Abba, Father
Chapter 11	Honest Communication — the Four Horsemen named, Ephesians 4:15 applied, the family meeting as sacred space
Chapter 12	Loving the Enemy — Matthew 5:44 applied with pastoral realism; love and trust distinguished; light defeating darkness

Part Five moves from healing to flourishing. The goal of the gospel is never merely survival. It is abundant life — the “life more abundantly” of John 10:10 that the book’s own ministry home is named for. Part Five casts the vision for the blended family that is not just enduring but thriving: building new traditions, finding its community in the body of Christ, and leaving a legacy of grace that will outlast every wound that was brought into the household.

The worst is behind us. The best is still being built.

“Making All Things New”

PART FIVE

Thriving Together

SURVIVAL IS NOT THE GOAL.

Flourishing is.

Part Five casts the vision for the blended family that not only endures

but thrives — building traditions, finding community, and leaving a legacy of grace.

Part Five casts the vision for the blended family that not only endures but thrives: building new traditions, finding its place in the community of faith, and ultimately leaving a legacy of grace that outlasts it.

CHAPTERS IN THIS PART

Chapter 13	Building Traditions and Identity: The New Family Story
Chapter 14	The Blended Church Family: Community, Support, and Belonging
Chapter 15	Leaving a Legacy of Grace: The Multigenerational Gospel Family

“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.”

— **Jeremiah 29:11 (NASB)**

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Building Traditions and Identity

The New Family Story

“And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, “It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.””

— **Exodus 13:8 (NASB)**

WHY TRADITIONS MATTER

The Liturgy of Family Life

The Israelites had just walked out of Egypt through a parted sea.

They had witnessed plagues and Passover and the spectacular, unmistakable intervention of God in their collective history. And God’s immediate instruction, as they stood on the other side of the miracle, was not primarily a theological treatise or a systematic doctrine. It was a command to tell the story. To their children. With their bodies — through the ritual of the Passover meal, through the physical practices of remembrance, through the embodied, repeated, annual enactment of the night that changed everything.

God understood something about human beings that the blended family most desperately needs to internalize: identity is formed less by what is believed than by what is practiced. The Israelites who told the story every year did not merely remember the Exodus — they inhabited it. They were the people of the Exodus, not just in history but in lived experience, because the practice of remembering made it present.

Traditions are the liturgy of family life. They are the repeated, embodied practices that tell a family who they are, where they came from, and what they believe — not through statement but through participation. A family that has no traditions has no liturgy, and a family without liturgy is a family that is slowly losing its story.

WHAT TRADITIONS DO: THREE ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

“Who are we?” Traditions answer the identity question by repeated embodied practice. A family that always prays together on Sunday mornings knows something about who it is that no mission statement can convey.

“Where did we come from?” Traditions carry the family’s history forward in a form that children can participate in before they can understand it. The story becomes part of them before they have the language to tell it.

“What do we believe?” The practices a family repeats are, over time, more formative than the beliefs it formally asserts. The family that practices gratitude at dinner is raising children with a theology of abundance, whether or not they can articulate it.

For blended families, the question of tradition is freighted with additional complexity. Every person in the blended household brings existing traditions from prior family systems — holiday practices, meal rhythms, birthday rituals, religious observances. Many of these traditions carry deep emotional weight and represent, for the children especially, one of the most tangible connections to the family that no longer exists in its original form.

The pastoral wisdom for blended families is not to erase these prior traditions but to create new ones alongside them — traditions that belong to this specific family, in this specific configuration, as a specific community of people who have chosen, through loss and love and the grace of God, to become something new together.

Creating new traditions is not the erasure of old ones. It is the honest, creative work of becoming a family.

DR. WILLIAM DOHERTY — The Intentional Family (1997)

Dr. William Doherty's research on family rituals identifies shared family practices as one of the most significant predictors of family cohesion, individual wellbeing, and children's resilience. Families with intentional, consistent shared rituals — dinners, prayers, celebrations, storytelling practices — report significantly higher levels of connection and significantly lower levels of the relational entropy that affects families without them.

For blended families, Doherty's research carries a specific implication: the intentional creation of new shared rituals is not optional window dressing on the family's structure. It is structural. Rituals create the relational connective tissue that holds a family together across the fault lines of different histories, different loyalties, and different expectations. The blended family that invests in new traditions is not manufacturing warmth it does not yet feel. It is building the architecture in which genuine warmth can eventually grow.

CREATING NEW TRADITIONS THAT HONOR EVERYONE'S STORY

Five Tradition Categories for the Blended Family

What follows are five categories of tradition — not a prescriptive list but a framework for intentional creation. The specific content of each tradition must be chosen by the specific family, reflecting its specific members, histories, and values. The framework is the structure; the family provides the substance.

† New Holiday Rituals That Honor All Backgrounds

Holidays are the most emotionally charged terrain in the blended family's annual calendar. They carry the weight of every prior family tradition, every childhood memory, and every grief about what the holiday used to be. The approach that works is not the elimination of prior holiday practices but the creation of new ones that belong uniquely to this family — while making explicit space for each person's prior traditions to be honored rather than erased.

► **Try this:** *Ask each family member: what is the one thing from the holiday in your family of origin that you most want to carry forward? Then build a new holiday rhythm that includes something from each person's answer.*

♥ Annual Family Statements of Purpose and Gratitude

Once per year, the family creates a written statement — brief, honest, specific — that names who this family is, what it is grateful for from the past year, and what it is choosing to be in the year ahead. This is not a corporate document. It is a covenant renewal — a family saying, in its own words, the gospel story of its own becoming. Over the years, the collection of these statements becomes a family archive: the written record of a people becoming.

► **Try this:** *Read last year's statement on the same occasion each year. Notice what has changed. Name the growth. Be honest about what is still unfinished.*

★ Shared Service Projects That Build Team Identity

The most effective team-building exercise available to the blended family is not a forced bonding activity but a shared act of outward service. Families that serve together — at a food bank, a shelter, a community cleanup, a church mission project — develop a team identity through the experience of working toward a shared goal that is larger than any individual's preferences or grievances. The shared experience of giving creates a shared memory of who this family is when it is at its best.

► **Try this:** *Choose one quarterly service project as a family — let each child take a turn choosing the organization. The choice itself is a tradition of empowerment.*

◆ The Family Origin Story — Told Honestly and with Grace

Every family has an origin story. The blended family's origin story is more complicated than most — it begins with loss, passes through change, and arrives at something new. The most powerful thing this family can do with that story is tell it — honestly,

with grace, without sanitizing the grief or dramatizing the failure. Children who know their family’s origin story — including the hard parts — carry a narrative of resilience, honesty, and redemption that serves them for the rest of their lives.

✓ **Dinner Table Rhythms of Blessing, Prayer, and Storytelling**

The dinner table is the most significant arena of daily family formation available to any household. Research consistently identifies shared family meals as one of the most powerful protective factors against adolescent risk behavior, academic failure, and social isolation. In the blended family, the dinner table is not just a place to eat. It is the primary daily venue for the formation of a shared family identity — if it is used with intention.

THE FAMILY ORIGIN STORY

The Most Honest Story the Blended Family Can Tell

Exodus 13:8 is a command not just to remember but to narrate: “You shall tell your son.” The Passover ritual is a story told in real time, performed in embodied practice, handed from parent to child across every generation. The question it answers is not merely “What happened?” but “Who are we, and whose are we?”

The blended family’s origin story must answer the same questions. Not the sanitized version that pretends the grief did not happen. Not the dramatic version that makes the failure of the first marriage the whole story. The honest, grace-saturated version that tells the whole arc: what was lost, what was endured, where God was visible, and what this family is becoming.

CRAFTING THE FAMILY ORIGIN STORY — FOUR ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

The Honest Beginning

Acknowledge what was lost without minimizing it. The story of how this family came to be begins with grief — a loss, a departure, a death, a dissolution. Honoring that beginning is not pessimism; it is the truth-telling that makes everything that follows credible.

The Turning Point

Name the moment or season in which the new family began to form. Not the wedding — often the wedding is not yet the turning point. The turning point may be a specific moment of unexpected connection, a crisis navigated together, or simply the slow accumulation of ordinary days that began, gradually, to feel like home.

The Evidence of Grace

Name two or three specific, concrete moments in which the grace of God was visible in the family's story. Not a theological claim — a specific memory. The night everyone laughed at the dinner table for the first time. The day the child called the stepparent something other than their first name. The moment of forgiveness that no one expected.

The Hope for What Is Coming

End the origin story not with a conclusion but with an orientation toward the future. What is this family being built for? What does flourishing look like for the specific people in this specific house? The origin story that ends with hope is the story that children carry into their own adulthood.

The telling of the origin story is not a one-time event. It is a living practice. Children who hear their family's story told with honesty and grace — who hear the loss named and the grief honored and the grace acknowledged — develop a narrative resilience that protects them across the full arc of their development. They know that hard things can be survived, that loss is not the end of the story, and that the family they belong to has been through something real and has come out on the other side of it as something better.

THE FAMILY NAME AND THE FAMILY GOD

Identity in Christ Transcends Biology

The deepest question of identity in the blended family is not “Whose children are these?” It is “To whom do we all belong?” And the gospel’s answer is the most unifying thing available to any blended family: you belong, all of you — the biological children and the stepchildren, the blood relatives and the chosen relatives, the people who share DNA and the people who do not — to the same Father. You have been adopted into the same family. You are heirs of the same inheritance. You bear the name of the same God.

GALATIANS 3:28 — MULTIPLE VOICES, ONE GOSPEL VERDICT	
<i>The biological family says:</i>	<i>These are my children / those are yours</i>
<i>The legal system says:</i>	<i>Custody arrangement, visitation schedule, child support order</i>
<i>The culture says:</i>	<i>Blended families are complicated, second-best, or broken</i>
The gospel says:	There is neither biological nor step; you are all one in Christ Jesus
<i>The inheritance says:</i>	<i>You receive a shared inheritance as adopted children of the same Father</i>

The future says:

The distinctions that feel permanent today will be dissolved in the family of God

Galatians 3:28 was written into a context of radical social division — between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. Paul’s claim was that in Christ, the deepest, most structural divisions of the ancient world were transcended by a shared identity in the Son of God. The blended family’s divisions — biological and step, his children and hers, the child of one household and the child of another — are real. They are not pretended away. But they are not ultimate. In Christ, there is a deeper identity than any biology can provide and a stronger bond than any bloodline can confer.

This is the foundation of the blended family’s identity: not that it has figured out how to make the step-relationships work, not that everyone finally feels like a “real” family, not that the complexity has been resolved, but that all of them — in their specific, complicated, beautiful, imperfect configuration — are one in Christ Jesus.

THE GOSPEL DINNER TABLE

Four Rhythms That Build Identity Daily

The dinner table is the most accessible and the most powerful daily tradition-building venue available to the blended family. It requires no special event, no significant financial investment, and no elaborate preparation. It requires only the willingness to be present together, to eat together, and to practice the four rhythms that transform an ordinary meal into a formative family experience.

THE GOSPEL DINNER TABLE — FOUR RHYTHMS THAT BUILD IDENTITY

† The Blessing

Begin every family meal with a prayer that names God’s specific presence in the specific day. Not a formulaic grace but an honest, brief acknowledgment of where

this family has been today and whose hands hold it. The tone set in the first thirty seconds of the meal shapes everything that follows.

♥ **The Gratitude Round**

Each person at the table names one thing from the day for which they are grateful. No exceptions — even a teenager whose best answer is “the day is over” is participating in a practice of orientation toward goodness. Over months and years, this practice reshapes the nervous system toward abundance and away from scarcity.

★ **The Story**

One family story told per meal — sometimes funny, sometimes serious, sometimes historical. Children who grow up in families that tell stories know who they are. They carry the family’s narrative with them as a portable identity that no relocation, no school change, and no blended family complexity can displace.

◆ **The Debrief**

A brief, unforced round of “What was hard today?” This is the practice that signals to every child at the table: this is a safe place to be honest about difficulty. The family that can speak about difficulty at dinner does not accumulate the unspoken grievances that eventually fracture relationships.

The family that practices these four rhythms consistently — not perfectly, but consistently — across the years of the blended family’s development will find, in year seven or year ten or year fifteen, that something has been built at that table that no amount of deliberate family programming could have manufactured. A shared story. A shared language. A shared experience of being people who say thank you and tell stories and speak honestly about difficulty and bless each other before the day begins.

