

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

FA12

CHILDREN FROM CHRISTIAN HOMES: IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF IT

This is the first of a series of articles which will focus on the biblical principles and practical strategies and issues faced by Christian parents bringing up children against the background of the mindset and environment created by an increasingly secular society.

The challenges facing every Christian home have always been immense. The pressures bearing down upon those being raised to follow the Lord Jesus Christ have always been significant. The purposes of this article are to outline the particular aspects of 21st century western culture which seek to shape our children and adolescents, and then to propose an overall approach by which Christian parents can respond to these challenges.

In the world: the cultural 'norm'

Before looking at the detail it may be helpful to note what is now the 'given' or the 'norm' in our culture – the prevailing thought-pattern which is so strong that to question it is seen by our culture as being incredible. I want to suggest that the norm of our culture is the worship of the self. In one sense self-worship has always been with us, since it lies at the heart of sin. Yet it has uniquely modern out-workings.

- The individual self, enlightened by information, is the source and judge of real knowledge and behaviour
- Self-fulfilment is the highest goal in life
- Personal feelings are the ultimate court of appeal in any dispute
- Religious satisfaction is defined in terms of personal comfort and self-realisation

The extent and acceptance of this modern idolatry has been summed up by a leading sociologist who heads up the National Study of Youth and Religion in the US. He notes that the '...assumptions [of] and commitments [to this 'norm'] infuse every level of the educational system; practices of courtship, marriage, family life, and divorce; some public social programs; key cultural elements of the economy, such as the advertising industry and the mass media, entertainment, and recreation;

the health care sector and public health system; very many elements of religion; and, increasingly, the justice system and government itself.¹ On this matter, what is true in America is very much the case in the rest of the western world.

In the world: cultural trends

Recent research by the Office for National Statistics revealed changes in the most popular names for boys and girls. Whereas in 1950 Mary was the first choice for girls, in 2010 the name most chosen is Olivia. For boys, in 1950 it was Michael, but in 2010 it is Jack. Language also reflects the fact that ‘the times they are a’ changin’. The word ‘book’ can now describe more than a piece of literature. According to an A to Z of teen terms the word ‘book’ is ‘an adjective to describe something that’s really cool. That’s because it’s the first option given in predictive text when typing “c o o l”.’²

Times change, trends develop and nowhere is this more the case than with the young in our society. When I studied for a post-graduate certificate in education in the early 1970s part of our training alerted us to the issues we might find in the lives of the youngsters we were going to teach. I imagine anyone undergoing such training today would have a very different set of information to deal with, most of it of a deeply distressing nature. There has been a veritable explosion of childhood pathologies. A brief perusal of popular and semi-academic book titles illustrates the tragedy affecting the young in our 21st century western culture: *Children at Risk*, *Video Violence and Children*, *Saving Childhood*, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, *The Plug-in Drug (TV, Computers and Family Life)*, *The War Against Boys*, *The Miseducation of Women*, *Toxic Childhood*, *What’s happening to our Girls?*

Most of these are written not by Christians but by secular commentators expressing growing alarm at what is happening to children in the English-speaking western world. They are based on trends in the young that are deeply concerning.

One such trend is the unexpected result of better diet among the young: the earlier onset of puberty. The impact on girls when this is allied to greater mobility through employment or family breakdown is that ‘not only are they physically sexualised earlier... emotionally they are more vulnerable than they were 20 years ago. When they used to stick with the same group of friends from nursery to secondary school, they had more support. Now they move more, and the extended family is not often around, we are seeing an increasing incidence of mental health issues.’³

Another is the damaging effect of consumerism. A range of serious medical conditions is now affecting the young, probably the best-publicised of which are eating disorders. At the same time it is alarming that suicide is on the rise among teens, alongside depression. Social commentators are now alerting the world to the damaging affects of consumerism on the immature and easily-

¹ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, ps. 174-175

² The Daily Telegraph. 3rd January 2008. The A to Z of Teen Terms.

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/7827533/Why-are-girls-reaching-puberty-younger.html>
Accessed 15.06.10.

influenced minds of children. In 2008 a report, conducted by The Children's Society, noted that: 'Rates of depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses have risen in the past two decades with one in 10 children now suffering from a diagnosable condition.'⁴

This same report concluded 'that the consumer society and failure to protect children from commercial pressures is partly to blame for deteriorating mental health among young people.'⁵

In a culture trumpeting choice as the ultimate value, the young are quite literally becoming 'stressed out.' Christian academic Tom Sisemore comments: 'The media has found a wonderful market in children and teens, and exploits their sinful desires to sell products, cleverly managing to wrestle money from the hands of disapproving parents.'⁶

