

Road Trip

*By the Rev. Tim Schenck
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Driving a mini-van is not cool. I've tried everything to enhance my image while behind the wheel but nothing works. Sleek sunglasses, blasting Led Zeppelin on the stereo, peeling out. No matter what I do, I still look more like a soccer mom than a NASCAR dad.

For many auto enthusiasts, you are what you drive. So tooling around town in a muscle car or a BMW or a pickup truck is an extension of your personality. I don't fully buy this but what I drive is certainly an extension of my stage in life. And I can just imagine the look Bryna would shoot me if I announced I was getting myself a sporty new two-seater. It's not happening. But 15 years from now? Look out.

My first car was a bright red 1980 Volkswagen Rabbit. Now, that was a thing of beauty. A souped-up, four-speed stick shift with black vinyl seats and no air conditioning. Climate control meant rolling down all the windows and driving fast. My friends and I would cram into that thing like clowns at a circus and speed all over the place. If your first car is the ultimate symbol of freedom, the mini-van is the ultimate symbol of domestic imprisonment. "Fully-loaded" used to mean a sunroof, AC, and a hot stereo; now it means 16 cup holders and a DVD player. And, let's face it; you can't go out cruising in a Honda Odyssey. Well, you could, but it would be called driving the car pool.

Despite all the technological advances, families still do take long car trips during summer vacations. This remains a staple of the American experience whether it's to the Grand Canyon, or Grandma's house, or just because you view sitting in traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike as quality family time.

The biggest difference between road trips as a kid and a road trip *with* kids is the whole safety thing. My brother and I used to stretch out in the back of the sedan with nary a seatbelt, booster seat, or side-impact air bag to be found. The only road rage we encountered was the result of

Matt having the nerve to place a finger on my side of the back seat. Now the kids are strapped into their car seats, immobilized. And instead of playing the license plate game, they're watching *Shrek* until their eyes glaze over. Distances aren't measured in miles but in movies. "Buckle up, boys, this is a three movie trip."

In those brief unplugged moments along the way, car travel lends itself to conversation. A long car ride is the perfect opportunity to catch up with a spouse or a child. Parents of teenagers tell me the car is the perfect place to have important talks with their kids. Mostly because they're trapped. And when I'm not refereeing disputes and threatening to "turn this car right around," family trips are great opportunities for quality time with our boys.

One positive change in family travel is the advent of the EZ Pass. When we lived in Baltimore and Bryna's family lived in New York, we regularly traveled up there for visits and spent plenty of time in toll lines. We had the added challenge of an infant son who invariably woke up from a nap whenever the car stopped. After a few trips we decided to investigate the then new EZ Pass system that allows cars to zip right through tolls. What a difference! I admit that I felt special driving past long toll lines, like I had some secret VIP privileges. I might have felt slightly guilty the first time but I got over it pretty quickly. And since Bryna dealt with the bill whenever it arrived, it was like all the tolls were suddenly free.

Approaching God is a bit like having EZ Pass. God is always inviting, always encouraging us into a deeper relationship. And God always gives us access to this relationship through prayer, through Scripture, and through faith in Jesus. True, we often create our own "toll booths" that keep us from the love of God. But, much like toll booths, they are merely human structures. If we allow God more fully into our lives, these toll booths can be wiped away and the road toward God opened once again.

I admit that a mini-van does make long car trips more comfortable. Everyone has room to spread out even though whoever's in the passenger seat has to act like a contortionist whenever the kids demand snacks in between movie showings. Maybe I'll look into putting racing stripes on the sides.