**ANNUAL RHYTHMS THAT BUILD SHARED
IDENTITY**

The Annual Blessing Statement

Once per year — perhaps at New Year, a family birthday, or the anniversary of the blending — the couple writes and reads aloud a statement of gratitude, values, and intention for the coming year. This is not a corporate mission statement. It is a covenant renewal — a public, spoken commitment to who this family is choosing to be.

The Service Tradition

Quarterly or annually, the entire family participates in a shared service project chosen together. Families that serve together develop a team identity that transcends biological connection. The shared experience of outward focus — giving rather than receiving — is one of the most powerful tradition-building tools available.

The Celebration Inventory

Annually, identify the moments from the past year that deserve to be named, remembered, and celebrated. Not only the obvious milestones but the quiet victories: the month the family stopped arguing at dinner. The day the stepchild asked for help from the stepparent. The conversation that no one thought was possible.

The Heritage Honoring

Once per year, deliberately honor each family member's heritage, background, and prior family story.

Not as grief — as gratitude. Each person in the blended family brings a history that is part of who they are. The tradition that honors rather than erases these histories builds a family culture of wholeness rather than replacement.

“The family that prays together stays together — not because prayer is magic, but because shared dependence on God creates shared identity.”

— Patrick Peyton

Chapter 13 has given the blended family the building materials of shared identity: traditions, origin stories, table rhythms, annual practices, and the theological foundation of a shared identity in Christ that transcends biology. The family that builds these things is building something that will last.

But no family thrives in isolation. Chapter 14 turns to the community of faith — the church — which is uniquely positioned to do for blended families what no program, no curriculum, and no family system can do on its own: provide the extended community of grace in which the blended family’s flourishing is witnessed, supported, and celebrated.

“Making All Things New”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Blended Church Family

Community, Support, and Belonging

“And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together.”

— Hebrews 10:24–25 (NASB)

THE CHURCH’S CALLING TO BLENDED FAMILIES

A Mission Field Already Sitting in the Pews

There is a pastoral emergency sitting in the third row of most American churches every Sunday morning.

It is not dramatic. It does not announce itself. It looks like a man and a woman and some children of various ages arriving in separate cars, or sitting slightly apart, or navigating the complex logistics of who sits where with the practiced efficiency of people who do this every week and have learned not to draw attention to the difficulty of it. It is the blended family — already there, already present, already hoping that this is the community that will finally have something real to say to their situation.

And too often, it is not.

The church has a remarkable, largely untapped opportunity in this moment. The blended family is not a niche population requiring specialized ministry. It is — as Chapter 1 established — increasingly the norm. More than half of all Americans have personal experience with stepfamily life. The congregation that takes blended families seriously is not serving a demographic edge case. It is serving the central reality of American family life.

THE CHURCH IS UNIQUELY POSITIONED

to be what no other institution can be

for blended families:

a community of grace that surrounds the imperfect family

with love, accountability, and truth.

1 in 8

blended families reports having received any meaningful church-based guidance for their specific situation. The majority describe their experience with the church as invisible, judged, or simply unpastored. (Barna Group, 2020)

The majority of those blended families describe their experience with the church in one of three ways: invisible, judged, or simply unpastored. Invisible — because the sermon illustrations and the small group structures and the family retreat programming assume an architecture that does not reflect their reality. Judged — because the theology of divorce and remarriage, however carefully handled, too often leaves blended families with the impression that their family is a second-class family in the kingdom of God. Unpastored — because the pastoral team, however sincere, has not been equipped with the stepfamily-specific knowledge to provide the guidance these families are desperately seeking.

The blended family is not a problem to be managed. It is a mission field already in the building.

WHAT A BLENDED-FAMILY-FRIENDLY CHURCH LOOKS LIKE

Five Ministry Characteristics

The following five characteristics are not a program to implement but a posture to adopt. They describe what a church looks like when it has genuinely received the gospel's vision of the ekklesia as a community that makes room for the family configurations that the world has written off.

01 † Preaching That Acknowledges the Reality Without Shame

The pulpit is the most powerful instrument available to the church for shaping how its community understands the blended family. Preaching that acknowledges the reality of divorce and remarriage — not as the defining failure of a life but as one of many places where the gospel's grace is specifically and powerfully operative — creates permission for blended families in the congregation to receive the whole of the gospel's address to their situation. When the pastor names the blended family from the pulpit as a site of redemption rather than a category of dysfunction, the family in the third row straightens slightly and begins to listen differently.

† **Pastoral note:** *The family in the third row will not always tell you they needed to hear it. But they will come back next Sunday.*

02 ♥ Small Group Structures That Include Blended-Family-Specific Gatherings

Generic small groups — however warm and well-led — do not provide the specific community that blended families need. The stepparent who walks into a couples' group and spends ninety minutes hearing discussions about biological parenting challenges that do not map onto their experience does not feel included. They feel further isolated. A blended-family-specific gathering — even one small group of four to six couples meeting monthly — provides the specific community in which honest conversation about stepfamily complexity is normalized, not exotic.

† **Pastoral note:** *The goal is not to segregate blended families from the wider congregation but to create a specific space where their specific reality can be honestly addressed.*

03 ★ Pastoral Counseling Equipped with Stepfamily Research

The pastoral counselor who approaches the blended family's presenting concerns with only generic marriage and family counseling frameworks will consistently misdiagnose the structural dynamics that are driving the conflict. The stepparent who is struggling with Papernow's Mobilization stage does not have a character problem or a faith problem. They have a developmental problem that has a specific name, a specific trajectory, and a specific pastoral response — if the counselor knows what they are looking at. Six to eight hours with Ron Deal's *The Smart Stepfamily* and Patricia Papernow's *Surviving and Thriving* changes every pastoral counseling conversation with blended families permanently.

04 ◆ Children's Ministry Trained to Support Kids in Multiple Households

Children in blended families often carry their complexity into the children's ministry space without being able to name it. The child who is unusually difficult on the Sundays when they are transitioning between households is not a behavioral problem. They are a child whose nervous system is managing the stress of living between two worlds. Children's ministry leaders who understand loyalty conflicts, the father wound, and the developmental needs described in Chapter 8 can meet these children with the specific grace that their specific situation requires.

† **Pastoral note:** *A two-hour training for the children's ministry team on blended family dynamics is one of the highest-leverage investments a church can make.*

05 ✓ Mentoring Relationships Pairing Thriving Blended Families with Newer Ones

The most valuable resource available to a new blended family is a couple who has been through it and come out on the other side. Not a therapist, not a curriculum, not a program — though all of these have their place. A specific, named, available person who can say: we were in year two once, and here is what we wish someone had told us. The church that actively creates these mentoring connections is providing something irreplaceable — the witness of a family whose story has been redeemed, available in real time to a family that cannot yet see what their own story might become.

WHAT BLENDED FAMILIES NEED FROM THE CHURCH

A Pastoral Needs Assessment

Before a church can serve its blended family population, it needs to understand what those families are actually looking for. The following assessment is drawn from research, pastoral experience, and the consistent testimony of blended family members about what they found — or failed to find — in the church communities they inhabited.

WHAT BLENDED FAMILIES NEED FROM THE CHURCH

To be seen

Many blended families feel invisible in church settings designed for a nuclear family structure. The sermon illustrations, the small group curriculum, the family retreat programming — all assume an architecture that does not reflect their reality. Being seen means having their specific family configuration acknowledged, not as a special case or a problem category, but as a

	<p>legitimate and valued part of the congregation’s membership.</p>
<p>To be included without being problematized</p>	<p>There is a version of blended family ministry that pathologizes the blended family — that treats it primarily as a category of brokenness requiring repair rather than a community of people requiring the same grace, worship, teaching, and friendship as everyone else. Blended families need inclusion that is not mediated primarily through their family structure.</p>
<p>To receive pastoral guidance specific to their situation</p>	<p>Generic premarital counseling, generic parenting classes, and generic small groups do not address the specific structural and relational complexity of the blended family. A church serious about serving blended families will resource its pastoral team with stepfamily-specific knowledge and create specific spaces for blended families to find guidance and community.</p>
<p>To give what they uniquely have to offer</p>	<p>Blended families are not only recipients of the church’s care. They are bearers of a specific gospel testimony — living evidence of the redemptive power of the cross applied to family life. Churches that receive this testimony and give blended families space to share it</p>

become richer communities for having done so.

THE BODY OF CHRIST AS THE EXTENDED FAMILY

The New Testament Vision of the Household of God

Perhaps the most underappreciated dimension of the church's unique capacity to serve blended families is this: for many of them, the church is the only available extended family. Divorce and family restructuring frequently fracture extended family relationships — grandparents lose access, aunts and uncles withdraw, family networks that were built around the original marriage dissolve. The blended family is often not merely a nuclear family that needs support. It is an isolated household that has lost its broader relational ecosystem.

This is precisely the situation that the New Testament envisions the church addressing. Ephesians 2:19 describes the community of faith as a “household of God” — not a collection of isolated nuclear families that happen to share a Sunday morning service, but a genuine household, with all that the word implies: shared life, mutual responsibility, the kind of knowing and being known that only comes from sustained community across seasons of joy and hardship.

EPHESIANS 2:19

“a household of God”

For many blended families, the church community becomes

the extended family they have lost.

This is not a secondary solution. It is the New Testament vision.

BONHOEFFER ON COMMUNITY — Life Together

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, written in the context of the Confessing Church's illegal seminary in Nazi Germany, remains one of the most penetrating theological analyses of Christian community ever produced. His central claim is that Christian community is possible only on the basis of Christ — not on the basis of shared experience, emotional compatibility, or even shared theological conviction, but on the basis of the specific, costly, incarnate love of Jesus Christ that holds together people who would otherwise have nothing in common.

This is the exact theological basis on which the church can genuinely receive the blended family. Not because blended families fit neatly into the existing community's structures and assumptions, but because Christ holds together people with radically different histories and configurations. The blended family does not need the church to become comfortable with its complexity. It needs the church to hold onto Christ hard enough that the complexity is not an obstacle to belonging.

The church that takes this seriously becomes something specific and transformative for the blended family in its midst: it becomes the grandparents the children's grandparents no longer are. It becomes the older siblings who can speak truth to the stepparent without the weight of relational history. It becomes the table where everyone belongs, not because of shared biology or shared history, but because of the shared identity that the gospel creates in the family of God.

THE BODY OF CHRIST IN ACTION FOR BLENDED FAMILIES

Bearing Burdens (Galatians 6:2)

The church is the community designed to help carry what individual families cannot carry alone. The weight of blended family life — the grief, the complexity, the exhaustion of sustained cruciform

Weeping with Those Who Weep (Romans 12:15)

love — was never meant to be carried in isolation.

The blended family's grief is often unacknowledged. The church that weeps with the blended family — that gives grief its full honor before rushing to the encouragement — creates the safe space in which genuine healing becomes possible.

Speaking Truth in Love (Ephesians 4:15)

The community of faith is uniquely positioned to deliver the honest, loving word that the blended family sometimes needs to hear: about patterns that are harming the children, about unresolved bitterness that is undermining the marriage, about decisions that have more to do with pride than with wisdom.

Celebrating Together (Romans 15:7)

The blended family's victories — the first time a stepchild reached for the stepparent's hand, the year the custody arrangement finally stabilized, the conversation that no one thought was possible — deserve community celebration. The church that notices and celebrates these milestones becomes a community where the blended family's story is honored, not just managed.

Providing Mentors (Titus 2:3-5)

Older, experienced blended families — those who have passed through

the Mobilization and Action stages and have genuine wisdom to offer — are one of the most valuable resources a church can connect to newer blended families. Mentoring relationships of this kind are not programs. They are the natural overflow of a community that has been shaped by the gospel’s vision of multigenerational relationship.

A GUIDE FOR PASTORS AND MINISTRY LEADERS

From Awareness to Action in Six Steps

This section speaks directly to the pastor, chaplain, or ministry leader reading this book. The blended families in your congregation are not waiting for a perfect program. They are waiting for someone with the courage and the knowledge to meet them where they are. The following six-step framework is not a comprehensive ministry strategy — it is a starting point. Six practical actions that will change the experience of every blended family in your congregation.

A PASTOR’S SELF-ASSESSMENT — SIX AREAS OF MINISTRY READINESS

The Pulpit

Does your preaching acknowledge the reality of divorce and remarriage as experienced by the people in the pews — not with condemnation, not with minimization, but with the gospel’s honest grace?