A relatively recent trend is technology. According to figures on mobile phone ownership, 24% of nine-year-olds have their own phones, 51% of 10-year-olds and 94% of 12-year-olds.⁷ The wonderful gift of the internet has been harnessed to provide many children and young people with social networking. Figures here are just as startling, 49% of 8-17 year-olds having an 'online social networking profile.' The pace of change here is breath-taking. In 2008 MySpace and Bebo featured as major networking sites alongside Facebook and MSN messenger. In 2010 the main sites are Facebook and Twitter. Many say the primary reason they use these sites is to meet new friends. The worrying upshot is that 44% of teens have talked to strangers online. The negative impact on the ability of young people to learn the relational skills necessary to living in the real world is growing. Indeed the lure of this stunted form of intercourse is actually promoted. The creator of www.secondlife.com says: 'We are competing with the real world to create a better place for your mind to live.'⁸

A more long-term trend is family breakdown. At one time, concern about marital break-up used to be the preserve of the political right, but now left-wing commentators are decrying what is happening. One such, returning to the UK after a year away, noted: 'Marriage, not so long ago the institution which defined the sacred union of human beings, governed by a myriad of rights and responsibilities, has become for many a temporary arrangement and, for even more, a commitment to be postponed or even avoided.'⁹

Family breakdown contributes to a range of difficulties from poor educational achievement to addictive behaviours, as the young are left picking up the pieces of adult selfishness.

Addictive behaviours are on the increase. In 2006 a left-wing think tank produced a report with the unwelcome findings that British teenagers are among the worst-behaved in Europe with

⁴ The Times, Feb.8th 2008. Pressures of consumerism make children depressed.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Tom Sisemore, Of such is the Kingdom. Christian Focus, Ross-shire. 2000.

⁷ All statistics are from Totally Wired –a talk delivered by Matt Summerfield (Urban Saints) and Chris Curtis (a Luton Schools worker) in 2008. This is an excellent starting place to consider the issues surrounding modern technology.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The former editor of Marxism Today writing in [the Guardian](http://the-guardian.com) October 5th, 2002. The age of selfishness: rampant individualism is corroding our personal lives, politics and popular culture.

alcohol featuring significantly.¹⁰ Alcohol and drug consumption are a rising issue along with the pernicious effects of pornography. Children can be exposed to this material even when not wishing to be so, 36% of nine-19-year-olds having accidentally found themselves on a pornographic website when looking for something else.¹¹ At the same time sexually-transmitted diseases are at record levels and those infected are getting younger and younger.

Increasing concern is being voiced at the sexualisation of children, particularly girls. Playboy T-shirts designed for 11-year-olds on sale in major chain stores are just a bit of fun, aren't they? In February of this year a government report identified a 'drip-drip' exposure to sexual matters as 'distorting young people's perceptions of themselves, encouraging boys to become fixated on being macho and dominant, while girls in turn presented themselves as sexually-available and permissive.'¹²

Even voices from inside an industry that has been part of fuelling this tragedy are now being raised. In August this year, Mike Stock (of Stock, Aitken and Waterman – remember Pete Waterman in the early editions of Pop Idol?), who was behind the success of artists, including Kylie Minogue, declared: 'Ninety-nine per cent of the charts is R'n'B and 99 per cent of that is soft pornography.'¹³ No surprise that Britain is in the unenviable position of being top of the teen pregnancy 'chart' in Europe.¹⁴

The role of the media in the whole sorry saga is probably best illustrated by the highly popular and seemingly innocuous Tracy Beaker series on CBBC. The way adults are presented as well-meaning, but in the end hopeless, helpers in the various crises besetting poor Tracy gives a clear signal to the young: trust your peers rather than these inept adults.

Of course, adults have often played second fiddle to children in older literature, but the difference is that children's stories in the past were often set in magical fantasy worlds unrelated to their own, and so were safe places in which to deal with fear. Even when this was not the case, the world of Enid Blyton is a far cry from the regular diet of fractured relationships, depression and sexual danger portrayed in some modern children's literature.

There is also growing concern over the impact on the genders of the cultural 'norm.' Besides the sexualisation of girls through the consumer-led media, there are also the messages from modern educational practice.¹⁵ In the vast majority of schools – whether state or independent – the

¹⁰ Daily Telegraph, 2nd November 2006. Britain's youths 'the worst behaved in Europe'.

¹¹ http://www.care.org.uk/Articles/110165/CARE/Care_Services/Internet_Misuse/Information_and_Advice/What_is_Pornography.aspx Accessed 18.10.10.

¹² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8537734.stm> Accessed 26.02.10.

¹³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/7938026/Children-being-sexualised-by-pop-music-porn-claims-Mike-Stock.html> Accessed 25.08.10.

¹⁴ From 2000 to 2007, there have been 17,626 pregnancies among under-15s - six every day. There were 268 pregnancies of 12 year-old girls, 2,527 of 13 year-olds, 14,777 of 14 year-olds and 45,861 of 15 year-olds. Source <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/7186620/Primary-schoolgirls-getting-pregnant-aged-10.html> Accessed 25.02.10.

