

No-Fault Child Raising

by Philip Lancaster

Is God faithful? Is man responsible? Do our moral actions have predictable consequences, or are God's dealings with his children utterly capricious?

The answers to these questions appear to be in doubt for a large segment of the evangelical community in the late 20th Century. While we rail at the world and our secular society for its lack of faith in God and its failure to hold men accountable for their actions, we exhibit the same character flaws ourselves. In fact, it is accurate to say that the reason our nation has lost its faith and its moral compass is because professing Christians have lost theirs.

I refer specifically to the widespread attitude among evangelicals about raising their children. They have lost their faith in the faithfulness of God. They have lost their sense of their own accountability to God for how they raise their children.

Witness a recent article in *Focus on the Family* magazine (by Karen Orfitelli, October, 1995, p. 6). We are here introduced to a 13-year-old girl who spends 45 minutes on the phone excitedly recounting the events of today's English class with a girl friend. When she gets off the phone, her mother asks her about her day and the class and gets only a one word answer, then a complaint about a lack of good food in the kitchen, then a brush-off as the girl heads off to homework. The author then concludes, "If this scene sounds familiar, then you are probably finding that communicating with your adolescent can be a full-time, headache-producing job. Be encouraged—you are not alone."

It is no doubt true that many parents, even Christian parents, find themselves in such a situation, but is that reason to be encouraged? Imagine the crew of the Titanic telling the drowning passengers, "Be encouraged—you are not alone." Some comfort! A better conclusion by the author would have been, "Be alarmed! You've got a very serious problem on your hands, and what makes it even worse: many other families are in the same shipwrecked state as yours."

The author continues: "As a veteran middle school teacher, I have found that a large portion of my time is spent reassuring parents that their children's inappropriate actions, surly attitudes and peer dependence are common behaviors . . ." Here it is again, that comforting thought that you are not the only parents with warped children. We are being set up for the real message of this article, already suggested in these statements, but now explicitly laid out: ". . . [these] are common behaviors—not signs of parental failure or social deviance."

Let's not miss this astounding conclusion. Here we have a child who displays peer dependence, shows a "surly" attitude toward her mother as she rudely

rejects conversation with her, irritably mutters a complaint about her parents' provision, and then sullenly departs to be by herself. This child is acting wickedly! She is violating the fifth commandment which calls her to honor her mother. Yet we are assured that this is *not* a sign of social deviance! By *whose standard* is it not a sign of social deviance? By *God's* holy standard revealed in the Bible it is clearly deviant behavior; it is sin and deserves punishment (Ex. 20:12; Eph. 4:29; 6:2; Phil. 2:14; Col. 3:12, etc.). Our author rejects the Bible as a standard of righteousness.

Perhaps even worse, however, the author also assures parents that such deviant behavior is not a sign of parental failure. Parents are not responsible for the wicked behavior of their children. This is consistent with the teaching of the Focus on the Family ministry which assures parents that hormones are the reason for teenage rebellion, so it is normal, and parents are not responsible, so don't feel guilty when your kids rebel and act wickedly. I cannot imagine a more destructive and utterly false response to parents with rebellious children.

The fact is that parents are responsible for how they raise their children. God has given guidelines for the process, and when his guidance is ignored, the fruit is bad. The bad fruit Christian parents are experiencing today in their children is a result of disobedience to God's commands.

God says fathers are responsible for training their children (Gen. 18:19; Ps. 78:3-7; Prov. 1:8; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21), yet most fathers give the primary task to others.

God says child-training must be carried out in a thoroughly Christian environment with a focus upon God's Word (Deut. 6:6-9; Eph. 6:4), yet Christians send their children to the godless state schools which expel any mention of God or his commandments.

God says that children tend to foolishness and that those who keep the company of fools come to harm (Prov. 22:15; 13:20; 1 Cor. 15:33), yet parents place their children in groups of their age-mates, thus corrupting their character.

Many Christian parents are seeing bad fruit in their children because they have ignored or rejected God's revealed will for raising them. But rather than telling parents the truth, Focus on the Family tries to comfort them in their disobedience: Everybody has this problem so it must be normal; it surely can't be your fault. The fruit is rotten, but that's OK, just keep eating. Christian parents are being betrayed by such ungodly advice.

Parents are left to muddle through the bad situation their own bad choices have created. What advice does our author give the parents with surly, wicked children? (1) Be a good listener; (2) Show respect to the child; (3) Be a guidance counselor, not a warden.

Toward the end of this mercifully-short article the author presents the situation of an eighth-grade girl who gets an invitation from the boy she is “going out with” to meet her in the woods after a soccer game. The girl seeks the advice of her peers (unanimous “yes, go”) and her teacher manages to find out about it and ask her what she thinks will happen in the woods. She hasn’t thought that far.

Commenting on this lack of forethought, the author continues, “The most sobering aspect of this situation is that this thought process (or lack of it) is occurring at the same time we can no longer be with our children everywhere they go.

“Thus, we should seek every opportunity to guide children to consider the consequences of their behavior. Our teens may not be comfortable coming to us, so we should encourage them to also consult other trusted adults (teacher, pastor, youth pastor) for godly counsel.” End of article.

Be a good listener, but don’t “pontificate” against your child calling a teacher a “jerk.” Be respectful; don’t demean the child. Be a guidance counselor, but don’t be so restrictive that you could be called “a warden.”

What a counsel of despair: We can’t be with our kids to guide them all the time. Our children’s hearts may not be turned to us or ours to them, so they will consult their foolish peers and (ungodly?) teachers. Somehow maybe it will turn out all right. But if it doesn’t, don’t blame yourself. What’s a parent to do?

So the child gets pregnant, marries a pagan, leaves the church and denies the faith—and there will be many to comfort the parents that it was not their fault.

And what about God’s promise that if you train up a child in the way he should go he will not depart from it? (Prov. 22:6) Conveniently, many now teach that it is not really a promise, after all. God didn’t mean to assure parents that their child-raising efforts would be rewarded. How could he? I mean, look at all the rebellious teenagers!

So we let our failure of obedience undermine our trust in the faithfulness of God. Rather than repenting and returning to God’s ways, we are encouraged to accept things, bad as they are.

Fathers need to be told: Stop! Get your kids out of those godless schools before it is too late. Do whatever you have to do to save your children. Don’t accept wicked behavior as normal. Don’t be content to be one of your child’s counselors. Be a father. Be a man and rescue your children. God is still faithful. But that means we must be responsible. Good fruit follows obedience. Bad fruit follows disobedience.

The article we have been considering is dangerous, and all the more so since it appears in a Christian magazine that parents trust for godly direction. We

are thankful for the good God has done through the ministry of Focus on the Family, but we must expose the falsehood that will lead Christians astray. The author here offers chaff at best, poison at worst. She says the things that the itching ears of parents want to hear: sin is not sin; you are not responsible. But where is the God of the Bible in all this?

He is still there. Still allowing foolish behavior to bring its own punishment. Still offering grace to those who repent. Still faithful to his promises about our children. The question is, Do we believe his promises any more? Are we willing to admit when we have not been doing things God's way? Are we willing to be obedient at any cost?

Families and churches will not be renewed, our nation will not be turned around, as long as we deny our failures and give ourselves comfort in disobedience. Families are hemorrhaging, churches are cancerous, the nation is dying. Psychological Band-Aids and placebos won't heal us. Only the radical surgery of returning to biblical righteousness will.