The Pastoral Office

Is your pastoral counseling equipped with stepfamily-specific research and gospel frameworks? Do you know Papernow's seven stages? Can you distinguish co-parenting from parallel parenting? Do you know Ron Deal's work?

The Small Groups

Does your small group structure include a blended-family-specific gathering, or are blended families expected to navigate their complexity in groups designed for a family system they don't inhabit?

The Children's Ministry

Are your children's ministry leaders trained to support children who are navigating multiple households, loyalty conflicts, and the specific grief of family restructuring?

The Mentoring Culture

Does your congregation actively pair thriving blended families with newer ones — creating the mentoring relationships that no program can substitute for?

The Preaching Calendar

When did you last preach a sermon that directly addressed the blended family's experience, not as an illustration of dysfunction but as a site of gospel redemption?

The church that takes these six steps will not be a perfect church. But it will be a church where the blended family in the third row finds what they came hoping for: not a community that pretends their situation is simple, but a community that meets them in its full complexity with the full weight of the gospel, and refuses to let them navigate it alone.

**LAUNCHING BLENDED FAMILY MINISTRY
— A SIX-STEP FRAMEWORK**

<p>Step 1: Assess</p>	<p><i>Identify the blended families already in your congregation. Many are not visibly identified as blended. A simple, gracious survey or pastoral conversation will reveal a population larger than most pastors expect.</i></p>
<p>Step 2: Learn</p>	<p><i>Equip the pastoral team with stepfamily-specific research. Ron Deal's <i>Preparing to Blend</i>, Patricia Papernow's <i>Surviving and Thriving</i>, and <i>FamilyLife Blended's</i> resources provide the foundational knowledge. This takes six to eight hours of reading. It changes every pastoral conversation with blended families permanently.</i></p>
<p>Step 3: Create Space</p>	<p><i>Launch a blended-family-specific small group. It does not need to be large. Four to six couples meeting monthly with a gospel framework and honest conversation provides the community that most blended families have never had.</i></p>
<p>Step 4: Train the Team</p>	<p><i>Brief the children's ministry team on the specific needs of children navigating multiple households. Brief the counseling team on co-parenting dynamics and the father wound. Two hours of training changes everything.</i></p>
<p>Step 5: Connect</p>	<p><i>Identify two or three thriving blended families willing to mentor newer ones. Introduce them. Step back. The mentoring relationship that emerges</i></p>

Step 6: Preach It

will do more for the newer family than any program the church could design.

Preach directly to the blended family's experience at least once per year. Not as a problem to address but as a site of gospel testimony. Give the blended families in the congregation the experience of hearing their story told from the pulpit as a story of grace, not of failure.

"The church is not a select circle of the immaculate, but a home where the outcast may come in."

— **Richard C. Trench**

"We do not need more studies to tell us that community is essential. We need the courage to actually be the community we were designed to be."

— **Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together**

Chapter 14 has cast the vision for the church as the extended family the blended family needs — and has given pastors, ministry leaders, and blended families themselves the specific framework for making that vision real. The community of faith is not the final chapter in the blended family's story. It is the community that helps the family write its final chapter.

And that final chapter is the subject of Chapter 15: the multigenerational gospel family. The legacy that begins now, in the imperfect daily life of this specific blended household, and extends forward into generations yet unborn. The inheritance that no court document and no custody arrangement can prevent: the inheritance of grace.

"Making All Things New"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Leaving a Legacy of Grace

The Multigenerational Gospel Family

“For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants.”

— **Isaiah 44:3 (NASB)**

THE LONG GAME OF GRACE

Lifting the Gaze to a Longer Horizon

Most conversations about blended families are conducted in the present tense.

They are conversations about this school year, this custody arrangement, this conflict at dinner last Tuesday, this season of the stepchild’s resistance, this year of the marriage’s particular difficulty. And these conversations are necessary. The present is where the grace must be applied, where the wounds are sustained and healed, where the daily choices of covenant love are made or deferred.

But this final chapter lifts the gaze. Not away from the present — out of it. Out to the horizon of the multigenerational family, where the choices being made right now at the dinner table in this blended household will be felt, in ways that cannot yet be traced, by children who are not yet born. Out to the inheritance that is being assembled, deposit by deposit, in every act of forgiveness and every spoken blessing and every morning the family gathers to pray before the day fragments.

Legacy is not built in the dramatic moments. It is built in the accumulated weight of the ordinary ones. The blended family that endures its ordinary Tuesday nights in the grace of God is building something that neither the divorce decree nor the custody arrangement nor

the hostile co-parent can ultimately take away. It is building a family that will outlast them all.

THE LONG GAME OF GRACE

Every act of forgiveness.

Every moment of sacrificial love.

Every prayer spoken over a child who did not choose this family.

These are deposits in an eternal account.

THE RESEARCH ON GENERATIONAL PATTERNS

Breaking the Inheritance, Writing a New Story

Nicholas Wolfinger's longitudinal research on the transmission of divorce across generations is among the most sobering findings in the family science literature. Children of divorce are 40% more likely to divorce themselves. The relational templates established in childhood, the attachment patterns formed in the context of family breakdown, and the implicit beliefs about love's durability that grow in the soil of parents' fractured relationships — all of these travel forward into the next generation with a momentum that is remarkably resistant to deliberate intervention.

40%

*more likely to divorce: children of divorce face this statistical headwind in their own adult relationships (Wolfinger, *Understanding the Divorce Cycle*, 2005) — unless they are exposed to a sustained counter-narrative of healthy, committed, gospel-shaped relationship.*

But Wolfinger's research also contains the most important qualifier in all of family science: unless. Unless the child is exposed to a sustained counter-narrative of healthy, committed

relationship. The 40% inheritance is not a sentence. It is a risk factor. And the blended family that thrives in Christ — that demonstrates, in the daily, imperfect, persevering life of a household shaped by the gospel — what covenant love actually looks like, becomes that counter-narrative.

THE BLENDED FAMILY THAT THRIVES IN CHRIST

becomes the counter-narrative

to the 40% statistical inheritance

not just for themselves,

but for every child watching.

Every child watching a gospel-shaped blended family navigate the hard middle years is receiving an education in love that no curriculum can replicate. They are learning that covenants hold under pressure. That forgiveness is real and not merely rhetorical. That two people from different histories can build something new together that is worth the cost of the building. That God keeps His promises to families that keep returning to Him.

This is the most important thing the blended family can do for the next generation. Not to achieve a perfect family. To demonstrate a persistent, honest, grace-saturated one.

WRITING A NEW FAMILY NARRATIVE

The Inheritance No Court Can Divide

Proverbs 17:6 declares: “Grandchildren are the crown of old men, and the glory of sons is their fathers” (NASB). The multigenerational aspiration of the biblical text is not accidental. The goal of the well-lived family life is not merely a functional household in the present. It is a crown worn by the grandchildren, a glory carried by the sons and daughters, a blessing that flows forward through generations.

The blended family that has walked through the furnace of grief, forgiveness, and cruciform love has something the untroubled family does not: a redemption story. A specific, honest,

hard-won testimony to the faithfulness of God in the most complicated of human circumstances. This story is the most portable inheritance available. It cannot be contested in court. It cannot be divided in a settlement. It is carried in the hearts of the children who lived inside it, and it speaks long after the adults who built it are gone.

The goal is not merely to have a functional family in the present. It is to create a legacy that blesses generations yet unborn.

FIVE ETERNAL DEPOSITS — WHAT THE BLENDED FAMILY PASSES FORWARD	
Forgiveness Modeled	Every act of genuine forgiveness — of the ex, of the stepparent, of the stepchild, of oneself — demonstrates to the children watching that the debt can be released, that bitterness is not inevitable, and that the gospel’s power to reconcile is real. Children who watch their parents forgive learn to forgive. This is perhaps the most important thing a blended family can deposit in the next generation.
Covenant Love Sustained	The couple that stays — not perfectly, not without seasons of difficulty, but covenantally, through the hard middle years, into the genuine cohesion of year seven and beyond — gives the children in that home a lived experience of what covenant love looks like. Wolfinger’s research is clear: this experience is the most powerful single protective

	<p>factor against the 40% divorce inheritance.</p>
<p>Honest Faith Practiced</p>	<p>The family that practices honest faith — that prays and grieves and doubts and repents and praises in the presence of the children — gives those children a faith they can inhabit rather than a performance they must maintain. Authentic, honest, grace-saturated faith is the inheritance that funds the next generation’s spiritual formation.</p>
<p>The Redemption Story Told</p>	<p>The family that names, retells, and honors its own redemption story — including the loss that preceded it and the grace that sustained it — gives the children a narrative of resilience, honesty, and the faithfulness of God that they can draw on across the full arc of their own lives.</p>
<p>The Blessing Spoken</p>	<p>The specific, named, spoken blessing — delivered intentionally over each child, by name, identifying what is seen and loved and valued in them — is the single most portable inheritance a parent can give. It is carried in the child’s interior world for the rest of their life.</p>

LEGACY-BUILDING PRACTICES

Four Investments in the Eternal Account

The four practices that follow are not programs or events. They are sustained, recurring acts of intentional legacy-building — each one a deposit in the account that the children will draw on for the rest of their lives.

† **Written Family Mission Statements and Blessing Documents**

The written word has a permanence that the spoken word does not. A family mission statement, written together and revisited annually, becomes a living document of the family's identity and covenant — a tangible artifact that the children can hold when the family is dispersed and the house is empty. A blessing document — a written letter addressed to each child by name, from the parent or stepparent, naming what is seen and loved and valued in them — is the single most durable inheritance a family can create. It is re-read in hospital rooms. It is found in boxes after someone has died. It speaks, with the parent's specific voice, across decades.

► **How to begin:** *Write the first family blessing document this year. Address it to each child individually. Keep the original. Give them a copy. Tell them you will add to it.*

♥ **Intentional Father and Mother Blessings Spoken Over Children**

John Trent and Gary Smalley's research on the spoken blessing, summarized in *The Blessing* (1986), identifies the spoken parental blessing as one of the most powerful determinants of children's identity, resilience, and capacity for healthy adult relationship. The research identifies five elements: meaningful touch, a spoken word, high value expressed, a special future envisioned, and active commitment pledged. For the stepparent especially, the spoken blessing is the most direct expression of chosen love available — the voluntary, deliberate act of claiming a child who did not enter the world through this parent's body.

★ **Passing Down the Redemption Story as Sacred Narrative**

The most powerful thing a blended family can pass to the next generation is not assets, education, or social connection. It is a story — specifically, the story of how God was faithful in the specific, complicated, expensive circumstances of this family’s particular history. The family that tells this story — honestly, including the grief and the failure and the grace — gives the next generation a theology of God’s faithfulness that is rooted in lived experience rather than abstract doctrine. It is the equivalent of Exodus 13:8: “You shall tell your son on that day.”

► **How to begin:** *Tell the redemption story this year. Not the polished version — the honest one. Include the hard parts. Let the grace be visible because the hardness is visible.*

◆ **Investing in the Next Generation’s Faith Formation as the Primary Inheritance**

The greatest inheritance is not financial provision, though provision matters. It is the faith formation of the next generation — the intentional, sustained investment in the children’s relationship with the God who adopts, the God who heals the father wound, the God who forgives the incalculable debt and calls the broken family beloved. Parents and stepparents who pray with their children, read Scripture with their children, take their children to church, and have honest conversations about what they believe and why, are building the most durable inheritance available. It is the one thing the family brings into eternity.

THE SPOKEN BLESSING

The Most Powerful Act Available to Any Parent

Of all four legacy-building practices, the spoken blessing deserves extended attention because it is simultaneously the most powerful and the most underpracticed. Trent and Smalley’s research reveals that the majority of adults in Western culture did not receive a formal spoken blessing from their parents. The absence is felt — often without the adult being able to name what is missing — as a specific kind of incompleteness, a question that

was never answered: Am I worthy of love? Am I seen? Do I matter specifically, not just generally?

THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF THE SPOKEN BLESSING — Trent & Smalley	
Meaningful Touch	A hand on the shoulder, a hug, a held hand. The blessing is spoken into physical contact that communicates presence and safety. Trent and Smalley’s research identifies meaningful touch as the first and most foundational element of the spoken blessing.
Spoken Word	The blessing must be said out loud. Not thought, not implied, not expressed through provision or presence alone. The specific, audible words, addressed to the specific child, by their name. “I want to tell you something about who you are.”
High Value	The content of the blessing names the specific, observed qualities of this specific child — not generic praise but the honest, particular recognition of what is genuinely seen and valued in them. “I see the way you care for people who are hurting.”
Special Future	The blessing speaks into the future, expressing the confidence that this child has a calling and a purpose that the blessing-giver believes in. “I

	believe God has placed something in you for others.”
Active Commitment	The blessing ends with an expression of ongoing presence: “I will be here. You are not alone in becoming who you are meant to be.” For the stepparent especially, this is the seal of the covenant of chosen love.

For the stepparent, the spoken blessing carries particular weight. It is the voluntary claim of a child who was not claimed by biology — the deliberate, courageous act of saying, in specific words addressed to a specific child: I see you. I choose you. I believe in you. I will be here.

The child who receives this blessing from a stepparent who has shown up consistently, who has loved without guarantee of return, who has modeled the agape of 1 Corinthians 13 in the daily ordinary life of the blended home, receives something that echoes across the decades. It is the voice of the stepfather Joseph saying to the child in his care: you are named. You are claimed. You are not an accident of anyone’s second marriage. You are exactly who God intended to place in the path of exactly this family.

WHAT THE CHILDREN WILL REMEMBER

The Legacy That Outlasts Everything Else

Every blended family member who has ever worried that the difficulty of their family’s story will define what the children carry forward needs to hear this: the children do not primarily remember the difficulty. They remember what was done with it.

WHAT CHILDREN REMEMBER — THE LEGACY THAT OUTLASTS EVERYTHING ELSE

<p>Not the difficulty of year two, but whether the adults stayed.</p>	<p><i>Children who watch their parents navigate the hard middle years and remain covenantally committed carry a lived knowledge of what love is capable of that no sermon can replicate.</i></p>
<p>Not the perfection of the parenting, but the honesty of the repair.</p>	<p><i>What children remember is not whether their parents and stepparents got it right, but whether they admitted it when they got it wrong and came back. The repair is the testimony.</i></p>
<p>Not the household rules, but the household atmosphere.</p>	<p><i>Children remember whether the home felt safe. Whether grace was in the air or performance was. Whether they were seen or managed. The atmosphere is the legacy.</i></p>
<p>Not the programs, but the prayers.</p>	<p><i>Children who were prayed over, by name, with specific words by the adults who loved them, carry those prayers as an interior voice that speaks long after the adult is gone. The prayer is the most durable inheritance available.</i></p>

The blended family that understands these four truths stops measuring its legacy by the absence of conflict and starts measuring it by the presence of grace. Not the absence of

hardship, but the abundance of honest love sustained through it. Not the pretense of a perfect family, but the reality of an imperfect family that kept showing up for each other in the name of the God who never stops showing up.

ISAIAH 44:3

***“I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring
and My blessing on your descendants.”***

The blessing does not end with this generation.

It flows forward into generations yet unborn.

Isaiah 44:3 is addressed to a people in exile — a people who have known displacement, loss, and the specific grief of a world that broke in a way they did not choose. God’s promise to them is not the restoration of what was. It is the outpouring of His Spirit on their offspring and His blessing on their descendants. The exile is not the end of the story. The descendants are.

This is the promise to the blended family in exile from the family it once was or the family it imagined it would be. The exile is not the end of the story. The descendants are. The grandchildren are. The generations yet unborn, who will carry in their bones the specific way that grace moved through this specific family in this specific season, are.

Plant the tree. The posterity will shade themselves under it in ways you will not live to see.

“A man does not plant a tree for himself; he plants it for posterity.”

— Alexander Smith

“The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother. And the most important thing a stepfather can do is to love them anyway.”

— Theodore Hesburgh (adapted)

Chapter 15 has completed the book’s arc from survival to flourishing, from the present difficulty to the multigenerational inheritance, from the dinner table in year two to the grandchildren who will shade themselves under the tree this family is planting now.

THE BOOK AT A GLANCE — THE COMPLETE ARC	
Part One	Understanding the Landscape — the statistics, the grief, and the wounds that enter every blended home
Part Two	The Gospel Foundation — the God who redeems, the grace that covers, the forgiveness that builds
Part Three	Building the Gospel-Shaped Family — covenant marriage, the stepparent’s cross, the children’s needs, the two households
Part Four	Healing the Wounds — the father wound, honest communication, loving the hostile enemy
Part Five	Thriving Together — new traditions, the church community, the multigenerational legacy of grace

The Conclusion receives the book back to where the Introduction left it: the furniture maker at his bench, the broken piece in his hands, the grain beginning to emerge from beneath the damage. And it names, for the final time, the most important thing there is to say about any of it: the craftsman is still at work. The story is not finished. And the God who makes all things new has not run out of material.

“Making All Things New”

CONCLUSION

Making All Things New

The Blended Family as Gospel Testimony

REVELATION 21:5

“Behold,

I am making all things new.”

This includes your family.

THE FURNITURE MAKER RETURNS

The Piece at the End of the Process

The bench is the same. The tools are the same.

What is different is the piece. It arrived, if you remember, as something the world had given up on. Broken. Scarred. Bearing the marks of damage and neglect and the accumulated evidence of a history that had not been kind to it. Someone had tried to fix it once, badly. Someone else had decided it was not worth fixing at all. It had been set aside, discarded, assigned to the pile of things that would not become what they were supposed to be.

But the furniture maker saw something. He always does. He saw, beneath the damage and the bad repair work and the accumulated years of being treated as something that did not matter, the grain of the original wood. Sound. Strong. Waiting. And he brought the piece to his bench.

What followed was not quick. It was not clean. There were moments when the stripping back revealed worse damage than anyone expected. There were seasons when the repair seemed to produce more grief than progress. There were mornings when it would have been easier, and certainly faster, to simply declare the thing unsalvageable and move on.

But the craftsman does not leave things unfinished. Not when He has seen the grain.

THE FURNITURE MAKER'S GOSPEL

The piece is not restored to what it was.

It is made into something better than it was before.

The scars do not disappear.

They become evidence that something was worth saving.

The craftsman is not finished with your family.

He is still at the bench.

He is still working the grain.

The piece you are looking at now — the family at the end of this book's arc — is not a restoration of what was. It was never going to be that. The first marriage is not un-dissolved. The grief is not un-grieved. The children's experience of family breakdown is not un-experienced. The furniture maker did not erase the history of the piece. He integrated it. He honored the grain that the damage revealed. He made something new — genuinely, substantially, irreversibly new — that bears the marks of what it has been through and is more honest, more beautiful, and more durable for it.

This is what the gospel does. Not the removal of the scars, but the transformation of them — into evidence that something or someone was worth saving. Into the testimony that the craftsman's hands leave on everything they touch.

THE GOSPEL HAS THE LAST WORD

Seven Declarations for the Blended Family

The world has had a great deal to say about the blended family. It has said it in statistics and in cultural narratives and in the polite but pointed expressions of concern from extended family members who worry about what all of this is doing to the children. It has said it in the court documents and the custody agreements and the legal architecture that must be constructed around a family that the law recognizes as inherently more complicated than the alternative.

The gospel does not deny any of it. It does not pretend the complexity away or offer a spiritual bypass around the genuine weight of blended family life. But it speaks a different last word over everything the world has said. And the last word matters more than the first.

THE WORLD SAYS	THE GOSPEL DECLARES
<i>Blended families are damaged families</i>	Blended families are redeemed families
<i>The statistics argue against you</i>	The resurrection argues for you
<i>Your past disqualifies you</i>	Your past is the raw material God uses most willingly
<i>The second marriage is the lesser marriage</i>	The covenant entered in faith is held by the same God who held the first
<i>The children are permanently harmed by the divorce</i>	The children who watch grace at work will carry its testimony for a lifetime
<i>The ex's hostility defines the boundaries of your flourishing</i>	The God who is greater than your heart defines the boundaries of your flourishing

The story ends with the breakdown

The story has not ended yet

The resurrection is the grammar of the gospel. Not that things do not break — they do. Not that death does not arrive — it does. But that breaking is not the end of the sentence. That death does not have the final conjugation. The God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same God who is working in your specific, imperfect, complicated, Tuesday-night blended family — and He has never once been stumped by the raw material.

The resurrection argues for you. Always.

THE BLENDED FAMILY AS GOSPEL TESTIMONY

What a Redeemed Family Declares to the World

This book began with a question asked over a dinner table where no one quite knew where to sit. Is there a gospel powerful enough to redeem this too? The answer, sustained across fifteen chapters, five parts, and every specific, pastoral, theologically grounded application the book has attempted, is: yes. Unequivocally. Yes.

But the answer is not merely an affirmation for the blended family's private comfort. It is a declaration with public dimensions. The blended family that has been transformed by the gospel — that has walked through the grief and the forgiveness and the cruciform love of the stepparent's cross and the loyalty bind's resolution and the hostile ex's provocation and the long slow building of genuine cohesion — is not merely a better family. It is a testimony.

And the church that receives this testimony, that gives it a platform and a voice, that celebrates it rather than managing it — becomes a more honest, more grace-saturated, more fully gospel-shaped community for having done so.

**THE BLENDED FAMILY AS GOSPEL TESTIMONY
— FOUR DECLARATIONS**

The Testimony of Forgiveness

A blended family that has genuinely forgiven — the ex, the stepparent, the biological parent, the self — testifies to a watching world that the cross is not a metaphor. That a debt of incalculable weight can actually be released. That the bitterness that seemed permanent was not, in fact, the last word.

The Testimony of Covenant


A blended family whose couple has stayed — through the Mobilization stage, through year three, through the school-parking-lot encounters with the hostile ex, through all of it — testifies that covenant love is not merely an aspiration. That it can be sustained, in real time, by real people, through the grace of a real God.

The Testimony of Redemption

A blended family that names its own redemption story — honestly, including the grief and the grace together — testifies that God does not waste wreckage. That the raw material of a broken family is exactly the kind of material He has always preferred to work with. That the craftsman is still at the bench.

The Testimony of Abundance

A blended family that has raised children who know they can love both parents without betrayal, who



have been blessed by both biological parents and stepparents, who carry the gospel's abundance theology in their bones — testifies that love is not a zero-sum economy. That grace multiplies. That the family of God is larger than any biology can contain.

Every one of these testimonies is already present in the congregation. They are sitting in the third row, arriving in separate cars, navigating the logistics of a complicated family with the quiet dignity of people who have decided, week after week, to bring their complication to the table of grace and let the gospel do what no strategy and no program could accomplish.

The church's calling is to recognize them. To name what they are bearing. To celebrate what they are building. And to tell the world — loudly, specifically, without sanitization — that the God who makes all things new has been doing it again.

A FINAL WORD

Addressed to Each Person at the Table

Before the doxology, a final pastoral word — addressed personally, to each person who has read this book from inside a blended family.

To the stepparent who has shown up, again, without guarantee of return: you are doing the most theologically demanding work available to a human being. You are not invisible to the God who sees what the world misses. Your daily cruciform love is registered in eternity.

To the biological parent caught between your children's loyalty and your spouse's presence: you are not navigating an impossible situation alone. The God who is near to the brokenhearted is near to the ones who are broken between things they love.

To the child who did not choose this family and has not yet found a way to love it: your grief is valid, your anger is legitimate, and the God who heals the brokenhearted is near to you specifically, by name, in the exact condition you are in right now.

To the couple who began this second marriage with hope and found the complexity larger than they anticipated: you entered a covenant, not a contract. The same God who holds that covenant is more than sufficient for what the early years have revealed.

To the pastor or chaplain reading this book to better serve the families in your care: the blended families in your congregation are not a pastoral problem. They are a pastoral opportunity. The gospel you preach has specific, powerful, practically applicable things to say to them. Say them.

EPHESIANS 3:20–21

*“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly
beyond all that we ask or think,
according to the power that works within us—”*

***“to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”***

Including this one. In this house. Around this table.

The craftsman is not finished.

He has never left the bench.

And the piece He is working on is worth far more than the world decided to pay for it.

“God never wastes our pain. What seems like the wreckage of a life is often the material He uses to build something more beautiful than we could have asked or imagined.”

— Brennan Manning, *All Is Grace*

METRO COMMUNITY CHAPLAINCY

“Making All Things New”

Not because the pieces were never broken.

Because the craftsman refused to leave them that way.

For the families who are still at the table.

