

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

FA13

PARENTING OUR CHILDREN

This is the second 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.

There is a crisis in parenting in the Western World. Fifteen years ago, in her book *All Must have Prizes*¹, Melanie Phillips lamented the loss of confidence among parents as part of the reason for problems in our education system. More recently, Frank Furedi has sounded the same note, warning that the loss of adult authority in general is harming the young.²

At a popular level, this is seen in various TV offerings, such as *Supernanny*, where parents or their out-of-control offspring are given boundaries and a framework for living day to day. Some church leaders have added their voices to the fray. A bishop of the Church in Wales – Dr Barry Morgan – has said parents must work hard to spend quality time with their children.³

Such comments have led to a plethora of advice and countless books on how to produce a balanced, sane and stable child. Parenting is not only big business but also increasingly the province of ‘experts.’ In response to this, some have sought to show that parenting isn’t all that complicated. Furedi produced *Paranoid Parenting* (subtitle *Why Ignoring the Experts may be Best for Your Child*)⁴, while Christian commentator Anne Atkins wrote *Child-rearing for Fun* (subtitle *Trust your Instincts and Enjoy your Children*)⁵.

Kevin DeYoung voiced the same concerns in a recent blog: ‘Does it seem like parenting has gotten more complicated? I mean, as far as I can tell, back in the day parents basically tried to feed their kids, clothe them, and keep them away from explosives. Now our kids have to sleep on their backs (no, wait, their tummies; no, never mind, their backs), while listening to Baby Mozart surrounded

¹ *All Must Have Prizes*, Little Brown, London, 1996.

² ‘If adults behave authoritatively towards youngsters at home...it is likely that teachers will feel comfortable in exercising authority in the classroom.’ *Wasted. Why Education isn’t Educating*, London, Continuum, 2009, p. 2.

³ From <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8009805.stm> Accessed 26.07.10.

⁴ Chicago Review Press, Illinois, 2002.

⁵ Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2004.

by scenes of *Starry, Starry Night*. They have to be in piano lessons before they are five and can't leave the car seat until they're about five foot six.'⁶

The Fear Versus Faith Principle

In the previous article, the principle of *Fear versus Faith* was introduced as a helpful way of considering families, church and the young. There are other principles that will come into this discussion (e.g. idolatry because we are by nature created to worship) but this most usefully gives insight into the area of parenting.

The Voice of Fear

Given all that our culture seeks for the young, it would be unnatural for the church, and parents in particular, not to fear for them. So it is not fear as such that is under the microscope here. Rather it is allowing fear to be the only and thus the determining voice in the way parents raise their children.

(a) Fear says: 'I don't want my children to continue as pagans.' Every godly parent longs that their sons and daughters will love and serve the Lord Jesus just as they do. But that very longing can produce an approach to parenting (and indeed to the church's youth work) which seeks a formula which once applied will do the trick. Even though deep down they know that 'Parenting... is not a precise recipe. Follow the steps and... voilà, out pops a fear-of-the-Lord, covenant-keeping, wise young adult... All we... have to do is trust in our steps and everything goes fine.' Nonetheless, fear seeks the comfort of certainty. Yet as Ed Welch continues: 'Such parenting would actually oppose the way God does things. Instead, the (much better) system we have received is one where we parent by faith. We trust in Christ every step of the way. We pray tons and love the best we can.'⁷

b) Fear says: 'I don't want my children to leave the church.' Once more this understandable concern can produce some unwelcome fruit. The most obvious is pressure on either the pastor to make services more 'user friendly' or the youth and children's work to be more 'relevant' for the particular child or for the establishment of 'youth services.' While creativity and effort are always necessary in any aspect of the church's life, it is sometimes the case that the particular child or adolescent is unsaved and thus no amount of improvement will touch the core issue. Fearful parents are looking in the wrong place.

c) Fear says: 'I don't want my children to appear odd or out of touch.' This is nothing new. Back in the 19th century, the Anglican J.C. Ryle noted: 'A true Christian must not be a slave to what's currently "in fashion," if he wants to train his child for heaven. He must not be content to teach them and instruct them in certain ways, merely because it is customary, or to allow them to read books of a questionable sort, merely because everybody else reads them, or to let them form bad habits, merely because they are the habits of the day. He must train with an eye to his children's

⁶ From <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/05/10/parenting-001/> Accessed 11.05.10.