¹⁵ The influence of feminism is but one of a group of things that go towards the creation of a worldview that is essentially antagonistic towards Christian values such as the family in educational theory and practice.

themes of early feminism hold sway. Girls are taught that 'independence and career are what are most important to a girl; that marriage, children and family are just so much domestic drudgery.'¹⁶

There is also what has been termed the feminisation of education.¹⁷ The introduction of learning methods which favour girls has led to a growing achievement gap between boys and girls. From 1987-2000, girls outperformed boys by 20%, whereas in the previous 15 years there had been parity.¹⁸ As a result: 'Boys dominate among the excluded, the remedial classes, the special needs classes and the temporarily excluded.'¹⁹

The answers proposed by those who influence our culture vary. From an increasing number, wisdom is being expressed. World-wide research has established connections between TV and computer time and problems such as obesity, high cholesterol and blood pressure, inattentiveness, declining aptitude in maths and reading, sleep disorders and autism.²⁰ As a result, the government has been urged to limit TV time.²¹

A book called *Nurtureshock* has popularised research which demonstrates that the culture of praise underlying the self-esteem movement has damaged rather than enhanced children's attitudes and performance.²² At least one member of the psychiatric profession has recently gone on record challenging the received wisdom that children are innately good (which has its origins in the writings of philosophers such as Rousseau). This challenge to the supposed established wisdom brings us one step nearer to the biblical teaching of original sin.²³

However, blind dogma is still being pursued in many areas. A Freedom of Information Act request revealed that at least 58,000 15-year-olds were on the pill in 2009 – more than double the number in 1999 – while a staggering 1,000 11-year-olds were also prescribed it.²⁴ The same Home Office Report on Child Sexualisation which encouragingly expressed concerns about this matter had

¹⁶ James Tooley, *The Miseducation of Women*, Continuum, London, 2002.

¹⁷ For more on this see James Tooley and a survey for 4 leading universities on gender –based learning reported in *The Times* April 9 1999.

¹⁸ For parents interested in pursuing this issue further see John Marks, *Girls know better*, Civitas, London, 2001.

¹⁹ The Leading Lads Survey quoted in Melanie Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes*, Little Brown, London, 1996.

²⁰ See Marie Wynne, *The Plug-in Drug*, Penguin, London, 2002.

²¹ France banned TV programmes aimed at under-threes in 2008.

²² A meta-analysis of 150 praise-studies by Stanford University in 2002 found that praised students become risk-averse, try less and are less self-motivated. In the same vein a study of 'Emotional Intelligence' showed that convicted prisoners had higher 'EQ' than the rest of the population. Reported in http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/article7005175.ece Accessed 29.01.10.

The research behind the article was published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1998 Vol. 75, No. 1, 33-52 Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance. A less technical summary and development of this can be found in *The Best of Educational Leadership 2007-2008 Summer 2008 Volume 65 Pages 34-39 The Perils and Promises of Praise*.

More general articles on concerns about self-esteem can be referenced at <http://www.illinoisloop.org/selfesteem.html>

²³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1316391/Wicked-children-inadequate-parents-Are-children-born-bad.html#ixzz1113iS35b> Accessed 30.09.10. In the original New York Times article Dr. Friedman says that his professional experience of dealing with parents with unruly children has led him to question the commonly accepted mantra that, 'there is no such thing as a bad person, just a sick one.'

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/13/health/13mind.html> Accessed 04.12.10.

²⁴ Source - the General Practice Research Database. Reported in <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/7921105/Huge-rise-in-11-year-olds-on-the-pill.html> Accessed 07.08.10.

among its proposals that Personal, Social, and Health education along with Sex and Relationships education are made compulsory in schools. It is hard to break from the rhetoric which sees reason as king, where all that is needed is to 'empower' the young with 'right' information so that they make the 'right' choices.

To sum this up, our current culture offers children a small world view constrained by the false hope of happiness through material things, or greater contentment through raised self-esteem expressed through gender 'rights,' or the rescue of planet earth as the most worthy cause to live for. Such false gospels act like astringents on the soul of the young. Relationships, which are a mark of God's image, are undermined and attacked through many of the applications of modern technologies and pseudo-psychologies.

But not of the world: responses

Faced with such grim statistics and so long a catalogue of concerns, how should Christian parents respond? Thankfully, it must be noted, many youngsters from Christian homes have been preserved in the midst of all this, much as Daniel and his friends were kept in Babylon. Parents whose children have been deeply affected, who have very young children, or children about to enter adolescence, will, however, be rightly concerned.