APPENDIX A

Chapter Discussion Guide

*15 Sessions for Small Groups, Couples,
and Pastoral Counseling Contexts*

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide provides 15 discussion sessions aligned with each chapter of *Blending Families the Gospel Way*. Each session includes: a key scripture, a facilitator note, 5–7 discussion questions, and a Gospel Application section with practical weekly exercises.

Recommended formats: (1) Weekly small group of 4–8 blended family couples, meeting 90 minutes. (2) Couples study, working through one session together per week. (3) Pastoral counseling context, one session per appointment over 15 weeks.

Facilitator note: The goal of each session is honest conversation in a grace-saturated environment, not theological performance or the appearance of a resolved family. Create permission. Slow down. Let the gospel do what no discussion guide can.

SESSION 1 • Chapter Introduction

The Broken Made Beautiful

Why the Gospel Changes Everything

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

— Romans 1:16 (NASB)

FACILITATOR NOTE

This opening session sets the tone for the entire study. Resist the urge to rush into answers. The goal is to create a safe space where participants can honestly name where they are. The dinner table scene from the Introduction is deliberately pastoral — let it do its work. Many in the group will recognize themselves in it immediately.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you first encountered the image of the blended family dinner table in the Introduction, what emotions surfaced? What did you recognize from your own experience?
2. The Introduction states: "Is there a gospel powerful enough to redeem this too?" How would you have answered that question when you first entered blended family life? How would you answer it now?
3. The furniture restoration metaphor describes the craftsman as someone who "strips it down, works the grain, and makes it new without erasing its history." What part of your family's history do you most hope will be worked with rather than erased?
4. Which of the four key themes established in the Introduction (gospel as resurrection power / grief must be grieved / grace enters complexity / God specializes in written-off families) do you most need to hear right now? Why?
5. The Introduction says this book is "for people who are tired of trying harder and ready to trust deeper." Where are you on that spectrum today?
6. Before moving forward in this study, what is the single most honest thing you can say about the current condition of your blended family?

GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ This week, write down your honest answer to the question: "Is there a gospel powerful enough to redeem this?" Keep it. Return to it at the end of the 15-session study.
- ▶ Identify one way you have been "trying harder" rather than "trusting deeper" in your blended family. Bring it to God in prayer this week.

▶ Read Romans 1:16 aloud over your household this week — not as a performance, but as a declaration of the only power sufficient for what you are attempting.

SESSION 2 • Chapter Chapter 1

The Blended Family Reality

Statistics, Struggles, and Sacred Opportunity

“Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it?”

— Isaiah 43:19 (NASB)



FACILITATOR NOTE

This session deals with statistics and the church's silence, which can surface frustration and grief. Allow both. Some participants may have deeply painful experiences of feeling judged or invisible in church settings. Do not rush past that. The session's pivot from crisis to opportunity is a gospel move, not a dismissal of the pain.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

7. The chapter states that the blended family is "no longer the exception — it is the norm." Did you feel like the norm or the exception when you first entered your blended family situation? How did the church respond to you?
8. Of the six core struggle zones identified in the chapter (competing loyalties, unresolved grief, boundary conflicts, household differences, financial strain, myth of instant family), which one has been most present in your experience? What has it cost you?
9. Research shows only 1 in 8 blended families has received meaningful church-based guidance. How does that statistic land for you personally? What have you wished the church had said or done?
10. The chapter reframes the pastoral gap as "not a crisis to lament but a mission field to enter." What would it look like for your church to actually enter this mission field? What is one specific thing it could do?

11. The chapter closes with the claim that "the gospel has always been most alive among the broken." Have you experienced this to be true in your blended family? Where have you seen grace most alive in the complexity?
12. If you could tell your pastor one thing about what it is like to be a blended family in your congregation, what would you say?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ This week, identify one other blended family in your church or community. Pray for them by name. Consider reaching out with a simple acknowledgment that you see them.
- ▶ Write down the single most difficult structural challenge in your blended family right now. Bring it to God specifically — not as a problem to solve, but as a weight He already knows about and is already at work within.
- ▶ Read Isaiah 43:18–19. What is the "former thing" God is asking you to stop rehearsing? What might the "new thing" be in your specific situation?

SESSION 3 • Chapter Chapter 2

What Went Wrong

Grief, Loss, and the Wounds We Bring

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."

— **Psalm 147:3 (NASB)**

FACILITATOR NOTE

This session addresses grief directly. Some participants will not have named their grief before. Create permission. Do not rush to comfort or resolution — this is not the week for that. The chapter's pastoral insistence that "you cannot heal a wound you have never named" applies equally to the group process. The facilitator's job here is to create the space in which honest naming can occur.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

13. The chapter defines grief unacknowledged as grief that "hijacks." Where have you seen suppressed grief show up in your blended family in ways that surprised you?
14. Of the four grief portraits described in the chapter (children, adults, stepparents, extended family), which one resonates most with your own experience? What has been the specific shape of your grief?
15. The chapter notes that society does not give permission to grieve the restructuring of a family — no funeral, no casseroles. Did you feel you had permission to grieve your loss? What would it have meant to have that permission explicitly given?
16. Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that early relational ruptures create internal working models that shape how people give and receive love. What internal working model did you bring into your blended family? How has it affected your relationships?
17. The chapter says: "You cannot build a healthy blended family on a foundation of suppressed pain." What pain in your blended family has most needed to be surfaced and honestly addressed?
18. God is described as *qarov* — "near" to the brokenhearted. Have you experienced God's nearness in the grief of your blended family? What did that nearness feel like?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ Name one grief in your blended family that has not yet been formally acknowledged. This week, bring it to God by name in prayer — not to solve it, but to honor it. Grief that is brought to God is grief that can begin to heal.
- ▶ Consider writing a brief letter to the version of yourself who first entered the blended family — the letter that names what you now know about the grief that was coming. What would you say?
- ▶ Read Psalm 34:18 aloud. Receive it as a specific promise to the brokenhearted person you are, not the person you are trying to become.

SESSION 4 • Chapter Chapter 3

The God Who Redeems Broken Things

A Theology of Family Redemption

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

— Romans 8:28 (NASB)



FACILITATOR NOTE

This session shifts from diagnosis to foundation. The biblical case studies — Ruth, Moses, Joseph, the Prodigal — are not just illustrations; they are pastoral identifications. Let participants find themselves in these stories. The Joseph material is particularly significant for stepparents. Give it room. The genealogy discussion may be the most surprising material of the session — it often produces genuine tears of recognition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 19.** The chapter opens by saying the Bible is "a gallery of redemption from the wreckage of broken homes." Which biblical family story feels most like your own? What about it resonates?
- 20.** Joseph of Nazareth is described as "the patron saint of stepfathers." If you are a stepparent, how does Joseph's model speak to your specific experience? What would it mean to parent from covenant commitment rather than biological instinct?
- 21.** The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 includes Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary — all women whose stories include scandal, foreignness, grief, or complexity. What does it mean to you that the Son of God was born into this specific lineage rather than a "cleaner" one?
- 22.** The chapter argues that "God's redemptive project is not the restoration of what was, but the creation of something better." Do you believe this for your specific blended family? What makes it difficult to believe? What makes it possible?

- 23.** Romans 8:28 promises that "all things work together for good" — not that all things are good. How have you seen God working something good through something that was genuinely not good in your blended family?
- 24.** If your blended family is a "living parable" of the gospel's redemptive arc, what is the specific truth it is parabling right now?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ This week, write down your family's own redemption story so far — even if it is incomplete. Where did it begin? Where has God been visible? Where is it going?
- ▶ If you are a stepparent, read Matthew 1:18–25 again, specifically for what Joseph does with a child who was not biologically his. Identify one specific thing Joseph modeled that you want to practice this week.
- ▶ Read Romans 8:28–29. Receive the promise not as a resolution to the complexity, but as a declaration about Who is active within it.

SESSION 5 • Chapter Chapter 4

Grace That Covers Every Broken Piece

The Ragamuffin Family

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

— **Romans 5:8 (NASB)**

FACILITATOR NOTE

The shame material in this session is among the most sensitive in the entire study. The five shame layers identified in the chapter (divorce, not bonding, anger, unequal love, church judgment) may all be present in the room. Create explicit permission for these to be named without the group rushing to fix or reassure. Ragamuffin theology is not comfortable theology — it is the gospel insisting on being received, not performed. This session often produces the most significant pastoral moments of the study.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

25. Manning defines ragamuffin theology as "grace without qualification for the broken without exception." What is your immediate internal reaction to that phrase? Does it feel liberating or suspicious?
26. Of the five shame layers described in the chapter (shame about the divorce, not bonding, anger, unequal love, church judgment), which one has most affected you? Have you ever named it out loud before?
27. The chapter makes a distinction between guilt ("I did something bad") and shame ("I am bad"). Where in your blended family experience have you carried shame rather than guilt? What would it look like to bring that shame specifically to the cross?
28. Dallas Willard says "grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning." How would your daily family life change if you genuinely stopped trying to earn God's approval through how well the blended family is performing?
29. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says power is perfected in weakness. What specific weakness in your blended family might be the site of God's greatest power, if you stopped treating it as a disqualification?
30. The chapter describes grace as "the atmosphere the blended family breathes." Does your household currently feel like a grace atmosphere or a performance atmosphere? What would it take to shift it toward grace?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ Name one shame you carry about your blended family. Write it down. Then write over it, in larger letters: Romans 5:8 — "while we were yet sinners." Receive the grace that arrived before the improvement.
- ▶ This week, identify one place where you are "earning" rather than receiving in your family relationships. Practice the posture of receiving grace — even if it feels passive.
- ▶ Read Brennan Manning's quote from the chapter aloud to yourself: "God's love for you does not fluctuate." Sit with it. Let it be true.

SESSION 6 • Chapter Chapter 5

Forgiveness as Foundation

The Cross and the Blended Home

“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

— **Ephesians 4:32 (NASB)**



FACILITATOR NOTE

Forgiveness in the blended family context is the most practically demanding topic in the study. Be alert for participants who conflate forgiveness with reconciliation, or who have been spiritually coerced into premature forgiveness that bypassed their grief. The chapter's careful distinction between forgiveness and trust is essential — spend real time here. The self-forgiveness material often surfaces the most unexpected vulnerability. Hold it carefully.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 31.** The chapter says forgiveness in the blended family is "not optional — it is foundational." What is your honest reaction to that statement? Does it feel like a liberation or a burden?
- 32.** Review the "Forgiveness Is Not" table from the chapter. Which of those misconceptions have you carried? How has the misconception affected your ability to actually forgive?
- 33.** What is the most difficult specific forgiveness your blended family situation has required of you? Where are you in Enright's four-phase process (Uncover, Decide, Work, Deepen) with that forgiveness right now?
- 34.** The chapter makes a sharp distinction between forgiving the ex and trusting the ex. How does this distinction help you? Is there something you have been withholding from your family (protection, peace, forward movement) because you confused the two?
- 35.** The chapter addresses self-forgiveness directly. What is the specific thing about your blended family history for which you have most struggled to forgive

yourself? What would it mean to receive 1 John 3:20 — "God is greater than our heart" — as permission to stop condemning yourself?

- 36.** Lewis Smedes says, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." Has this been your experience in any specific act of forgiveness? Where are you still imprisoned?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ Name the most significant unforgiven debt in your blended family relationships. Place it before the cross this week — not with a feeling of warmth, but with a decision of the will to begin the process.
- ▶ If you are carrying unresolved self-condemnation, read 1 John 3:20 slowly, three times, with your own name in the space: "God is greater than [your name]'s heart, and knows all things."
- ▶ Pray for the person you most need to forgive, by name, once each day this week. Do not pray about them. Pray for them — for their specific needs, their wellbeing, their encounter with grace.

SESSION 7 • Chapter Chapter 6

Two Becoming One (Again)

Covenant, Commitment, and the Second Marriage

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh."