⁷ See the article *Successful Parenting* at <http://www.ccef.org/successful-parenting> Accessed 08.06.11.

souls. He must not be ashamed to hear his training called odd and strange. What if it is? The time is short – the customs of this world are passing away. He that has trained his children for heaven, rather than for the earth – for God, rather than for man – he is the parent that will be called wise in the end.’⁸

d) Fear says: ‘I don’t want my children to miss out.’ It is all too easy for parental effort and concern to be focused on academic achievement or sporting or artistic success. Clearly, such things are to be encouraged, but when driven by fear they are pursued at the expense of spiritual growth. So, an adolescent may miss Sunday worship to complete school work or be encouraged to attend the school choir but not the Christian Union. The implicit, if unintended, message is that spiritual activities are not of *ultimate* importance.

e) Fear is often reactionary – a response to some extreme behaviour or to the unwelcome consequences of poor parenting. Parents will then declare that they won’t do too much spiritual stuff with their children as it might turn their children off. After all, remember what happened to so and so’s daughter!

f) Fear leads to over-protection. An analogy often derided is that of the child being a tender plant. A parent may protect their child because he or she sees them as a young plant vulnerable to the elements. Yet the analogy is a helpful one. Children are to be nurtured and protected from the harsh frosts of life. But the protection is in preparation for planting them out when they can withstand the storms and strong winds of life. Protection has an end in view rather than being an end in itself.

The Voice of Faith

By way of contrast, trust in God produces very different fruit in the lives of parents.

a) Faith says: ‘I want to enquire what God says in his word.’ Rather than turning to the latest ‘how to be the perfect parent/ produce the perfect child/ help when your kids rebel’ volume from Amazon, faith knows that the words of Paul to Timothy apply to parenting: ‘All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.’ (2 Tim. 3:16). God has not left us without guidance on this crucial matter. Rather, large numbers of verses and passages provide clear instruction and help on how to raise the young.⁹

b) Faith says: ‘I will apply those principles regardless of the consequences. Once assured of what the Bible teaches, those who parent by faith apply those principles as consistently and comprehensively as it is possible for fallen sinners to do. Is modesty a biblical virtue? Then parents will engage in the battle to ensure that their sons value young women who are virtuous and that their daughters dress appropriately. Is laziness warned against? Then parents will discourage self-

⁸ J.C. Ryle, *The Duties of Parents*, in *The Upper Room*, Banner of Truth, London, 1970 p.290.

⁹ Such as Deut. 4:9, 6:4-9; Psalm 78:1-8; Proverbs 1-9; Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20-21.

indulgence and lack of effort in the home and in life. Is sin a danger? Parents will do the hard yards of teaching their young to face up to the realities of their sin and teach them the way of repentance through the Cross.

c) Faith says: 'I will trust God – even when it seems that what I am doing is not welcome or apparently working.' So, for example, when their children are refusing to go to church they will insist that this is part and parcel of the privileges that this family enjoys. Once more it is comforting to know that such struggles are not new. 'It is a sad sight in a church when nobody comes to the Lord's Table but the older people, and the young men and the young women all turn away. But it is a sadder sight still when no children are to be seen in a church, except those who come to the Sunday School, and are often obliged to attend. Let none of this guilt lie at your doors. There are many boys and girls in every city, besides those who come to Sunday School, and you who are their parents and friends should see to it that they come with you to church. 'Do not allow them to grow up with a habit of making vain excuses for not coming. Make them clearly understand, that so long as they are under your roof, it is the rule of your house for every one in good health to honour the Lord on the Lord's Day, and that you believe that the healthy person who refuses to go to church on the Lord's Day brings great harm to his soul. 'Do not be discouraged because your children do not see the full value of church and the Lord's Supper now. Just train them to have a habit of regular attendance. Set it before their minds as a high, holy, and solemn duty, and believe me, the day will very likely come when they will bless you for your efforts.'¹⁰ The language may be quaint but the sentiments exactly accord with Scripture.

d) Faith always reacts by going back to the word. Rather than seeking to pull as far away as possible from any excess or eccentricity, faith-filled parents will go first to God's word to check their own hearts as well as to receive wisdom and instruction. It may be that so-and-so's aim is biblical even if poorly delivered.

f) Faith seeks God in the word. The Bible is read, absorbed and lived out not as a moral code-book, but because in it the living God is seen. And that living God is loved. And that love of God overflows into the parents' hearts and from there governs their parenting. It is a daily battle but if 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28), then every part of life involves the Lord God and this is what our children will see at work in their parents' daily lives.

An introduction to biblical parenting¹¹

Perhaps no-one has thought as deeply about the Bible's teaching on parenting than Paul and Tedd Tripp.¹² In his DVD *Getting to the Heart of Parenting*,¹³ Paul Tripp defines the family as 'God's primary learning community.' In this he is not alone. Preaching on Proverbs 1:7-8, John Piper declares: 'God ordained the family not just to be fruitful and fill the earth with people, but to fill

¹⁰ Ryle, *Duties of Parents*, p.296.

