

What people are saying about ...

## spiritual parenting

“*Spiritual Parenting* paints a marvelous portrait of the environment God wants us to have in our Christian homes. Dr. Anthony has masterfully woven Biblical truth and personal experience together in a way that will instruct and inspire any parent who reads. I believe this is the most comprehensive description of a God-centered home in print today. It’s not about techniques (though there are some great ones in the book), but about a mind-set. Read this book, and you will change who you are as a family, not merely what you do. Trust me—when you finish, you will know what being a spiritual parent looks like!”

**Larry Fowler**, executive director  
of Global Training, Awana

“With refreshing honesty, Michelle Anthony shares her wisdom about parenting from a perspective *everyone* can relate to. While keeping a real-world perspective, she weaves a picture of how we can guide our children not just to be ‘good’ kids, but to be active and vital members of the family of God. Her own life lessons give you a sense of vision for what your parenting can become. Her honest and transparent illustrations will inspire you to excel in your role as a mom or a dad.”

**Ken Canfield, PhD**, executive director, Boone  
Center for the Family, Pepperdine University

“There is no doubt in my mind that this book will help you be a more effective parent and bring you an abundance of practical help. Michelle Anthony is one of America’s premier leaders in the field of family and parenting. *Spiritual Parenting* is one of the best books I have ever read on energizing your family’s spiritual life as well as presenting a philosophy of parenting worth living out. It will make a legacy of difference in your parenting.”

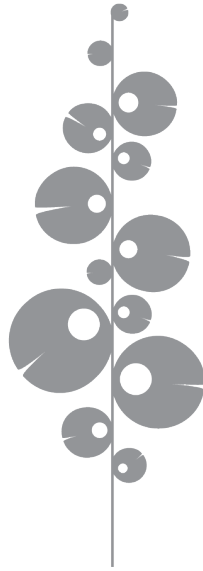
**Jim Burns, PhD**, president of HomeWord  
and author of *Creating an Intimate  
Marriage* and *Confident Parenting*

“My thoughts as I read *Spiritual Parenting*: ‘Wow! I never thought of it like that! That actually sounds *doable*.’ Michelle Anthony has written a biblical, honest, encouraging, complete work that is different from any other Christian parenting book I’ve read. Generations can be changed by the power of God through the principles in this book.”

**Rob Biagi**, recording artist

“How I wish I had this amazing, insightful book long before my first day of parenting! Michelle’s unique perspectives and practical wisdom have encouraged, challenged, and inspired me in the immensely important task and privilege of raising my children to truly know and love the living God. I believe millions of families and churches will be powerfully affected by this book! It is an absolute must-read for Christian parents!”

**Jana Alayra**, Christian praise and  
worship recording artist for children



# spiritual parenting

an awakening for  
today's families

michelle anthony

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*transforming lives together*

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To my children: Chantel and Brendon.

You are the reason I want to  
be a spiritual parent!

Thank you for letting me tell "your  
stories" and for sharing your lives;

It is a privilege to be your mom.

I thank God for you everyday!

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# 1

## In the Path of the Divine *Beyond Managing Behavior*

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Too much of our time is spent trying to chart God on a grid, and too little is spent allowing our hearts to feel awe. By reducing Christian spirituality to formula, we deprive our hearts of wonder.

*Donald Miller<sup>1</sup>*

### In the Path of the Divine

As a young parent, I wanted to do a good job raising my children. Well, if I'm honest, I wanted to do a perfect job! I hated to fail, and I definitely didn't want to fail at this. I wanted people to look at my kids in amazement and think, "Wow, what a magnificent mother!" I became overwhelmed with trying to please everyone with my parenting. It was exhausting.

Both my mother and my mother-in-law were stay-at-home moms in the 1950s and '60s. They were like Mary Poppins: practically perfect in every way! Who can compete with that legacy? I wanted them to think I was cutting it with their grandchildren. But it didn't stop there. I'd be at a church event, and I'd want the ladies at my table to think I had it together so they wouldn't see how scared I felt. I was even beginning to care what the grocery clerk—a perfect stranger!—thought of me as a parent.

Of course, part of that was my pride, but another part was that I didn't want to do the parenting thing wrong, or badly—or even worse, to not do enough. I loved my children, and I wanted the best for them.