— **Genesis 2:24 (NASB)**



FACILITATOR NOTE

This session addresses the couple relationship directly. If the group includes individuals rather than couples, be sensitive — some may be navigating these realities without a present spouse. The contract vs. covenant distinction often produces the most significant lightbulb moments of the study. The Ron Deal research on the couple

as the engine may surprise participants who have been over-investing in individual parent-child relationships at the expense of the marriage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 37.** Before entering your current marriage, did you believe the second marriage would be easier because of experience? How has that belief held up against reality?
- 38.** The chapter draws a sharp distinction between a contract and a covenant. Looking at your marriage right now — in honest terms, not aspirational ones — does it function more like a contract or a covenant? What would it take to shift it toward covenant?
- 39.** Dr. Ron Deal identifies the couple relationship as "the single most predictive variable in blended family outcomes." Is that priority visible in how you currently invest your time, energy, and attention? What would need to change for the couple to become the true engine?
- 40.** Of the five gospel-centered marriage disciplines (daily prayer together, state-of-the-family conversations, protecting the marriage as the axis, pre-blending counseling, shared values), which one is most absent from your marriage right now? What is one specific step you could take this week?
- 41.** The chapter says covenant love holds "precisely when one or both parties fail — that is its point." Has your experience of the second marriage tested this claim? What has held the covenant when the parties were failing?
- 42.** If you were to write a brief covenant statement for your marriage — honest, specific, and gospel-grounded — what would it say?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ This week, pray together with your spouse before at least one difficult conversation, however brief. Notice what changes in the texture of the exchange.
- ▶ Identify one way the couple relationship has been structurally deprioritized in your blended household. Make one concrete change this week that reestablishes the marriage as the axis.

► Read Malachi 2:14 together. Receive "covenant" not as pressure, but as the theological category that explains why the gospel is sufficient for what your marriage is attempting.

SESSION 8 • Chapter Chapter 7

The Stepparent's Cross

Sacrificial Love Without Biological Bond

“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

— John 15:13 (NASB)

FACILITATOR NOTE

This session is for stepparents specifically but illuminating for all members of the blended family. If the group includes stepchildren (adult or otherwise), their perspective on the stepparent's experience can be extraordinarily valuable — and healing. Papernow's seven stages are among the most practically liberating information in the entire study. Many stepparents will have their experience named and normalized for the first time. Give it significant time.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

43. The chapter describes the stepparent's role as "cruciform love" — giving without receiving, serving without recognition, dying to self daily. On a scale of 1 to 10, how accurately does that description capture your current stepparenting experience? What would it mean to see your role theologically rather than merely relationally?
44. Where are you in Papernow's seven stages (Fantasy, Immersion, Awareness, Mobilization, Action, Contact, Resolution)? How does having a name for your current stage change how you feel about it?
45. The chapter distinguishes between storge (natural parental affection) and agape (chosen, will-based love). Have you been shaming yourself for not feeling

storge? What would it mean to stop measuring yourself by a feeling you cannot manufacture and start measuring yourself by the agape you are choosing?

46. Of the five gospel postures for stepparents (lead with presence, support the biological parent, build one-on-one connection, give children their own timeline, maintain your spiritual health), which one is hardest for you right now? Why?
47. The chapter says no one told you it would feel like this. What do you wish someone had told you before you became a stepparent? What would you now say to a stepparent who is in year one of this journey?
48. The chapter applies 1 Corinthians 13 directly to stepparenting — "love is patient" becomes "the stepparent who waits, year after year, for a child who is not ready." Which quality in the love chapter most describes your stepparenting right now? Which one do you most need?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ Read John 15:13 as a specific word addressed to you in your stepparent role. Write down what "laying down your life" looks like in one specific, practical act this week.
- ▶ If you are in Papernow's Mobilization stage, identify one specific practice that will help you not give up in the middle: a prayer rhythm, a trusted person to call, a weekly check-in with your spouse.
- ▶ Find one moment this week to build a one-on-one connection with a stepchild — not forced family time, but a small, low-pressure, voluntary shared experience. Let it be simple.

SESSION 9 • Chapter Chapter 8

The Children of Grace

Understanding Kids in Blended Families

"Children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward."

— Psalm 127:3 (NASB)

FACILITATOR NOTE

If any adult children are present in the group, their perspective is invaluable and should be honored. The loyalty bind material is among the most healing content in the study — parents who recognize what they have been communicating (even inadvertently) often experience significant conviction and immediate motivation to change. The age-stage grid is meant to be practical. Let participants work through it in relation to their specific children.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

49. The chapter says children in blended families need three things: felt safety, consistent love, and permission to grieve. Honestly assess your household: which of these three does each child in your home most need right now?
50. Wallerstein's research found that the impact of family breakdown often surfaces most acutely not in childhood but in the adult relationships children form later. What does this finding ask of you as a parent or stepparent right now, while you still have significant daily influence?
51. Work through the age-stage grid for each child in your home. Which developmental stage's needs have you found most difficult to meet? What specific change would most help that child right now?
52. The loyalty bind is described as the most damaging dynamic for children in blended families. Have you inadvertently created or maintained a loyalty bind in your home? What would it look like to genuinely dismantle it through explicit permission-giving?
53. The chapter introduces the abundance theology of Galatians 3:28 as the gospel's specific answer to the loyalty bind. Has your home operated more from a theology of scarcity (love must be protected and rationed) or abundance (love multiplies)? What would shift toward abundance look like practically?
54. Papernow says: "We must be willing to let children grieve what they have lost, rather than requiring them to celebrate what we have gained." Where have you been requiring celebration before grief? What would it look like to offer permission to grieve?

GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ This week, speak loyalty permission explicitly to each child in your home: "You are allowed to love your [parent/stepparent] completely. That is not a betrayal of anyone." Say it, even if they do not respond. Say it again next week.
- ▶ Identify one child in your home whose grief has not been formally acknowledged. Find a quiet moment to name it: "I know this has been hard. I'm not going to rush you through it."
- ▶ Read Psalm 127:3 over each child in your home this week. Receive each one — biological and step — as a gift of the LORD.

SESSION 10 • Chapter Chapter 9

When Two Worlds Collide

Navigating Two Households

"If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."

— **Romans 12:18 (NASB)**

FACILITATOR NOTE

This session will surface significant pain for many participants — the co-parenting relationship is often the most active source of daily stress in blended family life. The spectrum from cooperative co-parenting to parallel parenting is important pastoral information: participants dealing with genuinely hostile situations need explicit permission to implement parallel parenting structures without guilt. The absolute prohibitions section often produces conviction and immediate commitment to change.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

55. Research identifies the co-parenting relationship between biological parents as the single greatest predictor of children's long-term wellbeing after divorce. Does this surprise you? How does it change your view of the investment required in that relationship, even when it is painful?

56. Where on the co-parenting spectrum does your situation currently fall — cooperative, business-like, or parallel? Is it where it needs to be, or where it has defaulted to? What would intentional movement look like?
57. The chapter offers a phrase-by-phrase unpacking of Romans 12:18: "if possible" / "so far as it depends on you" / "be at peace" / "with all men." Which phrase is doing the most work for you in your current co-parenting situation?
58. Review the "Absolute Prohibitions" from the chapter. With honest self-assessment: have any of these been occurring in your household? What specific change will you commit to this week?
59. The chapter makes a distinction between the posture of the heart (which must remain peaceable) and the structure of the co-parenting arrangement (which must adapt to reality). Has this distinction been clear in your own thinking? How does it help you?
60. For families with a difficult co-parenting situation: what specific professional or structural support (co-parenting app, mediator, co-parenting coordinator, attorney) would most help you right now? What has prevented you from accessing it?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ This week, pray for the other biological parent by name — for their specific needs, not as a spiritual exercise in tolerance but as a genuine extension of agape to someone whose wellbeing affects your children directly.
- ▶ If you have been communicating with an ex through text in ways that regularly escalate conflict, research and implement one structured communication platform this week.
- ▶ Read Matthew 5:44 not as a general spiritual principle but as a specific, addressed command for your co-parenting situation. Ask God: "What does loving this specific person, in this specific situation, look like this week?"

The Father Wound

Absent Fathers, Stepfathers, and the Healing of Sonship

“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are.”

— 1 John 3:1 (NASB)



FACILITATOR NOTE

This session addresses the deepest wound in the blended family landscape. Many participants will be encountering the language of the "father wound" for the first time. Be prepared for significant emotional response — from men especially, who have rarely been given permission to name this wound publicly. The theology of divine adoption is the pastoral heart of this session. Allow it to land fully before moving to application. This is often the session that changes everything for participants who have carried unacknowledged father wounds for decades.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 61.** The chapter defines the father wound as "the absence of the experience of being unconditionally loved, seen, and secure in the presence of a father figure." Which of the six wound layers (Absence, Emotional Unavailability, Conditional Love, Abandonment, Paternal Harshness, Death) most describes your own father experience? How has it shaped your adult relationships?
- 62.** The chapter says the father wound in one generation becomes the "unexamined driver of nearly every relational conflict" in the blended family. Where do you see the father wound operating in your household — in yourself, in your spouse, in your children?
- 63.** Romans 8:15 describes the cry of the adopted child: "Abba! Father!" The Greek word *hiothesia* means "placing of a son" — a legal, permanent, irrevocable standing. Does the theology of divine adoption feel abstract to you, or have you experienced it as real? What would it look like to receive this adoption more fully?

64. For stepfathers: the chapter identifies five things Joseph did (Named, Protected, Taught, Remained, Was Chosen by God). Which of these five most describes your current stepfathering? Which one do you most need to grow in?
65. Manning says: "When a man knows he is beloved by a Father who will never leave him, he becomes capable of fathering others the same way." What would it mean for your own healing — as a father-wounded adult — to genuinely receive the Father's love, so that it can flow through you rather than stopping with you?
66. What specific prayer do you most need to pray this week about the father wound — whether your own or your children's?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ Read Psalm 27:10 this week: "For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me up." Receive it as a specific promise, addressed to the place in you that was not fathered as it needed to be.
- ▶ If you are a stepfather, speak Joseph's claim over a stepchild this week: give them something — a word, a task, a specific acknowledgment — that communicates: "I chose you. You are not an accident of my second marriage."
- ▶ Pray the Abba prayer from Romans 8:15 each morning this week: "Abba, Father." Just those two words. Let God be large enough to hold what your earthly father could not.

SESSION 12 • Chapter Chapter 11

Healing Through Honest Communication

The Gospel Speaks Truth in Love

"But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, that is, Christ."

— **Ephesians 4:15 (NASB)**



FACILITATOR NOTE

This session is highly practical and benefits from the group working through the Gottman material together with honest self-assessment. The Four Horsemen are not meant to produce shame — they are meant to produce recognition, which is the precondition for change. The Ephesians 4:15 framework (truth, in love, toward growth, in Christ) should be offered as a genuinely alternative architecture, not just a communication technique. The family meeting structure can be assigned as a homework experiment before the next session.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 67.** Of Gottman's Four Horsemen (Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, Stonewalling), which one is most present in your blended family's communication patterns? Where does it most commonly surface — between spouses, with stepchildren, in your internal narrative about the ex?
- 68.** The chapter says Ephesians 4:15's four elements (truth, in love, toward growth, in Christ) describe "how the Trinity communicates." Which of these four elements is currently most absent from the difficult conversations in your household?
- 69.** The four gospel communication disciplines (confess quickly, listen to understand, name your emotional state, invite God in) — which one would most transform the communication in your household if genuinely practiced? What would prevent you from practicing it?
- 70.** The chapter addresses anger specifically and describes the Psalmic model of bringing anger to God before bringing it to the person. Have you ever practiced this? What happened? What makes it difficult?
- 71.** The family meeting structure is described as "a weekly enactment of the family's core values." If you implemented a family meeting this week, what would you most hope would happen? What do you most fear?
- 72.** The chapter identifies the closing blessing in the family meeting as the most transformative element. What specific, named word do you most need to speak over each person in your household? What has prevented you from speaking it?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ Implement the Gospel Family Meeting structure at least once this week. Use the five elements (Prayer, Gratitude, What's Going Well, What Needs Attention, Closing Blessing). Report back to the group next session.
- ▶ Before the next difficult conversation you anticipate, practice the 30-second prayer with your spouse or yourself: "God, help us hear each other well." Notice what changes.
- ▶ This week, identify one conversation that needs to happen and practice the gentle startup: "When that happened, I noticed I felt _____. I want to tell you about it because I don't want it to sit between us."

SESSION 13 • Chapter Chapter 12

When the Ex Doesn't Play Nice

Loving Your Enemy in Real Time

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

— **Matthew 5:44 (NASB)**

FACILITATOR NOTE

This is the hardest practical session in the study. Some participants will be in situations of genuine ongoing harm — do not minimize this or rush to the spiritual application. The love/trust distinction is critical pastoral care for participants who have been spiritually pressured to trust people who are not safe. The identity anchoring material is often where the deepest pastoral work happens. Leave significant time for the personal testimony portion of the session.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

73. The chapter applies Matthew 5:44 specifically to the ex-spouse who is actively difficult. On a scale of 1–10, how impossible does this command feel in your specific situation? What makes it feel that way?
74. The love/trust distinction is central to this chapter: love is commanded unconditionally; trust must be earned through demonstrated reliability. Has this

distinction been clear to you? How does it change what you are being asked to do?