¹¹ Obviously limitations of space forbid a comprehensive treatment of this vital matter. See Useful Resources for further help on parenting.

¹² See their various resources at the end of this article.

¹³ Paul David Tripp, *Getting to the Heart of Parenting*, Sessions 1&2. Paul Tripp Ministries 2009.

the earth with instructed people and taught people. The family is the place where the next generation is born and where the next generation learns how to live.¹⁴

Piper in turn is building on Jonathan Edwards, who wrote: 'Every family ought to be... a little church, consecrated to Christ and wholly influenced and governed by his rules. And family education and order are some of the chief means of grace. If these fail, all other means are like to prove ineffectual.'¹⁵

Tripp points out that the various communities and agencies which God has provided are never meant to displace the family from its God-ordained role. The church (through its youth work) was never given by God to replace the responsibility of parents to nurture the souls of their young. Similarly, the State was never given by God to do the work of the parent. Rather it is put there by God to protect parents and their young, and one of its arms – the education system – is there to support parents in the education of their children. It is an unhelpful and ultimately dangerous thing when parents 'hand over' their children and teens to anyone else without recognising that no-one else can or should replace them. Tripp then identifies three ways in which the family teaches:

1 It teaches theology

This may seem a million miles from the daily life of parenting: struggling to persuade the truculent teen to tidy the bedroom or persuading the young child to stay in bed or to eat its food or a thousand and one other daily challenges that are part of normal home life. Yet everything begins with God, and if parents have to do one thing among many others, it should be to give their child awe. The task has been made considerably easier than we may think, since children are hard-wired for awe. Prise them away from the flickering screen to gaze in wonder at the night sky, a budding tree or a buzzing bee. Engage them with the world that God has made and it is not a big step to their engaging with a God of wonders. We want children to be so in awe of God that they are ready to meet him in the Bible.

In teaching God's truth to children, Psalm 78 is one of the most stirring passages on the role of the family. It is also in part a commentary on passages such as Judges 2: 10-11. To neglect teaching our children about the Lord God will not have neutral consequences. If parents don't shape them by Scripture then their children will be shaped by the world. It is as simple and as challenging as that. This is because children are worshippers. As Tripp shrewdly observes: 'Worship is an identity before it is an activity.' Children must be pointed to God – otherwise they will point their hearts towards themselves and their own needs.

Part of being worshippers involves the ability of children to interpret their world. An important principle results from this realisation: 'Human beings made in the image of God do not live life

¹⁴ From <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/do-not-forsake-your-mothers-teaching> Accessed 08.06.11.

¹⁵ Quoted in Elizabeth Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 2005, p. 25.

based on the facts of their own experience. They live life based on their interpretations of the facts.¹⁶

Imagine, therefore, a situation in which a child gets angry with his brother for taking the last chocolate biscuit, and lashes out at him. As the parent seeks to deal with the warfare, the guilty child will rarely locate the problem within his own heart, but will present a good case that he was justified to behave as he did. He may reveal skills a gifted lawyer may envy as he conducts his defence. In classic Genesis 3 style, he is bringing his interpretation of the facts to the parent, in order to evade responsibility. The ultimate goal of the parent though is to help that child face up to his sin so that he can be moved to the foot of the Cross.

2 The family teaches sociology

Every family involves close relationships. As a result, the child learns important sociological lessons about living in a community. Children have been designed to live as part of a loving community.

Any parent reading this will recognise immediately the massive challenge. It is not so much that young sinners find difficulty in loving their neighbours. The truth is that both parent and child often have deep difficulty in loving the ones closest to them. It is imperative then that parents are a daily living example of sacrifice for the sake of loving relationships. This may mean being willing to have a smaller house/car/holiday because they place being involved with their children above other things. Such decisions show that spending time with their children matters more than material well-being.

3 The family teaches redemption

While it may seem counter-intuitive, it is pure gospel to make children keenly aware that they are unable to meet God's standards. Unless they recognise the utter impossibility of loving their siblings truly from the heart, then they will feel no sense of need for forgiveness or for God's help.

