

# The Biblical Role of Grandparents

Part one of a two-part series

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By Josh Mulvihill

What is the biblical role of a grandparent? Every member of the family is given a clear role in Scripture. Husbands are told to be the head of the home and to lovingly lead their family (Ephesians 5:23). Wives are given the role of helpmate and are to follow their husband's leadership (Genesis 2:18; Ephesians 5:22). Children are told to honor their parents through obedience (Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1).

If the Bible clearly defines the role of every other family member, shouldn't it also define the role of grandparent? This has been the focus of my PhD dissertation and multiple years of study. The Bible is clear on the subject, but American culture is not, and many Christians have unintentionally adopted a non-biblical view of grandparenthood.

In American culture there is great uncertainty concerning the meaning and purpose of old age. Ambiguity surrounds the grandparent role. One author states that we have a "cultural crisis" concerning the meaning and purpose of old age. Another author states, "There is new uncertainty about what it means to be a grandparent and what grandparents are supposed to do." Many grandparents, including Christian grandparents, do not know what is expected of them.

## *The Changing Role of Grandparents in America*

America has created its own role for grandparents, known to scholars as "the new social contract." The core values include non-interference by grandparents, emotional independence from children, and personal autonomy. Families unconsciously operate according to the agreement that children will grow up, move away, start their own family, and become independent from one another. "Experts" encourage families to aim for closeness at a distance, but what is gained are lonely, overburdened, and disconnected families. The social contract has amputated generations from one another and left countless grandchildren as grand-orphans who do not have the intimate influence of a grandparent in their life.

Because the role of grandparents is not clearly defined by American culture, it is viewed as a frill, a role not essential to the functioning of the family or the growth and development of grandchildren. Grandparents themselves fear meddling in their children's and grandchildren's lives. While the relationship, when it exists, can be very positive, its limited and tenuous nature removes grandparents from the central hub of family life and places them on the periphery with a minimal role.

## *Grandparents in Contemporary Literature*

Over the past one hundred years, society changed the definition of family from institution to companionship, and one manifestation of this change is found in children's literature about grandparenthood. A few notable titles of children's books include: *Grandmas Are for Giving Tickle*s and

*Grandpas Are for Finding Worms*. The children's book, *What Grandpas and Grandmas Do Best*, suggest that grandparents are for playing hide-and-seek, singing a lullaby, building a sandcastle, and playing games. In *Grandma, Grandpa, and Me*, grandparents are to play with, work alongside, and have fun with. Children's literature speaks of a grandparent's role as one of playmate and companion.

Grandparents adjusted their value system based on the place and purpose society gave to the elderly. Values shifted from leaving a family legacy and financial inheritance to a pleasant retirement experience. A bumper sticker occasionally seen on the car of elderly people captures this well, "We're spending our children's inheritance." Instead of investing in future generations, older couples are encouraged to "indulge themselves a little, in travel, little splurges, or whatever makes their last years more enjoyable."

Andrew Blechman's book, *Leisureville*, captures the two primary roles of grandparents in American culture: independence and indulgence. *Leisureville* explores what life is like for a retired person living in the Villages, a gated community in Florida. The Villages is larger than Manhattan, boasts a population over 100,000, and has a golf course for every day of the month, its own newspaper, radio, and TV station. The Villages is missing only one thing: children. The Villages not only encourages, but legalizes the segregation of ages from one another. No one under the age of nineteen may live there. Children may visit, but are strictly limited to a total of thirty days a year. When Dave, one of the residents, was asked if he was uncomfortable living in a community without children, he answered, "I'm not thirteen...I want to spend time with people who are my own age." Another resident says, "I raised my children and I didn't want to raise anyone else's." These residents have an appreciation for a new and growing phenomenon in American culture: age segregation.

