

Growing Pains, by Randall Balmer

reviewed by [James Calvin Schaap](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

We have friends who decided to release their children from all obligations to attend Sunday worship when those children turned 18. Their reasoning is self-evident: What's required of each and every believing soul is willed commitment, not social (or parental) obligation. Once their children reached what some old creeds call "the age of discretion," they were, quite literally, on their own.

Many years have passed since those children reached 18, and I've never asked our friends how they would evaluate that decision today. My guess is that they'd shake their heads, shrug their shoulders and, like most believers with adult children, say that, well, it worked out, sort of.

Christian bookstores carry at least as many "how-tos" on rearing kids in the Christian faith as they do on keeping marriages together. The reason for this abundance is summed up by an old theological premise: God has no grandchildren. Parents cannot pass along faith as easily as they do the shape of their toenails and tongues.

Randall Balmer's short book of essays is, among other things, a primer in the difficulty believing parents have faced since Adam and Eve took on Cain and Abel. The book indicts the restrictive fundamentalism of the '50s and '60s, when Balmer grew up in the looming shadow of a preacher/father who appeared far more consecrated to the first office than to the second.

"The path of faith is not tidy," Balmer asserts, in reference to the meanderings of his own pilgrimage. But as he admits, his father would have disagreed defiantly, drawing his metaphors from more traditional evangelical sources--such as the image of "the straight-and-narrow way."

Freud wasn't all wrong, of course. Balmer had to dispatch the old man before he could find room for himself. And he did. Perhaps the most revealing anecdote of the book is the story of Clarence R. Balmer's conducting of the marriage of his divorced son to a second wife, also divorced--the only such "second marriage" his father ever blessed in his 40-year ministry.

But there's more to that story. Clarence Balmer grew up--as his son beautifully describes--as a Depression-era Nebraska farm boy, the sixth child of parents who broke up when Clarence's father went to Oregon to look for work and never returned. In other words, the Reverend Balmer's austere antagonism toward divorce was not something he'd simply gleaned from some resolute fundamentalist theologian. He'd grown up himself in the tangled emotional mess of divorce.

I found myself attracted to Clarence Balmer, though not because I share his absoluteness or because he suffered unjustly at the hands of his son. I was attracted to him, in part, because the issue which unites most of these valiantly autobiographical essays seems still not quite tucked away in the life and heart of his son. Mystery abounds as abundantly as the grace Balmer has less trouble locating.

I found myself believing the tale and not the teller. I'm not convinced by the subtitle: *Learning to Love My Father's Faith*. I'm not convinced that the antipathy of some essays is balanced or negotiated away by the endearing eulogies also included in the book. I'm not sure all the issues that Growing Pains raises have been finally put to rest for the author. But then, are they ever for any of us?