



The function of the promise of the covenant in the rearing of children

Do you have some advice?

Recently Dr. James Dobson was on the radio speaking about the rearing of children. He told a story about Charlie Shed, the author of the well-known book, *Promises to Peter*. Before they had any children of their own, he and his wife used to go around the country giving advice to parents about how to raise children. As they received children of their own, their advice began to change. They began to realize that everything was not always so cut and dried. When their children became teenagers they would start their presentation by asking, "Do you have any advice for us?" That is also how I feel this evening. We have in our midst many seasoned, professionally trained teachers, many parents and grandparents with a wealth of experience. I too am a father of seven children, a good portion of them in their teenage years. Daily I am reminded of how inadequate I am, and of how much any success depends on the grace of God. Nevertheless, I will try to impart to you some wisdom about the rearing of children. That wisdom is not my own, however. For I have no wisdom of my own. It is wisdom imparted to us in God's Word.

Human theories

What happens when man relies on his own insight? John Locke saw a child as a *tabula rasa*, a white piece of paper, or a blank slate. Parents are rational tutors who can mould the child in any way, good or bad. Jean-Jacques Rousseau taught that children are actually noble savages who were naturally endowed with a sense of right and wrong. He discouraged parental involvement and taught that the adult should be there mostly to be receptive to the child's needs. Later theorists became influenced by Darwin's teaching about the survival of the fittest. From then on the discussion ensued as to how nature influences the behaviour of children, and how much their behaviour is due their environment. This is the "nature – nurture" controversy.

These theories are based on human observations and human wisdom. We must go to God's Word, however. David said in Psalm 58: 3, "*The wicked go astray from the womb, they err from their birth, speaking lies.*" Solomon said in Proverbs 22:15, "*Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.*" The same thing we also confess when we present our children for baptism. In The Form for the Baptism of Children we state that "*our children are conceived and born in sin and are therefore by nature children of wrath.*"

Modern human behaviour theorists would shudder at those words. "That is much too negative. If you begin by seeing children as totally evil from birth, then you have a negative view, and you will affect them negatively." Many ridicule how the Puritans viewed and treated their children. A book on child psychology says,

"According to Puritan doctrine, the child was a fragile creature of God who needed to be safeguarded but also needed to be reformed. Born evil and stubborn, children had to be led away from their devilish ways. Therefore, it was necessary to take them firmly in hand and civilize them toward a destiny of virtue and salvation... Harsh, restrictive childrearing practices were recommended as the most efficient means for taming the depraved child... In schools disobedient pupils were routinely beaten by their schoolmasters."

(Laura E. Berk, *Child Development*, 3rd ed., 1994, pp. 7-9)

Covenant promises

Are children nothing more than evil creatures who need some sense beaten into them? That is the conclusion some might draw from the Form for the Baptism of Children. Why is it that this form speaks about the depravity of children? To impress upon us their need to be washed in the blood of Christ. That is why baptism was instituted. With baptism are spoken wonderful words of promise. Baptism into the name of the Father testifies and seals to us that He establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us. He adopts us for His children and heirs, and promises to provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit. He also promises that through Christ the child will be washed from all his sins, and that through the Holy Spirit he/she will be made a living member of Christ. God adopts that child as His own. Along with that adoption comes the promises of the washing away of sins, the rescue from all evil, and the assurance of eternal life. The children are heirs; something more is coming. In this life they have only the first fruits of those promises. Not only do they have the assurance that they are children of God now, they also have a foretaste in this life of the wonderful future that lies ahead for them. This knowledge help us in the rearing of our children. God does this because He loves us with an unconditional love. God showed this love in the way that He treated His people as they were poised to receive the promise of their own heritage, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Before God's people could go and inherit the promised land, the Lord God gave them the Ten Words of the Covenant, written in stone. He gave those commandments to them at Mount Sinai. But before they had come to that mountain, a lot had happened. They had just been delivered from the land of Egypt. God did some miraculous things in order to bring that about. In Egypt they were treated as nothing more than worthless slaves. The only interest the state had in them was economic. They were exploited in every sense of the word. The Lord God rescued them from there. As soon as they were delivered from the land of Egypt, however, they began to complain and to murmur against Moses and against God. They forgot about the miserable existence from which they had been delivered. They complained about the food and the drink, and about everything else. To top it all off, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai to give them the ten commandments, he found that they had had one great big party while he was gone. Like a bunch of adolescents left without restraints, they behaved very badly. They had asked Aaron to make a golden calf to worship. Then they danced around it in a drunken orgy. When Moses came down and saw what happened, he was so angry that he smashed the tables of stone God had given him. He was incensed. He was disgusted and angry. He acted like most parents would who happen upon such a scene.

