



Parenting as Shepherds

What is parenting in a human rights culture?

Not long after those little bundles of joy come into our lives we realise that we need wisdom on parenting. “What is my role?” we ask, “what am I supposed to be doing with this child?”, “is there a goal in parenting?” and “do I have any authority to achieve it?”

Our culture creates confusion as it seeks to answer such questions. Secular humanism tells us that human nature is basically good and parenting is about facilitating the good and not squashing it by restrictive parenting. Added to that, an evolutionary view of humanity implies that children function out of an innate and right instinct, to which we should basically submit. The implication of *anti-smacking legislation* is not just the issue of discipline but the deeper question of whether parents are really meant to have authority at all. *Human rights for the child*, adds to this uncertainty. It basically requires that children have the right to provision, protection and participation — all of which we would clearly own as important — but at the same time what appears to be lacking is clarity on human nature itself and whether any discipline and training is also needed. The plethora of books and programmes on parenting may add humorous and practical suggestions, but still generally operate out of secular philosophies of human nature.

This struggle regarding philosophies of parenting and the nature of children begins sooner than we realise. It starts from the moment of birth; a baby cries and we respond. That response is natural, but it can be continued through the early years, so that we always respond every time a child cries and we always give them what they demand. After all, an evolutionary framework implies that the child instinctively knows what it best and we must respond to that submissively. The humanist framework tells us we must affirm the good in the child and not crush it. So from birth, the child is determining the most basic elements of its own world and practically, parents can end up feeling exhausted and resentful because they feel there is nothing they can do about this loveable little tyrant that has entered their world. The Gospel of Mark records that when Jesus “*saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*” (Mark 6:34). I find this moving because my own heart says, “I need a Shepherd”. Whether it acknowledges it or not, our own culture says, “I need a Shepherd.” We are always looking somewhere for guidance and direction in the confusing maze of life. We look to parents, teachers, government, peers, celebrities, Twitter and Facebook. We do not naturally navigate life without help. How especially true of children who enter life so fresh and vulnerable.

The ultimate reason you and I, and our children, need shepherding is because of our hearts. The Bible says we have a sinful nature and that we have it from birth. A philosophy of parenting that does not take that into account will not provide the boundaries and discipline necessary to deal with that waywardness. A philosophy that gives only freedom is unwittingly allowing the destructiveness of sin to flourish. That is why the Good Shepherd when He leads us through the dark valley of this life, does so with rod and staff. These two implements function as means of guidance, protection and, yes, discipline and training, so that we do not wander off the safe path set for us.

A Biblical view of authority

The basic point that we must grasp is that as parents we **do** have authority. But, that authority is a **responsibility** rather than a **right**. There is only one who has all rights and whose authority is inherent in His being: God Himself. All authority belongs to Him and His Son the Lord Jesus Christ,

(Mathew 28:18). Authority is never anybody's by right, but it is an authority given by the One in whom all authority resides.

And this authority is given as a stewardship for a purpose. People in authority are accountable to the God, who gave them rule, for His glory, for the good of the one ruled and for the good of society. This is the pattern from creation. When God made Adam and Eve, they were subject to His authority yet He gave them an authority to rule over creation for its good and His glory

The place of parental authority in the Ten Commandments

Paul records the fifth command in Ephesians 6:1-3 as, *"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honour your father and mother' — which is the first commandment with a promise — 'that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.'"* Clearly, what is implied here is that parents, knowing they have authority, will train their children to do this from the beginning. Notice the promise attached. However as it is interpreted, it does emphasise that adherence to this command will bring great benefits to the child.

Not only that, the placement of this command in the order of the commandments gives it a central and crucial importance to the other nine. It falls directly between the four requirements to worship and love God only and the five which call for the practice of neighbour love. It is in the home, under wise and loving authority, that children learn to obey so that they may both honour God and be good citizens.

The authority of parents given as a stewardship for which we are accountable to God is to raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. That is, children who grow up with the mature view that they are to serve God and others and that the world does not revolve around them. A parenting philosophy that abdicates authority to the whims of a child's own personal sense of authority is actually doomed to create a chaotic culture of people who live for themselves above all else.

Parental Authority – what it is not

It is not authoritarianism

It is not the calling for blind submission to parents without reason or justification as though ultimate authority did rest with them. Again it is a stewardship which we exercise for the good of others. And, as we learn to parent, God is teaching **us** about servant-hood and self-sacrifice.

It is not legalism

This approach to parenting makes two mistakes. It first demands obedience without giving any reason for the command so that children grow up as dutiful people with no heart understanding of why something is right. They have no inner moral compass, only an external dutifulness that may fail them when temptation becomes too great. Secondly, they are taught by this dutifulness to live virtuous lives in their own strength, not by any strength received by the grace and presence of Christ. So they end up being legalists themselves, judgemental and lacking grace and compassion toward others

Parental Authority – what it is

It is compassionate

Children are sinful and broken just like we are, and so we understand their faults, fears and failings. Discipline will still be applied where necessary but in a measured way that takes the totality of the child into account.

It is for the child's own good

The bottom line is that sin and the self-gratification impulses are spiritually and eternally harmful. It is not helpful to teach a child in a fallen world that they can live for themselves. The wisdom of the Proverbs is to the point, *“Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death”* (23:13-14), or more positively, *“Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul”* (29:17).

It is for the good of society

Our culture is struggling with awful and unnecessary crime rates. Significantly contributing factors will be parents who are not there, parents who lack authority or parents who are unnecessarily authoritarian or even abusive.

It is for the gospel

All our training and discipline is holding before the child, by instruction and example, the God-pleasing life. But it is a ministry aimed at the heart, showing, by instruction and example, that we cannot live as we ought in our own strength because we are fallen. It therefore should lead to the gospel, constantly holding out the grace of forgiveness for failure and the power of Christ's indwelling presence to enable us to live God-pleasing lives.

Discipline is most effective when practised in the context of genuine love; where there is tenderness, explanation, prayer, forgiveness and reconciliation. Some have helpfully illustrated good parenting as a funnel. It is very narrow at the beginning but becomes appropriately wider as children learn virtue and live within the parameters that God has set rather than still needing parents to provide them. As parents we do not have to pretend to have it all together or that we do just fine in our own strength. That will produce more Pharisees. Rather it is only by the mercy and help of Christ that we can live life as it ought to be lived and train up our children to also live for Him.

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