The Villages sell a lifestyle that suggests retirees have worked hard, and now it is time to pursue hobbies, play golf, and socialize with peers. One of the residents of the Villages likes that he doesn't have to think about the problems of his former community and distant family. A different resident says, "The only thing I worry about these days is my daily golf game." A carefree lifestyle dominated by leisure pursuits and warm weather is the driving priority for those who live in the Villages. The self-indulgent values of the Villages are not isolated to this one group; they reflect a broader population of elderly people in America.

In general, society has lost its compass regarding why the generations should interact, how they are to do so, and what responsibilities each has to the other. It is likely that a percentage of Christian grandparents have embraced the *Leisureville* mentality and need a renewed biblical vision regarding their role in the family and purpose in society.

### *The Biblical Viewpoint*

The one word that describes the totality of a grandparent's biblical role is the word "heritage." Grandparents have inherited a faith they are to pass on to their children (Ephesians 6:1-4; Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and their grandchildren (Psalm 71:16-18; Deuteronomy 12:28). This is the biblical idea of heritage. Each member of the family has been given an important, God-ordained role that is not interchangeable with other members of the family.

The grandparent's role is to be a heritage builder (Psalm 78:1-8; 62-63). The word heritage in Scripture refers to a legacy or inheritance. The grandparent's role is to leave a godly legacy and build a rich heritage in the Lord. To be clear, the grandparent is not building their own heritage, but the Lord's. Psalm

127:3 tells us that “children (and thus, grandchildren) are a *heritage* from the Lord.” Just as a child does not truly belong to a parent (Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 10:26); so a heritage does not truly belong to a grandparent (Isaiah 65:23). Deuteronomy 9:29 states, “For they are your people and your heritage.” In 1 Kings 8:51, Solomon repeats this idea when he says, “For they [Israel] are your people, and your heritage, which you brought out of Egypt.” As grandparents transfer faith from one generation to the next, they build their family faith heritage, but ultimately they build God’s heritage (Deuteronomy 9:26; 31:9).

*“Psalm 78 is the primary text grandparents should turn to in order to understand their role and responsibility with future generations.”*

Psalm 78 is the primary text grandparents should turn to in order to understand their role and responsibility with future generations. In Psalm 78:1-8 God commands grandparents to “teach” and “tell” of the glory of the Lord, the hope of salvation in Jesus, and the necessity of obeying God’s commands. The remainder of Psalm 78 is the sad history of the Israel’s failure to transfer faith from one generation to the next and the resulting rebelliousness of one generation after another. Phrases such as “they sinned still more against him,” “they did not believe in God,” “they were not faithful to his covenant,” and “they tested God again and again” remind parents and grandparents of the important role they play in their children’s and grandchildren’s decisions to walk with or reject the Lord. As a result of Israel’s continued generational rebellion God “gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage. Fire devoured their young men, and their young women had no marriage song” (Psalm 78:62-63). When grandparents fail to teach and tell of the glory of the Lord and grandchildren fail to place their hope in Jesus Christ and obey his commands, a God-fearing heritage is lost.

Teaching and telling are important grandparent roles, but they are not the primary role. They are means to a greater end: a heritage of faith passed from one generation to the next. Society communicates a powerful message that grandparents are extras, not essential to the family. Nothing could be further from the truth. If the history of Israel teaches us anything, it is that grandparents are critical figures in the faith formation of the young. This is precisely what is compromised when grandparent’s mouths go silent (Psalm 78:4).

I want to encourage you to take your cues regarding the role of grandparenthood from the Bible and not from culture. A grandparent’s main role is not to spoil or be a companion to their grandchild. A grandparent’s purpose is not to indulge themselves during the last third of their life. God has given grandparents the role of transferring faith to future generations. May you give yourself over fully to this task.

Part 2 of this article will explore how the Bible instructs grandparents to build a heritage through three roles: telling, teaching, and treasuring.

### *Further Reading*

Mulvihill, Josh, *A New Way of Life for the Old*, The Journal of Discipleship & Family Ministries, Intergenerational Faithfulness, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville KY, Volume 3, Issue 2, Spring/Summer 2013; pp. 24-35. Read it at: [www.atgrace.com/grandparents](http://www.atgrace.com/grandparents).