Unconditional love

God, however, did something quite unexpected! He told Moses to ascend the mountain once more. Once again God gave him the Ten Commandments. He gave His Ten Commandments with the following words, *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."* These words show that God had not rejected His people, His chosen nation Israel. In spite of their terrible behaviour, He continued to affirm His commitment to them. *"I am your Father, and you are my children."* He said this after their bad behaviour, as well as before he gave them the commandments to live by. O sure, He did punish them with the sword and a plague. He took their sin very seriously. He disciplined them. But when He gave the law for the second time He did not change the wording by stating, "You terrible people. Look at the things you have done wrong. And now, if you want to again come into my favour, you had better prove yourself. Here are the ten rules by which you can prove yourselves. If you keep them, then I will be your God." No, He begins once again with the words: *"I am the Lord your God."* For you see, the Lord knows that there are lots of things wrong with His children. That became clear to Him already in Paradise. Therefore we have nothing to prove to Him. The prologue shows, however, that our heavenly Father loves us in spite of our sins.

What the people did was terrible, but if He was going to have any impact on them they first had to realize the kind of relationship God had with them. Only then could they appreciate why their actions are so terrible. He put the relationship before the rules. The rules are nevertheless put into

effect. Without rules there is no relationship. He did not give them so that He could interfere in their lives. He did not give them in order to stifle their existence. He gave the commandments because He wanted to protect them from themselves. He says, "I know that you are sinful. I know that you will not be able to keep my commandments. But do your utmost to keep them. Because that is the only way that you can be happy."

If you want to be a good parent, if you want to be a good teacher, you must begin by accepting your children the way God accepts you. Our heavenly Father accepts us the way we are. We do not have to prove ourselves to Him. Our children should have the same sense from us. We must teach our children about God about who He is, and what He means for you. Your children should learn from you how much you love your Lord and Saviour, how glad you are to be forgiven your sins. Teenagers typically do not have a lot of self-esteem. Teach your children from where you get your self-esteem. You get it from knowing that you are a somebody – you are a somebody in God's eyes. You know He loves you because He has told you He does. Teach your children to sing about and speak about the love of God. Children so badly want to be accepted. They are constantly looking to their parents, and also to the teachers, for approval. You can only give them that feeling of belonging if you yourself do not suffer from an identity crisis. Your identity is given to you by God alone. If your identity is tied to your possessions, or to your prestigious position in the community, or whatever, then you will miss the mark in your own life and in the way you relate to your children's lives. And do not ridicule our children or make fun of their less desirable attributes. Accept your children for what they are; they are God's children, with their own unique talents and abilities. Your child does not have to come home with all A's on her report card in order for you to love her; he does not have to be best baseball player, or hockey player, or musician. Parents should not live their ambitions through their own children.

Too many rules!

Do not have too many rules in your home. Don't have too many in the classroom either. The more rules and regulations you have, the more dysfunctional you, as a family or a class, are in danger of becoming. In a proliferation of rules there is much confusion. Before you establish the few rules that are necessary, make sure you have a relationship with the children in your charge. Make sure that the children know that you love them, no matter what. They should know that even if they make a very big mistake you will not reject them but that you will love them nevertheless. There are consequences for mistakes, but there are also lessons to be learned from them. Children need to feel safe. Show that you love them unconditionally, just like your Father in heaven. Think of the father's love shown in the parable of the prodigal son. That is the kind of Father we have in heaven. That is the kind of parent God wants each and every one of us to be as well.

Our children must feel our love every step of the way as they grow up. You must allow them to make their own mistakes, painful as that may be. God Himself is not a tyrant. He does not force us to serve Him. He does not compel us. He tells us about the consequences if we do not serve Him. He tells us, "Your end will be disastrous. If you reject me, even though I did everything possible to hang on to you, in the end I will also reject you, and say to you, I do not know you. Away from me. Go to your father the devil. It is him you wanted to serve, not me." However, He does not force us but says, "If you do serve me, I want you to serve, because you love Me, not because I forced you." That is why the ten rules can be reduced to one: the rule of love.

It is possible to get your children to obey by forcing them to obey. You can lay down the law and enforce the rules with a heavy hand. They will obey them, at least for a time – not because they want to, but because they have to. They will obey only because they are scared. On the outside they may look like well-behaved children, but inwardly they will seethe with anger and resentment. As soon as they are away from under the supervision of their parents, they will throw all the rules aside, and do whatever pleases them. The Lord God starts with love, and that is where we must also begin. Therein lies the basis for our relationship with our children. Children do not respond to rules, they respond to love, to a relationship. If that is the kind of love they feel in the home, then they do not so easily become a victim of negative peer pressure. They will not have such need to fit in some place; they know they already do.

Unique children

Parents must know the uniqueness of each child, their idiosyncrasies. “What makes her tick? What are his ambitions?” It is also important to reflect on how you relate to each other. It is very disturbing when you encounter teenagers who do not relate to adults. They are sullen and seem angry. You cannot allow them to remain in that way. Parents and teachers alike must observe them carefully and try to have an open relationship with them. Ask them about the way you are treating them. How do they feel about that? Think about what they say. Above all don’t be afraid of criticism. Don’t be on the offensive. They may be angry about something very significant, and something which needs to be changed on your part.