As they grow up, the bigger challenge for children privileged to have Christian parents is likely to be self-righteousness rather than unrighteousness. Tedd Tripp in *Shepherding a Child's Heart*¹⁷ tells the story of a father having his peace disturbed by his two sons conducting what sounded like WW3 in the room next door. Moving wearily out of his chair, he discovers both children squabbling over a toy. He barks: 'Who had it first?' (How many parents will identify with the scene and with the question.) But, as Tripp points out, the question is wrong. It has done two unintended things:

- 1) reduced the matter to one of simple justice when it's about idolatry; both children are prepared to engage in conflict to satisfy their hearts' desire for the toy.
- 2) suggested that there is only one sinner in the fight, when there are clearly two.

¹⁶ Paul David Tripp, *Getting to the Heart of Parenting*, Session 2. Paul Tripp Ministries 2009.

¹⁷ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, Wapwallopen, Shepherd Press, 1995.

In Luke 6:43-45, Jesus teaches that the root problem with every person is the heart. In the Bible the heart is the source of everything we think, say and do.¹⁸ In Paul Tripp's phrase: 'The heart is the causal core of your personhood.'

For many parents, however, the reality of this is hard to apply. It is far easier to focus on external behaviour. Tedd Tripp identifies two particular dangers that such a focus produces.

A Christian Behaviourism

He gives the example of a rewards system set up by a father trying to get better behaviour from his children. In the kitchen was a jar and besides it some scraps of paper and a pen. Each time one of the children behaved well, he or she had a scrap of paper with their name on it placed in the jar. Should a child misbehave, that piece of paper was removed. At the end of week the child with the most pieces of paper in the jar was rewarded. As Tripp points out, all this did was produce a child who only did good when his parents were around or he could be seen. Tragically and crucially, the heart remained unchanged.

Through this approach what the parent was appealing to in the child was the worst thing possible: self-interest, the polar opposite of the biblical pattern of developing a heart that serves others.

B Christian Determinism

This places all our hope in providing the 'right' conditions. So, as long as the right environment is provided – a Christian youth group, a Christian home, positive experiences etc., then the child will turn out all right in the end. The assumption behind this error is that in fact the problem is 'out there' rather than 'in here.' It then follows that if the child behaves wrongly, it is because they are a victim of their circumstances, rather than under the sway of a sinful heart.

This is not to say that we ignore behaviour. In a piece entitled *Why Require Unregenerate Children to Act like they're Good?* John Piper notes: 'No parents have the luxury of teaching their child nothing while they wait for his regeneration. If we are not requiring obedience, we are confirming defiance. If we are not inculcating manners, we are training in boorishness. If we are not developing the disciplines of prayer and Bible-listening, we are solidifying the sense that prayerlessness and Biblelessness are normal.'¹⁹ For the same reason the state of the youth group or home life is not unimportant. However, these things do not deal with the heart of the matter and if wrongly trusted are deadly.²⁰

¹⁸ See the vivid picture in Pr.4:23 where the heart is like the well of life.

¹⁹ From <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/why-require-unregenerate-children-to-act-like-theyre-good> Accessed 08.06.11.

²⁰ Examples from Scripture where heart change rather than external circumstances is the critical factor is shown we need only think of youngsters such as Joseph who at just 17 years old sold into slavery by his own brothers and thereafter subject to unjust treatment or the servant girl of Naaman's wife who was ripped from her home at a very

The deadly danger with both these approaches is that they prevent the child getting to the Cross. After all, why would a child need the Cross if he can do very well by controlling his own behaviour or be changed by the right environment? The gospel is not about doing new things – it's about being given a new heart. It's open-heart surgery, not a face-lift that we need both in our own lives and those of our children.

If we teach in such a way as only to address behaviour and not the heart, then we will produce a generation who are nothing more than mini-Pharisees: outwardly respectable, but inwardly rotten. It isn't hard to see what they will look like. I'm sure we have come across many such folk who have grown up in our churches:

- As children, they learned to live hypocritical, double lives.
- They were particularly adept at grading sins – so, for example, smoking is terribly wrong (I'm not wishing to imply that it is good), but gossip or excluding someone from the friendship group is fine.
- Finally, at some stage, the grown child either rejects the whole lot because it sees through it as sham or, perhaps worse, settles down nicely to refining its pharisaism in the church.

The main point is that Pharisees see no need for Christ or his work.

The goal of Christian parenting, therefore, must be to engage the hearts of the children. Paul Tripp gives five heart questions he used when dealing with issues with his own children:

- i) What was going on? (This is seeking reflection).
- ii) What were you thinking and feeling as it was happening? (This focuses on the heart – the seed- bed of the actions).
- iii) What did you actually do? (This focuses on behaviour).
- iv) Why did you do it? OR What did you intend to happen? (This focuses on motives).
- v) What was the result? (This focuses on 'harvest').

4 Summary thoughts on teaching

We teach all the time. Here are some ways we do so.