There is one over-riding principle that will be mentioned now as a response to our culture and which will provide the basis for further articles. It is the principle of *fear versus faith*.²⁵

The danger for the many of us who are parents, grandparents or those working with the young is that fear is the dominant emotion as we look out on an increasingly unsafe world for our children and adolescents. Yet our justified concern must not evolve into raw fear.²⁶ Acting out of fear will diminish the precious fruit of faith, and the resultant joy derived from seeing God at work in our young.

The fruit of fear in parenting

Fear ignores God. This may seem surprising, but it is often the case. We believe in a sovereign God who rules his world with goodness. That means that he not only knows the evil of the times but he has also placed us and our children in these particular times. Fear can lead to our doctrinal convictions about God being divorced from our day-to-day circumstances.

Our eyes can be taken off a real trust in God's sovereignly good purposes, and instead become focused on 'the waves' that threaten to overwhelm us. The dangers posed by our culture become the dominant concern of our lives. Such a focus can lead to hyper-control, where the young are not enabled to grow up and make mature godly decisions. This can produce unhappy and unrelaxed relationships in the home. The dominance of fear can also cause parents to fail to be

²⁵ For a general biblical overview of this see John Piper's excellent *Battling Unbelief*, Multnomah, Colorado Springs, 2007.

²⁶ There is of course a right fear encouraged in the Bible and it is the fear of God. The following verses show how it works and what it produces: Ps.33:7-11; 52 (esp. v.6); 103:10-17; Pr.1:7; Luke 12:4-7.

actively involved in guiding our children, as some parents judge that too close an intervention might put them at risk of 'losing' their children.

The message our children need is that the Bible shows us the greatness of God. Flowing from this, with their parents they need to experience the greatness of God in their lives. In many homes, this is not always the case in practice.

The fruit of faith in parenting

Faith on the other hand does look to God. It can face the reality of the evils of the times not only with grief and concern but also with bold trust in God, precisely because it knows God to be sovereign. His sovereignty is the shelter from the storm, the rock which prevents collapse, the hope that keeps Christian parents going. Quite simply, faith trusts God.

Consequently, faith looks for opportunities to build faith in our children. When they encounter heartache or confusion, faith seeks to use those occasions to provide appropriate shelter, and to encourage prayerful active dependence on their God.

Faith helps our children to engage lovingly with their world. It helps parents to explain the world rather than to dismiss it out of hand. It creates parents who spend time understanding the world so as to appreciate the good in society's cultural forms while identifying the idolatrous features.

While it cannot guarantee the production of godly young people, parenting by faith is more likely to be the tool God uses to produce them than the adoption by parents of any other approach.

What does parenting by faith look like?

In any relationship, the area that needs the most careful attention is communication. The effectiveness of any practical suggestions will depend to a large degree on the quality of the communication involved.

Initially, when young, our children are keen to communicate. At this stage in their development, we need to take notice of their contribution to conversation. We also need to explain our decisions patiently, but without indulging them, and without creating in them an expectation that whenever they wish to talk everyone else must stop to listen.

As puberty begins and adolescence is entered, teens can allow other friendships to dominate their conversations, and parents will need to work actively to create moments for communication. Often teens will want to chat when it is least convenient – e.g. at bedtime. When such a moment occurs, then they should ask the Lord for strength and invite them to share whatever is on their hearts. Where the communication relationship has been established, stressful issues which require conversation, such as dress sense, leisure activity or whatever else it may be, will be better able to be talked over.

Here is a ‘worked example’ of what parenting by faith might look like in one area of modern technology – access to the internet. The context is that parents may have allowed, or given in to pressure to allow, their children to have internet access in their bedrooms.

A fear-based attitude to this issue might lead parents not to address the problem at all in case the teen responds negatively. In effect this fear holds the parent in bondage to the threat of relational discord. In other words emotional blackmail is operating. Alternatively a fear-based response may lead to the right action, but with any explanation or discussion occurring in angry or impatient tones.

A faith-based approach recognises that one of the greatest concerns a parent should have is for their children’s godliness, over and above their happiness (as popularly understood). Godly wisdom knows that internet access needs to be restricted to ‘public areas’ in the home to protect from the influence of pornography and unwise social networking. Awareness of the human heart means that safety programmes²⁷ will be investigated and installed if appropriate.

Faith involves looking beyond the difficulties of the obvious action needed. It means that parents will not allow themselves to be manipulated away from the correct course of action. Faith then seeks God for wisdom in how to express this to the child in a firm but loving manner. Finally, faith looks to God to bless the child’s heart as he is told that he is welcome to have his computer in a ‘public space’ in the home if he wants internet access.

In this and in every other issue of parental responsibility, the battle to parent our children effectively needs to be joined in a way which is consistent with the greatness of our sovereign God, and with the resources he makes available to us.

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²⁷ In the case of pornography prevention or assistance in its defeat Covenant Eyes is a programme worth considering.