Solomon says in Proverbs 22:6, “*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.*” A lot of people have difficulty with this verse. They say, I have done everything I could for my child. I have sent him to all the right schools. I have taken him to church; I have provided for him to the best of my ability, and done all the things I am supposed to do. And now look at him. Look at the how he turned out. How can Solomon say what he says? He must have meant that there are exceptions to the rule.

Well, in the first place we have to remember that we are not dealing here with a command and a promise. We are dealing here with a proverb. It is giving you a word of wisdom. It tells us that normally, if that is how you conduct yourself, then that is what will happen. But that is not always the case. There are exceptions to that rule. Children also make their own choices.

And in the second place, our modern translations do not do justice to this text. Literally it says in the Hebrew, “*train up your child according to the demand of his way.*” That is also how an old Dutch translation has it. Indeed, that is the actual wording of this verse. The text shows that each child is unique, and that he ought to be treated as such.

I think that as parents and teachers we must want our children to be anything and everything God will allow them to be. Let me tell how I, in my bungling ways, try not to anger my children. I try not to stifle their initiatives. I try to teach them that in everything they are accountable to God. Within that God-given framework I try not to impose my personal tastes and likes and dislike on my own children, and that includes the music they listen to, or the entertainment they enjoy. If you push your child to do and be what they do not want to be, then they are going to be angry, and resent you. I once spoke to a man in his eighties, whose father tried to force him into becoming a butcher, while he himself wanted to be a farmer. That old man was still angry at his father for trying to shape him into something he did not want to be shaped into. He did not grow up believing that his father loved him. In his old age he still did not think so.

Four styles

How then do we teach our children to become what God wants them to become? Josh McDowell and Dick Day identified four different kinds of parenting styles: autocratic, permissive, neglectful and the relational styles. Let me summarize for you what each one is all about.

1. First then the autocratic style. The autocrat says, “My way or the highway. I am the boss here, and you had better listen to me, or else.” Autocratic parents usually provide good homes to their children. The parents are industrious and well-meaning. They provide their children with all the physical needs. And autocratic teachers run a tight ship. They have the class under control. But there is one big thing very wrong: They are big on rules, but low on relationships. Children living in an autocracy will respond differently. Some will try as much as they can to flee. They would rather be anywhere but home or in the classroom. They don’t feel loved or appreciated. Others will resort to fighting. They are angry; they are angry at home; they are angry at school. They are likely either to belong to the controversial group, or the rejected group. Others hide their feelings. They load themselves down with guilt. They blame themselves for not being able to keep all the rules. They are very unsure of themselves and have a great need somehow to measure up.

2. The permissive parent says, "You can do anything you want. Whatever you do is fine with me, and I will defend your freedom to what you want over against anyone who would dare say anything about it." These are the modern parents. They are always trying to reason with their children. I give them credit for their patience. They will try to grant any wish of the child. The child knows how to exploit that. A child growing up in a permissive home is just as confused as a child growing up in an autocratic home. Such children do not grow up to be happy adults. For children need a firm hand. Just like our heavenly Father sets certain limits on our behaviour, so must we with our children. A child growing up in a permissive atmosphere also grows up with the feeling that he is not loved. Such children think that the parents cannot be bothered with them; that they do not care enough to protect them from themselves. They know for themselves that they need limits for their behaviour.
3. Some parents have a neglectful style. Such a parent communicates to his child in one way or the other, "I don't really care what you do. Leave me alone. You are only there to serve me. You are there to fulfil my needs, not the other way around. A neglectful parent is an abusive parent. Quite often such a parent is abusive because he himself was abused, either physically, emotionally, or sexually. Abusive parents use their children to their own ends. The parents have compulsive behavioural patterns, and such patterns can, and often does include substance abuse, such as alcohol, drugs of various kinds, including over the counter drugs, etc. These children often become dysfunctional in their own adult lives and continue the cycle of abuse.
4. And finally, there is the parent with the relational style. A relational parent communicates in every way possible to his child, "I love you, and I am trying very hard to understand you, and to realize your needs. I really care about you and your needs. Nevertheless there are rules which I want you to stick to, only because I do care." A relational parent knows how to keep a good balance between freedom and restrictions. He knows that if you give them too much rope they will hang themselves, and too little rope and they suffocate. This is the kind of parent we should strive to be.

Children are precious

Our children are very precious in the sight of God. We all are. He reminds us time and again how much He loves us. He does that as He opens His word. He does that as together we sit under the preaching every first day of the week. That is how we start off our worship services. God pronounces his blessings upon us: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. He continues to proclaim His relationship to us, and to realize His promises in our lives. He comes to us with the wonderful content of salvation. In that framework He gives us His rules and regulations. He accepts us in spite of who we are, miserable sinners, with no redeeming qualities of our own. That is how He walks with us. That is how we too must relate to those whom He has put in our charge. Our task as parents is not an easy task. But it is a beautiful one.

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