75. Of the hostile co-parenting behaviors described in the chapter (Parental Alienation, Custody Violation, Financial Weaponization, Communication Sabotage, New Partner Interference, Legal Harassment), which ones are present in your situation? Have you named them honestly before? What would appropriate protective response look like?
76. The chapter argues that praying for the ex by name, by need, and by the gospel is among the most transformative practices available. Have you tried this? If not, what is your honest resistance to beginning?
77. The identity anchoring section presents two verdicts: what God says about you and what the ex says about you. Which verdict has been more functionally operative in your daily life? What would it look like to choose the gospel's verdict more consistently?
78. The chapter closes with MLK: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that." Where in your relationship with the ex have you responded to darkness with more darkness? What would the light response look like in that specific situation?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ This week, pray for the ex by name, by need, and by the gospel — once each day. Do not report on whether it changed them. Report next session on what it did to you.
- ▶ Write down the specific verdict the ex has spoken over you through their behavior, their words, or the children. Then write Romans 8:1 over it: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Let the gospel have the last word.
- ▶ If you have been speaking negatively about the other household in the presence of the children — directly or through tone and body language — make one specific, concrete change this week.

Thriving Together

Traditions, Identity, and the Church Community

“And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, “It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.””

— **Exodus 13:8 (NASB)**



FACILITATOR NOTE

This combined session covers the shift from healing to flourishing. It may feel lighter than preceding sessions — that is appropriate. Blended families deserve space to celebrate what God is building, not only to diagnose what is broken. The tradition-building discussions are meant to be generative and energizing. The church community section may still carry pain for some participants — honor it, but do not let it crowd out the vision-casting that is this session's primary work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 79.** Doherty's research shows that families with intentional shared rituals report significantly higher cohesion and wellbeing. What traditions currently exist in your blended family — even small ones? What would you most like to add?
- 80.** The chapter argues that creating new traditions is "not the erasure of old ones, but the honest, creative work of identity formation." What old traditions from prior family systems are present in your household? How have you navigated honoring them while creating new ones?
- 81.** The chapter describes the family origin story — told honestly, with the grief and the grace both visible — as one of the most powerful things a blended family can pass to the next generation. What is your family's origin story? Have you ever told it to the children?
- 82.** Galatians 3:28 is described as the theological basis for blended family identity: in Christ, the barriers of biology and history can be transcended. Does this feel true in your household? What does "you are all one in Christ Jesus" look like in your specific family?

83. The chapter says the church is uniquely positioned to be what no other institution can be for blended families. What has your experience of the church been in this regard? What do you most wish the church had offered you?

1. If your church were to launch one specific ministry initiative for blended families, what would you most want it to be? What would you be willing to help build?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

▶ This week, begin the family origin story. Tell it — honestly, including the hard parts — to at least one person in your household. Let the grace be visible because the loss is visible.

▶ Choose one new tradition to establish this month. It does not need to be large. A prayer before dinner. A gratitude round. A Saturday morning pancake ritual. Choose something that belongs to this family, in this configuration.

▶ Read Exodus 13:8 as a personal commission: "You shall tell your [children] on that day what the LORD has done." What specific thing has the LORD done in your blended family that deserves to be told?

SESSION 15 • Chapter Chapter 15 & Conclusion

Leaving a Legacy of Grace

The Multigenerational Gospel Family & Making All Things New

"I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants."

— **Isaiah 44:3 (NASB)**



FACILITATOR NOTE

This final session is a celebration and a commissioning. Allow significant time for testimony — participants sharing what has changed across the 15 sessions. The blessing exercise (having each person speak a blessing over someone in the group) is one of the most powerful group experiences available. If time permits, have each

participant speak the spoken blessing over their family at home this week as a formal closing exercise.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

2. Looking back across the full arc of this 15-session study: what is the single most significant thing that has changed in how you see your blended family?
3. Wolfinger's research says children of divorce are 40% more likely to divorce — unless they are exposed to a sustained counter-narrative of healthy, committed relationship. How has your blended family been, or how could it become, that counter-narrative for the children in your household?
4. The chapter identifies five eternal deposits: Forgiveness Modeled, Covenant Love Sustained, Honest Faith Practiced, Redemption Story Told, Blessing Spoken. Which of these deposits has been most consistently made in your blended family? Which one most needs your attention in the season ahead?
5. The spoken blessing is described as the most portable inheritance a family can create. Have you ever received a formal spoken blessing? Have you ever given one? What would it mean to begin this practice with your children this week?
6. The "What Children Will Remember" table suggests they will not remember the difficulty — they will remember what was done with it. What do you most want the children in your household to remember about this family when they are grown?
7. The Conclusion ends with the furniture maker at his bench, still working. Where is the craftsman actively at work in your blended family right now? What does the grain look like beneath the damage?

† GOSPEL APPLICATION

- ▶ Write a blessing document for one child in your household this week — a written letter addressed to them by name, naming what you see and love and value in them. Give them a copy. Keep the original.
- ▶ Return to the honest answer you wrote at the end of Session 1: "Is there a gospel powerful enough to redeem this?" Write the answer again. Notice what has changed.

► Read Revelation 21:5 aloud over your household: "Behold, I am making all things new." Receive it not as a future hope only, but as a present declaration about the work the craftsman is already doing in your specific, complicated, beautiful, imperfect family.

"Making All Things New"

APPENDIX B

The Stepfamily Development Timeline

Dr. Patricia Papernow's Seven Stages of Stepfamily Integration

With Pastoral Commentary and Gospel Anchors

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Dr. Patricia Papernow's research on stepfamily development, originally published in *Becoming a Stepfamily* (1993) and expanded in *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships* (2013), is the most clinically validated framework for understanding how blended families develop over time.

Her research demonstrates that it takes an average of 4–7 years for a blended family to reach genuine cohesion — a timeline most families are never told. Understanding these stages removes shame, provides orientation, and equips families to persevere through the critical middle stages where most stepfamilies dissolve.

This resource adds pastoral commentary and gospel anchors to Papernow's clinical framework, making it suitable for use in church contexts, pastoral counseling, and blended family support groups. It is designed to be shared freely with any new blended family.

AT A GLANCE — THE SEVEN STAGES

#	STAGE	PHASE	ONE-LINE DESCRIPTION
1	Fantasy	<i>Early</i>	Hope and unrealistic expectations carry everyone into the new family
2	Immersion	<i>Early</i>	Reality arrives; the stepparent begins to feel invisible and marginal

3	Awareness	<i>Early</i>	Each person begins to name their actual experience honestly
4	Mobilization	<i>Middle</i> ⚠	Conflict surfaces; most stepfamilies dissolve here
5	Action	<i>Middle</i>	The couple begins to align; trust takes its first fragile steps
6	Contact	<i>Later</i>	Genuine stepparent-stepchild connection begins to form
7	Resolution	<i>Later</i>	A new, stable family identity with authentic relationships

The average blended family takes 4–7 years to move through all seven stages. Most families are never told this.

Understanding the map does not eliminate the terrain. But it removes the shame of being exactly where you are.

STAGE 1 • EARLY STAGE • Months 1–6

Fantasy

WHAT THIS STAGE LOOKS LIKE

The blended family begins with hope — which is not a flaw but a grace. The stepparent imagines the stepchildren will be glad to have a stable, loving adult in their corner. The biological parent imagines the new spouse will complete the family. The children, especially younger ones, may hope the new family means healing. Everyone enters with a picture of how this will go. The picture is almost always wrong. That is not failure. It is the beginning of the real work.

THE STEPPARENT

**THE BIOLOGICAL
PARENT**

THE CHILDREN

Energized. Motivated. Hopeful that love will be enough. Surprised that the children are not as enthusiastic as expected but attributing it to adjustment time.

Relieved. Hopeful that the new partner will help share the parenting load. Beginning to notice the gap between the spouse's expectations and the children's reality.

Uncertain. Some may genuinely welcome the new adult; others are quietly resistant or waiting. The fantasy is largely invisible to them — they are living in the reality.

† GOSPEL ANCHOR

The gospel holds fantasy gently. It does not despise hope — it is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. But the gospel also insists on truth. The transition from fantasy to reality is not a fall from grace; it is the beginning of the honest journey toward something real. God is already present in the gap between the picture and the reality.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

— **Hebrews 11:1 (NASB)**

STAGE 2 • EARLY STAGE • Months 6–18

Immersion

WHAT THIS STAGE LOOKS LIKE

The fantasy gives way, and the reality that replaces it is often harder than anyone expected. The stepparent begins to feel like an outsider in their own household — present but marginal, invisible in the relational architecture that predates them. The stepchildren's loyalty to the absent biological parent becomes more visible. Small exclusions accumulate. The stepparent begins to wonder whether something is wrong with them, or whether they misread the situation, or whether this was a mistake.

THE STEPPARENT	THE BIOLOGICAL PARENT	THE CHILDREN
<p><i>Confused, marginalized, and beginning to wonder if they are fundamentally incompatible with the family. Tempted to withdraw or to push harder. The loneliness of being adjacent to a family system they cannot fully enter.</i></p>	<p><i>Caught. Beginning to feel the tension between the spouse's growing distress and the children's needs. Struggling to understand why the spouse feels so outside when the family feels (to the biological parent) fairly normal.</i></p>	<p><i>Uncertain and protective. The loyalty to the absent parent is operating beneath the surface. The family feels normal to them because it is their family; the stepparent's presence has not yet been integrated.</i></p>

† GOSPEL ANCHOR

Psalm 34:18 is the gospel word for this stage: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted." The stepparent who feels invisible is not invisible to God. The ache of marginality is known by the One who was Himself an outsider, a stranger, the One of whom it was said "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him." The immersion stage is the first cross of stepparenting. It is shared with Christ.

"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

— **Psalm 34:18 (NASB)**

STAGE 3 • EARLY STAGE • Months 12–24

Awareness

WHAT THIS STAGE LOOKS LIKE

Each person in the blended family begins to name their actual experience. The stepparent can articulate, perhaps for the first time, what they have been carrying. The biological parent begins to see the tension that was previously invisible. The children begin to surface their grief and their loyalty conflicts more explicitly. This

stage can feel like things are getting worse — because conflict is more visible. But visibility is not deterioration. It is the precondition for genuine resolution.

THE STEPPARENT	THE BIOLOGICAL PARENT	THE CHILDREN
<p><i>Beginning to articulate: "I feel like an outsider." "I don't feel welcome." "I expected love to be enough and it isn't." This naming, though painful, is the beginning of the stepparent's genuine presence in the family rather than the fantasy version.</i></p>	<p><i>Beginning to see. The biological parent starts to recognize the structural gap between their experience of the family and the stepparent's. Empathy begins to be possible. So does the beginning of active support.</i></p>	<p><i>Beginning to articulate their grief and loyalty conflicts more directly. "I miss Dad when we do things with you." This is painful for the stepparent and the biological parent, but it is the child's honest experience finally finding language.</i></p>

† GOSPEL ANCHOR

The gospel's word for this stage is John 8:32: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." The naming that happens in Awareness is the truth-telling that the gospel requires and enables. A family that can speak its actual experience is a family that can bring that experience to God and to each other. The Spirit who convicts and illuminates is actively at work in this stage, drawing things into the light that must be seen in order to be healed.

"You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

— John 8:32 (NASB)

STAGE 4 • MIDDLE STAGE  • Year 2–4

Mobilization

⚠ CRITICAL DANGER ZONE — Where most stepfamilies dissolve

WHAT THIS STAGE LOOKS LIKE

The most painful and the most dangerous stage. The tensions of the early stages, now named and felt, begin to mobilize into open conflict. The stepparent pushes for a place in the family. The children push back. The biological parent is caught between competing loyalties. The household may feel more conflicted than it did before the naming began. This is the stage where most stepfamilies dissolve — not because the family is broken but because they have reached the exact point where most families give up.