I have a close friend who one day joked, half-seriously, that she was setting aside a little money every month while her kids were little, so that someday they could pay for counseling (because of the dysfunction she was surely imposing on them)! Now, while we may laugh at her thought process, we also may understand how my friend felt. In that statement she was identifying how important her role as a parent truly was, for better or for worse, to her children's well-being for their entire lives.

In this book we will explore what it means to seek God as our primary audience—to please Him alone with our parenting and seek Him alone for the strength and power to do so. Spiritual parenting is not perfect parenting—it's parenting from a spiritual perspective with eternity in mind. It's a way of parenting that declares, "I want to parent the child or children that God gave me in such a way that I first honor God, and then second, create the best environment to put my children in the path of the Divine."



What does it mean to put my child in the path of the Divine? Only God is divine. His divinity is the essence of His holiness, which ultimately transforms each of us. Through Jesus and His work on the cross, God transfers His holiness to me. Wow! What an incredible thought! This transaction takes place by God's grace and through my faith, of course, but how it actually happens is a mystery.

As spiritual parents, we enlist ourselves as students of our children . . . to learn about them specifically as the children God has entrusted to us. Not only do I need to learn how to rely on God (since His Word makes it clear that He alone is the one who changes hearts), but I also need to learn how my children are fearfully and wonderfully made in order to best guide them on the path that God has designed specifically for each one. It's not about adopting a "parenting style" that works for all my children, because I will need to adapt my parenting to the *uniqueness* of each child (while still retaining my authority and values).

## Parenting Crisis 101

I remember having a crisis of parenthood one day when my daughter was only four. God was about to teach me a powerful lesson. He wanted me to learn some unique facets of my daughter's temperament while revealing to me how much I needed His help in order to shape her heart toward Him.

She was in her room playing with something. I told her to clean it up so that we could have lunch. She came out of her room, defiant, and started talking back to me. Soon we had entered into an epic battle of the wills. I was telling her to do something, and she wasn't doing it. She was also very verbal in her resistance. It was one of those moments when I felt I needed to win—but I didn't know how.

So I told her, “You need to go to your room right now to have a time-out, because you are not obeying me.”

She took an unyielding stance. Her body language said, *I’m not going, and what are you going to do about it?*

I repeated myself firmly: “You need to go to your room right now. You need to obey your mommy.”

And then she looked at me and said, “No. I don’t have to do what you say because you’re only *third* in charge.” She went on to explain that first God was in charge, then Daddy, and *then* me. I knew then that we were going to have our hands full with this one! She was strong, opinionated, passionate, and articulate. So I did what any rational woman would do in my situation—I called “second in charge.”

On the phone with my husband (even though he was at work), I sobbed about how horrible *his* four-year-old daughter was being to me. I was tattling. He listened patiently and then gently said, “Honey, she’s four. You’re the adult.”

She finally went to her room—screaming and crying. *I* was screaming and crying. I felt like a total failure as a mom. A four-year-old had gotten me to lose my cool and behave at her level. I decided it was time to talk to “first in charge.” I prayed. I told God I felt defeated as a parent. I didn’t feel equipped for this. And I didn’t know how I’d do it differently if this happened again—and I knew it would.

## Parenting “Aha!”

Since God’s Word makes it clear that He alone is divine and He alone changes hearts, I knew I needed Him to help me parent differently. I

knew I would have to parent with His goal in mind if I was going to be successful. Pleasing Him became my only focus that day. Nothing else mattered.

This was the first truth I began to cling to in my desire to be a spiritual parent. This truth revealed to me that *it was not my job to merely control my child's behavior and by doing so somehow create a spiritual life for him or her*. This was a real “Aha” for me. Nowhere in the Bible does God ask me to spend my days managing the deeds and actions of my child. Nowhere in Scripture am I warned that if I don't “control” my child's behavior, horrible things will happen.

However, I have oftentimes assumed this role—and sometimes pursued it as an end in itself. After all, who doesn't want children who behave beautifully at all times? For years I had naively assumed that as Christian parents we simply have babies, raise them in a Christian home, and then do our best as parents. We expose them to Christ and to God's Word, we put them in the community of other believers, and then eventually ... don't they just choose to follow Him?

### Igniting a Transforming Faith

That day was a defining moment in my role as a spiritual parent, because I didn't feel prepared to deal with my daughter's strong will, and I certainly didn't feel equipped to pass on my faith to either of my children. It was one thing for me to make sure that I taught them Bible stories and took them to church on Sunday mornings. I felt confident that I could teach them good morals and values and could for the most part keep them away from the dangers of this world. I even knew I could intentionally expose them to godly people and

benevolent causes. But if my job was not to merely control my children's behavior in these matters, then what was it?

