

***The Pastor's Kid: Finding Your Own Faith and Identity.* By Barnabas Piper. Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2014, 160 pp., \$12.99.**

Re-entering pastoral ministry after a seven-year seminary hiatus with the recent addition of two boys makes me nervous. More than anything I fear the possibility that my children's regular exposure to the disappointments, trials, and vulnerabilities of pastoral ministry will have a hardening effect on their hearts and will serve to drive them away from Christ and his people rather than into close communion with both. I have heard the stories of pastor's kids who have turned from the faith of their parents, often citing the unique difficulties of their dad's work and their experience in the church as the primary reasons they don't want to follow Christ. And now I'm a pastor. Who is sufficient for these things?

Barnabas Piper is a pastor's kid. Actually, Barnabas Piper is one of the most well-known pastor's kids, because his dad (John Piper) is one of the most popular pastors in America today. With a father whose immediate and derivative ministry has been, for several years, significant in terms of sheer breadth, the fishbowl has been particularly large for Barnabas Piper; he understands with special acuity the troubles that often harass pastor's kids.

Piper comes to writing this book with a threefold aim. First, he is writing for the sake of pastor's kids (PKs) to give them a voice. Second, he is writing to pastors to remind them of the unique struggles and pressures that face their children. Third, he is writing to the church to remind them of their special responsibility to care for their pastor's children. I would assess that Piper accomplishes his threefold aim throughout the book, with an emphasis on the second and third aims. The subtitle to the book ("Making Your Faith Your Own") is slightly misleading for Piper does not address PKs predominantly with regard to how they might personalize their faith. Rather, the message for PKs to "make their faith their own" comes implicitly as Piper addresses

pastors and the church; it is not the main thrust of the book.

After an introduction and a preliminary chapter, Piper discusses “The “Fishbowl” (chapter 2). Here he addresses the many assumptions with which Christians often approach PKs. It is typically supposed by church members that the PK has a solid relationship with God and with his family (38-39), loves the church (39-40), is confident in his religious beliefs (40-41), and desires to be a leader (42). None of these may be true, yet the relationships between church members and PKs are often based on these kinds of faulty assumptions. In time, these assumptions lead to unrealistic expectations for PKs and a growing sense that they are “well-known but unknown.”

The progression continues as these false expectations often lead to double standards. For example, Piper recalls a time when he was strongly rebuked by a church member for doing the same thing for which two other non-PKs were not corrected. The underlying belief is that the *pastor's* kid should be different: more holy, less inclined to youthful immaturity, and generally uninterested in the things of the world. Such double standards are often a catalyst for hypocrisy — a temptation to which PKs are particularly susceptible. “This kind of multiple standard causes PKs to focus on the wrong things. We begin to worry about pleasing people. Or we begin to resent them. It runs the risk of casting God in the same light as the crotchety old woman who’s always griping about our baggy pants, shaggy hair, and thumping bass” (51). What, then, do PKs need? While agreeing that obedience to God is important, Piper implores: “We need an extra measure of grace to overcome the lack of grace we find in so many other areas of life” (51).

Yet, not only do PKs need other church members to extend grace, they also need their parents to exhibit grace by refusing to be those who “present themselves as the flawless heroes they can never be (for us or the church) instead of the flawed, idiosyncratic, weird, sinful people they really are” (78). Pastor’s homes must be places where both parents are leading by example in confessing their sins, admitting mistakes, and demonstrating a

readiness to ask for and extend authentic forgiveness. Accordingly, the pastor must never indicate to his children — explicitly or implicitly — that his job security is tied to his children’s behavior (86). A gracious parent cares about his child more than his role as pastor (97-102).

Despite the many warnings and admonitions, Piper seeks to balance what appears to be a generally negative appraisal of PK life with positive reflections on the benefits of growing up as a PK. PKs enjoy the privilege of regular exposure to Scripture and theology, and they have the opportunity to observe parents who are devoted to serving the church. These kinds of privileges can help PKs prepare for future ministry.

Piper’s exposure of the temptations lurking within the pastor’s heart is a most welcome invasion. I found myself thoroughly rebuked, admonished, exhorted, and warned as I read this book. I am grateful for Piper’s willingness to draw from the hardships he endured as a PK to encourage other PKs, warn pastors, and instruct the church.

Yet, I fear that this book could serve to enflame a spirit of emotional entitlement among PKs if it is not read with the same grace from PKs that Piper requires of the church and her pastors. Piper often states that the pressures and struggles of a PK are unique. I do not doubt this claim. And Piper is also careful to warn PKs that playing the “victim card” is unacceptable (129-130). But the ratio between church-directed admonition and instruction aimed at PKs definitely slants in one primary direction: toward the church and pastor.

While I agree that many church members and pastors need to wake up to the way we think about and relate to PKs, I wonder if such a strong emphasis on the failures of the church and pastor-dads, coupled with the constant reminder that PKs endure a unique class of difficulty will prove healthy for PKs. Time will tell. Nevertheless, despite this weakness, I commend this book, especially to pastors and church members. We need to hear a pointed word from a PK who knows what it’s like to persevere

through the trials of pastoral life and come through the experience still loving Jesus. And that is something for which the church and her pastors can hope for all their children.

DEREK J. BROWN, PH.D.

Pastoral Assistant

Grace Bible Fellowship of Silicon Valley

Sunnyvale, California