

PRESERVING THE HARVEST:

Keeping Our Children in the Faith—Part Seven

By Philip Lancaster

Last month we saw that many of our sons and daughters depart from the Christian faith because we allow them too much exposure to godless people. The antidote, we noted, is to recognize and teach our children to recognize “the antithesis,” the strong contrast between the God’s truth and ways and the opposite which permeates the world under the control of the evil one. But it is not just unbelievers who are a threat to the spiritual welfare of Christian children.

Avoid Intimate Associations with Compromised Christians

It is bad that we have to face the onslaught of propaganda for the Lie all around us in the world. It is devastating that we often have to confront the same thing in the church. But then the church is not that different from the world, as any serious Christian knows and as research has documented.

In December 2000 the Barna Research Group cited the most noteworthy findings from its many religious polls conducted during that year. First on the list was, “A minority of born again adults (44 percent) and an even smaller proportion of born again teenagers (9 percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth” (www.barna.org). Read that again. Among those who claim to be born again, less than half of the adults and less than a tenth of the teens are certain that there is any such thing as absolute moral truth. Is it any wonder, then, that

exposure to church people is not much better than exposure to the world?

Actually at times it may even be worse - because parents assume that church associations provide positive input into the lives of their children, and so they are inclined not to place any limits on such contact. But the church youth group is very often not a place to build strong Christians.

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Another finding in the Barna report states, “Only a minority of born again teenagers (44 percent) claim that they are ‘absolutely committed to the Christian faith.’” The simple fact is that hanging out with the average evangelical church people may undermine a firm commitment to Christ and to God’s revealed truth! Is it any wonder, then, that Barna noted yet another finding:

“Fewer than one-third of all teenagers are likely to attend a Christian church once they are living independent of their parents”? The sad fact is that parents who want to pass on the Christian faith to the next generation must often limit the amount of time their children spend around church people.

This is the reason why many fathers who are anxious to pass the faith on to their children have separated themselves from traditional churches. They have become weary of having to guard their children from other children, and often even from leaders in the church. Such separation has its downside, with its risk of fostering an unbiblical independence and leaving the family without the oversight and protection God designed the church to provide. But many fathers are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place: be part of a traditional church or risk seeing their children compromised by evil - not a happy choice.

Don’t Be Deceived

It is an extraordinarily difficult thing for serious Christians to prevent their children from having too much exposure to the personal and impersonal influences that may lead them astray. Nor is it desirable or reasonable to eliminate all contact with those who do not believe and live as they do. Some exposure to the Lie can be appropriate - and even necessary for training purposes - if there are also heavy doses of training to recognize the antithesis. But it is not necessary or wise to immerse oneself in evil in order to learn about it. As Paul wrote, “I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil” (Rom. 16:19). Too much exposure to evil leads to

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tolerance, then to accommodation, and eventually to an embracing of the Lie. As the poet Alexander Pope observed in his “Essay on Man”:

Vice is a monster of so
frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but
to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar
with her face,
We first endure, then pity,
then embrace.

It is tempting to minimize the potential influence of relationships with those who are not uncompromisingly committed to the truth. It is easy to believe that our children will be able to stand strong in the midst of alien worldviews, to think that the people in question are not all that bad. Vice does not usually present itself right up front as a “monster,” and we hate to be too restrictive. Christian parents have a strong inclination to be optimistic concerning their own children and their associations. “Our local public school is not as bad as most others.” “The youth group leader is a godly young man. I’m sure he will set a good example for my daughter.” “My son knows that we don’t endorse the values that he sees and hears on TV.”

But Scripture is clear in its warning: “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’” (1 Corinthians 15:33). Our tendency is indeed, as the apostle notes, to be deceived about these things. We so easily lose sight of the antithesis ourselves, and everything begins to blur together so that we have a hard time taking a stand and risking the disappointment or even the hostility of our children when we say “No.” It is so much easier to believe that our children won’t be negatively affected by “evil com-

pany” or that the company is, after all, only a little evil.

We have to remember that Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light (II Corinthians 11:14), and yet he is a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (I Peter 5:8). Many godly parents have seen their precious ones devoured by the enemy because they have failed to remember how devious and determined he is and thus how discerning and diligent they must be in response.

A Personal Word

Lest I leave all that I’ve written in this article floating in the ethereal realm of the theoretical, let me assure you that I have learned (and am still learning) the importance of these principles through hard experience. I have known for years the general outline of what I am presenting to you here and have taught others these things, yet I myself have been deceived in this matter of allowing alien values to influence my children.

I erred seriously in allowing my children to have as friends and acquaintances children from Christian families who had a different view of life, and I allowed them to remain under the influence of a church leader who was quite libertine in his approach to moral issues. I rationalized that I couldn’t keep my kids locked up in the house, that they were old enough to be able to sort out the difference between our views and those of competing (even “Christian”) worldviews. While I never permitted dating or pairing off of boys and girls, and while my children were not even part of youth groups, I did give in to my teen children’s appeal for liberty to gather with other church children when they met for social events, despite my

knowing that many of the other children did not share our values. And while I didn’t allow them to attend special classes offered by the church leader, I did keep them too long under his teaching and influence. These seemed reasonable accommodations, a balancing of my own very strict inclinations and the more liberal tendencies around me - and my children would be strong; after all, their father publishes a Christian magazine!

Sadly, however, there has been bad

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fruit in terms of the effect of these associations on my children. I have realized only late in the game to what extent others have influenced the hearts and minds of some of them. While I have repented of my failure adequately to protect my sons and daughters and have made corrections, and while all my children are still in submission to me, there has been real damage, and I see only too well how easy it would be to lose one’s children to the enemy of their souls.

I am one who tends to fear being too strict, too authoritarian, and I

may pride myself on not being harsh or overbearing in my home. I don't want to make the Christian way of life into a system that smothers kids and leaves them immature and inexperienced or tempts them to throw off an oppressive yoke and abandon the faith of their fathers. But then I tend toward the other error: being too soft, giving in when I shouldn't. I rationalize my failure adequately to protect my children by telling myself (and my wife) that the threat is not that great and the kids are strong enough to handle it. Now I know from experience why Paul warned, "Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.'"

But whatever our failures as parents, we can chart a new course when we realize we have blown it. That path involves repenting for our sins before the family, identifying the proper course of action, and with humility, love, and determination pursuing that course henceforth. Past failures can never become an excuse for failing to pay the price to take corrective action in the present. My children are not under that church leader any more and I have put an end to certain of their friendships.

Parenting is a tough assignment. There are pitfalls and you and I will fall into some of them. We just need to be sure that we always remain ready to make mid-course corrections - and trust in the grace of God to make up for our failures.

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