I realized that my goal was much more grand than I had imagined—much more compelling. My goal was to pass on a vibrant and transforming faith, the kind of faith in which:

- My children would *know* and *hear* God's voice, discerning it from all others.
- They would *desire* to obey Him when they heard His voice.
- They would *obey* Him not in their own power, but in the power of the Holy Spirit.

One question still lingered. It haunted me in my depths. How would I pattern my parenting in such a way that these things I knew were essential would ignite in my children vibrant, spiritually transforming faith?

I longed for a place where I could talk about these things and be enlightened and equipped. This book is birthed out of that longing. Here you'll read some of my own experiences and how God's Word and Spirit shaped my thinking and actions while I raised my children. We'll ask questions such as, "At the end of the day, how can we feel confident that we invested in what *really matters most*? In fact, what does 'matter most' mean in our constantly changing, pressurized world?"

Whether we are single parents or part of a blended or traditional parenting model, the most significant part of our lives—and our children's lives—is our spiritual health. In fact, researcher George

Barna once stated that every dimension of a person's life experience hinges on his or her moral and spiritual condition.<sup>2</sup> Think about it: What you believe and where you aim your heart determines the direction and outcome of your entire life for eternity. Read it again: *What you believe and where you aim your heart determines the direction and outcome of your entire life for eternity.* Eternity is at stake.

Jesus said our purpose as God's people is to love Him with our whole life and to love others in every way we can think of (Luke 10:27). Furthermore, our purpose as parents is to teach our children about the awe-inspiring wonder of who God is, how to have a relationship with Him, and what it looks like to live our lives for Him and through Him. These are the purposes we'll aim for in this book.

### In the World but Not of It

As a young mom I was putting all of my efforts into shielding my children from this world, keeping them from wanting or desiring the things of the world, whether it be a movie I didn't want them to watch or a bad word I didn't want them to say. As they got older, I focused on making sure they weren't taking drugs or having sex before marriage. I was spending far too much energy on keeping them from the things I deemed harmful or sinful (essentially doing my best to control their behavior) because I was scared.

Oftentimes parents, recognizing the evil in the world, determine to take their child out of it completely. They say, "I'm going to pull them in close. I'm going to protect them from immorality. If I do this, the world won't negatively affect them." So they hold their children really, really close and really, really tight in an attempt to shield them from what is threatening.

Some other parents say, “You know what, my kids are eventually going to need to be toughened up by the world.” And these parents simply push their children into it, almost like throwing a child into the deep end of the pool and saying, “They’ll learn how to swim eventually.” These parents often rationalize this approach by their own journey. One father told me, “I’m not sure what the big deal is with raising kids. I was practically raised by wolves, and I turned out okay—and here I am back in church. I have a good life now. It all evens out eventually, right?”

Neither of these extremes is biblical. The Christian life calls us to be *in* the world but not *of* it. Yes, in the one extreme our children are not, in all probability, “of” the world. Certainly, they don’t bear the stench of the world as much as their counterparts—but as we attempt to separate them from it, they are not “in” it either. And the other extreme? Well, they’re probably so much “in” it that they do bear the marks of sin. The stench of the world can overwhelm their spiritual vitality.

Spiritual parenting doesn’t ignore the world’s depravity. But spiritual parenting also does not say, “Hunker down and hide—merely endure it to the end. Because the world is so evil, I don’t want any part of it.” Rather, I propose that spiritual parenting proclaims, “I’m going to stand here in the midst of it all. I’m going to live *in* the world because God has placed me here in it for this time. I do this, and yet I recognize that we are *aliens*, as the apostle Peter states. This world is not my home. It never will be. I will never feel completely comfortable here. I will never feel that I truly fit in. So while I’m here, I’m not going to be *of* it.” This is where spiritual parenting becomes important. It determines, through

God's help, how we will live productive and spiritual lives here and yet not become comfortable in the world around us. Really, this dependence on God and His Spirit is at the heart of being a spiritual parent.

When I was first wrestling with this concept, I was afraid. I felt there was absolutely no way I could do that. I didn't feel I could expose my children to this world without the sin and stain of this world damaging them in horrific ways. It was such a natural reaction to want to protect them from that.