- **Structure of family life.** This refers to the members of whom the family is made up. A child with three siblings, no present father, and no godly grandparents will have different influences than an only child surrounded by the generations.
- **Family Values.** What's important in this home? What upsets people? What are the unspoken rules? How much human tradition manufactured in our fallen culture is actually

tender age no doubt. Though doubtless deeply hurt and confused by their circumstances because their hearts were regenerate they lived lives marked by trust in God.

at work here? For example, what gets a child into greater trouble, breaking a vase, or lying to his mother? How do we approach gossip, neighbours, church, secrets etc.?

- **Family roles.** Who does what? Who takes responsibility and for which issues?
- **Family conflict resolution.** Problem solving in a family is a huge influence on how children will face difficulties later. For example, do people walk away from problems, refusing to talk about them or is it the loudest voice that wins?
- **Family response to failure.** Kids are always failing, how are they treated when they do? Humiliated, mocked, taught, encouraged, redirected? Some parents simply take over and take the matter right out of the child's hands.
- **Family history.** What significant things are going on in the affairs of a family? Money, illness, tragedy, moving home, unemployment etc.

Conclusion

It is easy to conclude that parenting is impossible – and in many ways it is. As a sinner raising sinners the challenges are great. Nevertheless parenting is a great calling from God. It is a daily act of resisting fear and living by faith. Often it can involve something as simple as a momentary heartfelt prayer. Ray Ortlund tells how his father used to ask for God's strength as he walked up the drive from work. It is through such on-going dependence on God that parenting is done.

Kevin DeYoung notes: 'I... know that the longer I parent, the more I want to focus on doing a few things really well, and not get too passionate about all the rest. I want to spend time with my kids, teach them the Bible, take them to church, laugh with them, cry with them, discipline them when they disobey, say sorry when I mess up, and pray like crazy. I want them to look back and think: 'I'm not sure what my parents were doing or if they even knew what they're were doing. But I always knew my parents loved me and I knew they loved Jesus.' Maybe it's not that complicated after all.'²¹

A word to parents whose children have rejected Christ

There will be some parents who avoid articles such as this. The pain, and often the shame, is too great. For them it seems both pointless and too late in any case. For all that they would not disagree with anything written here – it is simply not relevant to their painful situation. Their children have grown up, rebelled, and the grief is indescribable.

Commenting on Judges 14:4, Dale Ralph Davis says: 'Many Christian parents have stood in the sandals of Manoah and his wife. They have, though realising their own spiritual inadequacies, faithfully taught, prayed for, disciplined, and loved a son or a daughter, only to see that child wilfully turn from the way of the Lord. No-one can deny it is anything but devastating. Yet one

²¹ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/05/10/parenting-001/> Accessed 11.05.10.

should not forget v.4: 'But his father and his mother did not realise it was from Yahweh.' What we don't know may yet prove our deepest comfort.²² What he means is that God is doing something – even in our children's foolish choices and mistaken desires – that will in the end bring good.

Recently a close family member who had lived to please himself repented and was gloriously restored at the age of 54, bringing to an end nearly 40 years of heartache to his godly parents. My closing word to any parent with a rebellious child is to never give up hope: your son's or daughter's story is not over yet.

Useful Resources

English Books

The Duties of Parents, J C Ryle – various formats but originally a chapter in *The Upper Room*. Despite the 19th century language, remarkably up-to-date and refreshingly biblical.

Aren't They Lovely when They're Asleep, Ann Benton, Christian Focus.

Teenagers, Ann Benton, IVP.

Ann has also produced a helpful short parenting course *Putting Parenting to Bed* (the Good Book Company).

Come Back Barbara, John Miller and Barbara Miller Juliani, P&R (for those with children who have rejected the faith).

US Books

Everyday Talk, Jay Younts, Shepherd Press.

Family-Driven Faith, Voddie Baucham, Crossway.

Age of Opportunity, Paul Tripp, P&R. (excellent on adolescents)

Shepherding a Child's Heart, Tedd Tripp, Shepherd Press.

US DVDs (Both get into the details of parenting as well as addressing the various stages of childhood and adolescence)

Getting to the Heart of Parenting, Paul Tripp, Paul Tripp Ministries.

The Case for Kids, Paul Tripp and Tedd Tripp, Shepherd Press.

Books on the family

Marriage and Family in the Bible, Ken Campbell (Ed.) IVP.

God, Marriage and Family (2nd ed.), Andreas Kostenberger with David Jones.

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The above was published in The Bulletin [July 2011]

Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

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²² Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges*, Christian Focus, Ross-shire, 2003, p.172.