THE STEPPARENT	THE BIOLOGICAL PARENT	THE CHILDREN
<i>Increasingly frustrated. May begin to push harder for authority, recognition, or change. Or may begin to withdraw — emotionally or practically — as a protection against the sustained rejection. Both responses are understandable. Neither resolves the stage.</i>	<i>Pulled in multiple directions and increasingly exhausted by it. The biological parent is the hinge on which the Mobilization stage turns. Their movement toward supporting the stepparent while remaining a present, consistent parent to the children is the most decisive factor in whether the family navigates this stage successfully.</i>	<i>Actively resisting or testing. The stepparent's push for authority in this stage often triggers the children's most explicit loyalty responses. Some children in Mobilization are in genuine anguish — caught between love for both adults and the sense that the conflict is somehow their fault.</i>

† GOSPEL ANCHOR

Galatians 6:9 is the gospel word for Mobilization: "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary." The "due time" is critical. It has not yet arrived. The family in Mobilization is not failing — it is at the precise moment in

the developmental arc where perseverance is the only path forward. The cross is not the end of the story. And the Mobilization stage is not the end of the family's story.

“Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.”

— Galatians 6:9 (NASB)

STAGE 5 • MIDDLE STAGE • Year 3–5

Action

WHAT THIS STAGE LOOKS LIKE

The couple begins to align. The biological parent steps more clearly into support of the stepparent's role. The couple works together to address the structural issues that Mobilization surfaced. Small, incremental improvements begin to accumulate. Trust between stepparent and stepchild takes its first fragile steps. The atmosphere of the household begins — slowly, with setbacks — to change.

THE STEPPARENT	THE BIOLOGICAL PARENT	THE CHILDREN
<p><i>Cautiously hopeful. Beginning to experience occasional moments of genuine connection with the stepchildren. Still fragile, but the sustained investment is beginning to bear small, real fruit. The most important shift is the stepparent's growing sense of being supported by the biological parent.</i></p>	<p><i>More actively supportive. The biological parent is beginning to do the specific work of advocating for the stepparent in the family system — backing their decisions, requiring respect, and creating space for the stepparent-stepchild relationship to</i></p>	<p><i>Beginning to soften. Not all children, not all at once. But some children in the Action stage begin to voluntarily initiate small moments of connection with the stepparent. These moments are significant and must not be forced or over-interpreted.</i></p>

develop without constant triangulation.

† GOSPEL ANCHOR

Proverbs 13:12 holds the Action stage: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life." The tree of life is beginning to emerge from the ground in this stage. Its roots are still shallow, but they are real. The gospel word for Action is the persistent, unhurried cultivation of a living thing — the slow, patient gardening of genuine relationship in soil that has been tilled by years of honest engagement.

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life."

— **Proverbs 13:12 (NASB)**

STAGE 6 • LATER STAGE • Year 4–6

Contact

WHAT THIS STAGE LOOKS LIKE

Genuine connection forms between the stepparent and at least some of the stepchildren. Not a replacement of the biological bond — something new, distinct, and authentically its own. The household develops a shared identity and a shared language. The family begins to feel, in specific moments and then in longer stretches, like a genuine family rather than a managed household.

THE STEPPARENT	THE BIOLOGICAL PARENT	THE CHILDREN
<i>Experiencing real relationship with the stepchildren. Not the relationship they imagined in Stage 1, but something</i>	<i>Experiencing the relief and joy of watching a family they love becoming genuinely cohesive. The exhaustion of the middle</i>	<i>Developing a genuine relationship with the stepparent that is distinct from the biological parent relationship and not in</i>

more durable — a relationship forged through difficulty and sustained through grace. The stepparent begins to find their specific, irreplaceable role in the family.

stages begins to yield to something like gratitude.

competition with it. Some children describe the Contact stage as the first time the new family begins to feel like home.

† GOSPEL ANCHOR

The Contact stage is the beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah 43:19: "I will do something new, now it will spring forth." The new thing is visible. It is specific. It has names and faces and shared memories and inside jokes. It is the redeemed family beginning to inhabit its redemption. The gospel word is Romans 15:7: "Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." Acceptance in this stage is not performance. It is the slow, real fruit of sustained cruciform love.

"Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God."

— Romans 15:7 (NASB)

STAGE 7 • LATER STAGE • Year 5–7+

Resolution

WHAT THIS STAGE LOOKS LIKE

The family has reached a new, stable identity. Roles are clear and largely accepted. Relationships have genuine depth. The family is not what anyone originally imagined in Stage 1 — it is something that has been forged by time, honesty, grief, cruciform love, and the grace of a God who refused to let the damage be the final word. The family that reaches Resolution does not arrive at perfection. It arrives at something better: authenticity.

THE STEPPARENT	THE BIOLOGICAL PARENT	THE CHILDREN
<p><i>Has found their irreplaceable role in the family. Is no longer competing with the ghost of the biological parent or measuring themselves against the Stage 1 fantasy. Is present, secure, and genuinely connected to the family they chose.</i></p>	<p><i>Experiencing the specific, hard-won satisfaction of watching a family they built survive what most families do not. The exhaustion of the early and middle stages has been replaced by a quiet, earned peace.</i></p>	<p><i>Are living in a family with enough stability and authenticity to provide the felt safety, consistent love, and permission to grieve that they most needed. Some children at Resolution describe the blended family as the family that taught them the most about what love is actually capable of.</i></p>

† GOSPEL ANCHOR

Revelation 21:5 is the gospel word for Resolution: "Behold, I am making all things new." Not new as in unrecognizable, but new as in transformed — bearing the marks of what the family has been through and more honest, more beautiful, and more durable for it. The Resolution stage is not the absence of all difficulty. It is the presence of a family whose foundation is solid enough to hold the difficulty without being destroyed by it.

"Behold, I am making all things new."

— Revelation 21:5 (NASB)

A FINAL WORD TO THE FAMILY READING THIS RESOURCE

You are somewhere on this map right now. The stage you are in has a name. The feelings you are carrying have a developmental context. The difficulty you are experiencing is not evidence that your family is broken beyond repair — it is evidence that you are in the exact middle of a process that takes longer than anyone tells you and asks more of you than anyone warns you about.

God is present in every stage of this map. He is not waiting at Stage 7. He is at the bench in Stage 2, working the grain that the Immersion stage has revealed. He is in the Mobilization stage, sustaining the couple that refuses to dissolve. He is in the Action stage, celebrating the first voluntary moment of genuine connection between a stepparent and a child who is finally, slowly, beginning to let them in.

He is making all things new. Including yours.

“Making All Things New”

*Based on the research of Dr. Patricia Papernow, *Becoming a Stepfamily* (1993) and *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships* (2013)*

APPENDIX C

The Blended Family Covenant

A Gospel-Saturated Statement of Shared Identity, Values, and Commitment

WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS

A covenant is not a contract. A contract is a legal agreement between parties based on mutual performance and conditions. A covenant is a blood-sworn, unconditional commitment modeled on God's own covenant with His people in Christ — a commitment that holds not because both parties deserve it, but because the One who initiated it does not break His promises.

The Blended Family Covenant is a gospel-saturated statement of who this family is, what it believes, and how it chooses to live — not in the strength of its own intentions but in the grace of the God who makes all things new. It is designed to be adapted, personalized, signed, displayed, and returned to whenever the family needs to remember what it has committed to becoming.

This is not a performance document. It is a grace document. The family that signs it is not claiming to be what it is not. It is naming what it is choosing — in the power of the Spirit, over time, imperfectly but genuinely — to become.

HOW TO USE THIS COVENANT

† **Adapt it.** The language in this document is a starting point. Revise it to reflect your family's specific history, values, and voice. Make it yours.

♥ **Read it together.** Before signing, read the covenant aloud together as a family — all members old enough to understand. The reading is part of the covenant formation.

that this family was not formed by accident. It was formed through loss, through love, through the specific and irreversible choices of the adults who committed to one another and to the children in their care. We do not pretend this family is without complexity. We do not pretend the history was not painful. We acknowledge honestly that we arrived here through roads we did not entirely choose and that the family we are building stands on the honest ground of what actually happened.

And we declare that the God who makes all things new has not been absent from any of it. That the same gospel that reconciles sinners to God can reconcile strangers into family. That the cross is not merely the foundation of our individual salvation — it is the architectural blueprint of every redeemed relationship in this home.

“Behold, I am making all things new.” — Revelation 21:5 (NASB)



WE COVENANT

I. We Are a Family by Choice and by Grace.

We recognize that biology is one way families form, and not the only way. We have been formed through covenant commitment, not merely through bloodlines. We receive one another as gifts — imperfect, complicated, and given by God. Every person who bears this family’s name is genuinely, fully, and permanently a member of it.

II. We Will Live by Grace, Not Performance.

This family does not require its members to earn their belonging. Grace is the atmosphere of this home. We will fail each other. We will say the wrong thing. We will have seasons when the love is more will than feeling. We covenant to receive grace from God and to extend it to one another — not because we always feel like it, but because we have been forgiven an incalculable debt and are therefore able to forgive the smaller debts between us.

III. We Will Forgive Quickly and Repair Honestly.

We will not let the sun go down on unresolved anger (Ephesians 4:26). We will confess when we have caused harm. We will not require the other person to deserve the

forgiveness before we extend it. We will return to the cross as often as necessary — which will be often. The repair is the testimony of this family, not the absence of the wound.

IV. We Will Honor Every Child at This Table.

Every child in this home — biological and step, blood-related and chosen — is a full and irreplaceable member of this family. We will not require children to perform an affection they have not yet developed. We will give each child their own timeline. We will speak well of every parent, in every household, in the hearing of every child. We will give our children permission to love everyone who loves them.

V. We Will Protect the Marriage as the Axis of This Home.

The couple relationship is the load-bearing wall of this family. We will invest in it, protect it, and refuse to allow it to be crowded out by the demands of the household. We will pray together, speak honestly together, repair quickly together, and remember that our marriage is not a casualty of the complexity — it is the center that holds the complexity together.

VI. We Will Invite God into Every Room of This Home.

This family belongs to the God who makes all things new. We will pray together. We will read His word. We will bring our honest grief and our honest gratitude into His presence. We will not pretend before Him that the difficulty is smaller than it is, or that the grace is smaller than it is. We will raise our children to know that they are beloved children of the Father who runs toward them.

VII. We Will Tell the Truth in Love.

This family values honesty above comfort. We will name what is hard without dramatizing it. We will celebrate what is good without performing it. We will speak truth in love — toward growth, in Christ — because a family that cannot speak honestly cannot heal honestly. We will not require each other to be more than we are, or less.

VIII. We Will Build Something That Outlasts Us.

We are not merely building a functional household. We are planting a tree under whose shade our children's children will one day rest. Every act of forgiveness, every

prayer, every moment of cruciform love in this home is a deposit in an eternal account. We choose to live with the long horizon in view, trusting that the God who is making all things new is working in this family across generations we will not live to see.



OUR FAMILY IDENTITY

We are the _____ family.

We believe:

We value:

We commit to:



THE CHILDREN OF THIS COVENANT

The following children are fully and permanently members of this family, held in the blessing of this covenant, and beloved before God and one another:

Child 1: _____ *Date of birth:* _____

Child 2: _____ *Date of birth:* _____

Child 3: _____ *Date of birth:* _____

Child 4: _____ *Date of birth:* _____

Child 5: _____ Date of birth: _____

Child 6: _____ Date of birth: _____



IN WITNESS OF THIS COVENANT

We, the undersigned, enter this covenant freely, with open eyes and honest hearts, in the name of the God who makes all things new.

Husband / Partner	Wife / Partner
<i>Signature</i>	<i>Signature</i>

Date signed: _____

Children's signatures / marks:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Witnessed by (pastor, counselor, or trusted friend):

Signature • Name • Date



*“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly
beyond all that we ask or think,
according to the power that works within us —”*

to Him be the glory in this family, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20–21 (NASB)



Metro Community Chaplaincy • “Making All Things New”

Annual Covenant Renewal

A record of the years this family has renewed its covenant

Covenants deepen through repetition. The family that returns to this document each year — at a birthday, a marriage anniversary, New Year’s Day, or any date that carries meaning for this specific household — builds a living record of its own becoming. The signatures below are not mere administrative records. They are the annual testimony of a family that chose, again, to be what it covenanted to become.

YEAR	DATE	WORD FOR THIS SEASON	SIGNED BY
1			
2			

3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

NOTES FROM OUR JOURNEY

What God has done in this family. What we want the next generation to know.

“Making All Things New”

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