## How We Define Ourselves

Maybe some of you are like me. Raised in a Christian home, I often felt defined by the things that I *didn't* do. To *not* smoke, *not* drink, *not* swear, *not* chew, and *not* go with boys who do (such a helpful little rhyme) was how I defined myself for the most part. But what would it look like if we parented a generation of young people to define themselves by what they *did* do? What if they were defined by their actions of justice and mercy, forgiveness and love, strength and courage, generosity and humility and faithfulness? What if they were a generation who lived in the world and still proclaimed these things by their very lives?

The danger in merely focusing on our children's outward behavior without the inner transformation is that sometimes our children will align their behavior to our mandates to please us or receive approval. They can end up doing or not doing these things without true spiritual healing inside. Without this supernatural transformation, we may have moral or obedient children, but we don't necessarily have spiritual children.

Before long, after the external motivations for obedient behavior are eliminated, our children will grow up and determine life for themselves. Either they will have been transformed by God's Spirit, they will have chosen to live sinfully without any desire to change, or they will hide their sin and live a double life. But a spiritual life is one that is transformed and out of hiding.

### Strangely Dim

Now what if we as spiritual parents agreed to do something different than merely manage our children's behavior? *What if we put our energy toward setting our children in the path of the Divine and watching them fall in love with Jesus?* What a remarkable difference this would make! One option warns, "Don't fall in love with the world," while the other option offers, "Fall in love with Jesus, and the world will look less attractive."

When I was little I used to sing a song in church, and I have come to understand these words in richer and more meaningful ways during my adult life:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in His wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of His glory and grace.*<sup>3</sup>

I have realized how profound these words are in my life and in the lives of my children. The song doesn't direct me to turn away from the world, but rather to turn to Jesus. Just as the author of Hebrews calls us to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of



our faith” (Heb. 12:2), the charge is to look to *Jesus*. When I do this, the world suddenly grows dim in its allure, and I begin to love it less as I love Jesus more.

## Living Testaments

What better way to have our children fall in love with Jesus than for us to be living testimonies of what that means? One thing is true in spiritual parenting: *You can't give away something you don't have!*

Let me illustrate this: I have been rock climbing before, and I really enjoyed it. I did a good job at following directions, but I am certainly a novice on the ropes. Now, if I were to offer to take you rock climbing on one of the highest gorges in the world and be your instructor, I can pretty much guarantee that you wouldn't be willing to do that. You would wisely recognize that I can't teach you to do something that I don't understand the fundamentals of myself. Yet often the mind-set we embrace as parents is based on our desire for our children to have a more vibrant spiritual relationship with Christ than we ourselves are currently experiencing.

Think about it. We want so much for our children. We want them to have a better education than we did. We want them to have better opportunities. We want them to have life a little easier, with less struggle or pain. In general, we want them to have *more* than we had. We are guilty even of sometimes wanting them to have a more genuine spiritual life than we do. But the fact is that we are living examples of what is real, and unfortunately, we can't give away something we don't possess.

So spiritual parenting reminds me that it's not my job to merely control my children's behavior, but rather it is my job to model with

authenticity *what I have* in my relationship with God through Christ. And hopefully what I have is worth passing on to the next generation.

### Natural Flow of Life

Our children hunger to see the reality of who God is in the natural flow of our lives—when we’re getting up, when we’re sitting down, when we’re on a journey, when we’re putting them to bed. It’s not that the formalized methodology is bad, because it definitely has a place. It’s just that it’s not *best* apart from a role model. Our children need to see that faith matters, that it’s relevant to our daily situations, that it’s real. We need to model how our lives are spiritual in every decision, erasing the divide between sacred and secular. They need to witness firsthand that our faith is not merely something we compartmentalize when it’s convenient to do so.

Some of my best moments of sharing the reality of God with my children were ones I didn’t plan. They just happened. There were days when money was tight and we prayed for God to provide. Then we waited. And without our expecting it, a refund check from the insurance company arrived in the mail. There were times when we were held up from traveling somewhere because a neighbor needed our assistance, only to find that we were spared from an accident on the highway that occurred just moments before.

Other days were filled with trips to the zoo, where my son was so amazed by the diversity of the animals that he asked me, “Who thought of that?” Questions about why there is a rainbow in the sky after it rains, what the story of the Bible is, where God lives, where people go when they die, why we give money at church, why we pray or sing or worship—all of these become natural teachable moments

of sharing our faith with our children when we generously live it in front of them.

### Behavior as a By-product

In order to pass on our faith to our children, we need to understand what biblical faith is and how it is connected to action. We'll deal with this at length in chapter 2, but for now let me point to what James writes in the Bible about faith. He alerts us that our faith without works is dead (James 2:14–26)—as lifeless as a body without the spirit inside it. It's simply dead. So faith in our lives and in our children's lives must have this expression of obedience for it to be alive. Perhaps the fullest definition of faith comes from its meaning in the original Greek. The word *pistos* embodies three things: possessing a *firm conviction*, making a *personal surrender*, and demonstrating the *corresponding conduct*.

Now remember that one of the nonnegotiables for spiritual parenting is that it's not my responsibility to control my child's behavior. However, this definition of faith supports that when one possesses a firm conviction and a personal surrender, then the corresponding behavior, inspired by the prior two, will follow. Wow! *This* is where behavior comes in.

Too often we merely focus on the “corresponding behavior” part, missing the point that it is a by-product. This by-product is the outcome of a *firm conviction* (which is something we probably most intuitively know about faith), but it's also from a posture of *personal surrender*. This aspect of surrender is something we don't always acknowledge in our own lives, let alone teach to our children. In simple terms, faith is based on a strong belief from a heart of self surrender.

Thus, behavior isn't something we simply manage—otherwise our Christianity is nothing more than what Dallas Willard refers to as “sin management.”<sup>4</sup> How compelling is that? Rather, when we see our behavior and that of our children as a by-product of genuine faith, we begin to understand what it means to pursue a spiritual life and spiritual parenting.

### Cultivating Environments

Faith is supernatural. I am not capable of creating it in another person. I can give you all the information about something, and you can still not believe or experience an unwavering conviction. We can probably all think of someone who has been exposed to the truth of Scripture and of God and yet still doesn't believe. It takes a supernatural transformation. Just as belief and trust that produce faith in a person's life are a supernatural transaction, the behavior and action that align with faith need to flow supernaturally. When we try to manufacture this or impose it on others, they become resistant or even rebellious.

Believe it or not, this is where freedom comes in. As we put our children in proximity to God, to fall in love with Jesus, the Holy Spirit is the one who makes their actions congruent with their belief. He's the one who causes the process of their hearts to become more and more like Jesus'. This is true transformation. As their faith is vibrant, their actions become vibrant. So often our temptation as parents is to spend all of our time and energy striving to fix their behavior—a process that is not our responsibility.

What is our job then? The joy of parenting can be spent on cultivating environments for our children's faith to grow, teaching

them how to cultivate a love relationship with Jesus as we cultivate our own, living our lives authentically in front of them so that they become eyewitnesses to our own transformation.

As a young teenager, I heard my dad get up early every morning to go downstairs. I never heard the TV or heard busyness in the kitchen, but one day I saw what he had been doing down there every morning. He was kneeling, praying, and reading God's Word. I can't remember my dad ever telling me I "should" read my Bible, but it was modeled for me quietly and consistently—and that was captivating to me. Understanding our part in this process of spiritual parenting is foundational for us before we embark on the rest of this book.

## Discovering My Role as a Parent

At its core, then, *Spiritual Parenting* is not merely a book on "how to parent." It's far more than that. It's a book about how to view your *role* as a spiritually minded parent, the God-given role that is yours alone. Essentially, it asks the question, "What is my end goal in raising each of the children God has entrusted to me, and then how will I parent them with that end in mind?"

With this perspective, I can take my focus off of a series of day-to-day events and set it on the bigger picture of passing on my faith. Each moment of every day becomes an opportunity to parent toward my God-given goal. I parent in a way that does not simply *spend* my hours but also allows me to *invest* my days toward eternity.

This book is designed to inspire you—to awaken you, if you will, toward a greater perspective about the spiritual role of parenting. As you see that role revealed and as the Holy Spirit works through that

insight, then God will give you the guidance to apply these truths to specific situations that come up in your home. I hope the question, “Who does God require me to be as a parent, and how will I create environments in my home for Him to be at work in the unique children that He has entrusted to me?” will resonate over and over in your heart as you read these pages.

Our goal as parents should be to endeavor to pass down our faith to the next generation in such a way that they will be able to pass down their faith to the following generation in our absence. Someday we won't be here, and all that will remain is that which is eternal—those things that we have successfully transferred to our children, and our children's children, so that faith will endure to all generations.