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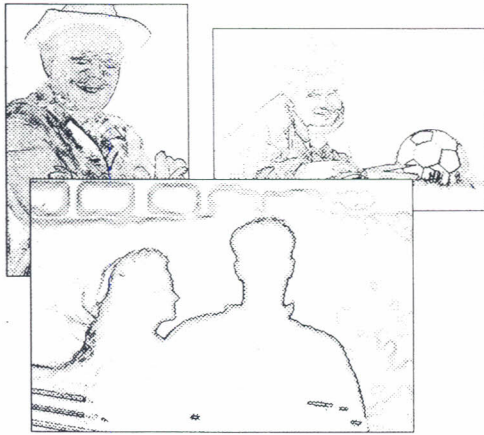
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# Who is Responsible for the Children?

## Parenting Our Youth in the Context of the Church

Clarence Hibbs

Ultimately, who is responsible for children's being raised in such a way that they become responsible and capable adults? In a pluralistic society such as the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is no real consensus on who holds the responsibility for rearing children. There is no consistent answer to the question of who is the community of responsibility in which children are to be raised. Two extremes suggest themselves. At one end of the spectrum is the belief that only the parents of the children are responsible. There is a sense in which this is true, especially legally. However, without a framework of standards or guidelines, parents often run into trouble. Isolated families who have little significant contact with outside influences may become oppressive or abusive or, at the very least, produce children who are ill equipped to deal with the outside world.<sup>1</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum is the belief that government is ultimately responsible for the welfare of children and, therefore, that agents of government should set the standards and guidelines for how they are to be raised. In the United States, families in a wide variety of contexts are increasingly unable to provide completely and independently for their members.<sup>2</sup> Various programs have been provided by governmental agencies to meet these needs.<sup>3</sup> However, these programs tend to address specific physical and economic needs and seldom include attention to the values that they imply. Furthermore, they are based on the premise that all families need support.<sup>4</sup> Government therefore assumes ultimate responsibility for the welfare of children without a unified value system to guide its bureaucratic decisions. In fact, government often works at cross-purposes with itself; it is not able to act coherently or consistently in providing services to families.<sup>5</sup> In my view, neither of these extremes is satisfactory.

### Cultural Climate

Western cultural institutions have increasingly become instruments of liberation rather than restraint, and the result has been a far weaker family unit, particularly in the role of preserving morals and transmitting them to children. The influence of the dominant medium of the popular culture, television, has profoundly altered the relationship between parents and children. Previously, parents were the primary molders of young children. Now, parents combat competing images and ideas over which they have little direct control. This is so much so that some believe that parents are no longer the dominant sources of moral instruction. Even children's perception of parental authority has changed.<sup>6</sup> At present, particularly in large urban areas, there are increasingly diverse populations with competing and fragmented value systems, including a very individualistic view of human responsibility. These diverse groups at once try to influence the larger cul-



ture and are impacted by it.<sup>7</sup> In this atmosphere it is increasingly difficult to have any coherent value system or standards of conduct by which children can grow up and prosper.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the family cannot expect that its values will be supported by society in general.

In this increasingly fragmented culture, morality is more and more privatized and individualized. The result is the view that what is good or bad, what is needed or irrelevant, has no external standard to which one can appeal. This is especially true where postmodern views of reality question any objective or enduring standard of truth.

### **Community of Responsibility**

Is there, in this atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty, any solution to the question of who is responsible for children? Family therapist William Doherty argues that in an increasingly fragmented and individualistic world, children and families need to live in strong communities in order to prosper. And further, these communities need citizens to be more than consumers of services from governments, businesses, and professionals.<sup>9</sup> His point is that citizens should be positive contributors to their communities, even when it is necessary for them to receive services of some kind.

A number of community movements are currently attempting to address the difficulties of raising children. They see the problems of current society, particularly the lack of a moral compass to guide the behavior of young people. Two examples stand out. In Minnesota, communities are organizing to bring various elements of the community together to work to take back the family for the good of the children.<sup>10</sup> Damon advocates "youth charters," which organize communities to work together to develop a coherent set of standards and expectations for youth behavior, including moral, work, academic, and safety standards.<sup>11</sup> These efforts by concerned citizens—families, schools, churches, and other organizations—are very encouraging. However, even these efforts exist in diverse communities in which the unifying concern is the welfare of children and the obvious need to counter the disintegrating forces around them. What is lacking is a coherent value system by which they can be guided.

Strong communities are characterized by interwoven relationships that crisscross and reinforce each other and by a shared set of values, norms, and meanings to which they are committed. \_\_\_\_\_

Another element that is essential to families for raising children successfully is social support. There is abundant evidence that parents who receive social support from family, friends, and community are more successful and competent in their parenting duties.<sup>12</sup> Black churches have long made extensive use of their resources in support of families.<sup>13</sup> The opposite is also true. Where social support is lacking, where families are alone and isolated, trouble is not far away. Communities that have both a common value system and the social support for that value system are becoming harder and harder to find.

Strong communities are characterized by interwoven relationships that crisscross and reinforce each other and by a shared set of values, norms, and meanings to which they are committed. They also have a history and identity to which they can appeal.<sup>14</sup>

Where is such a community—a community that can provide a place where parents can be competent and children can prosper, and even thrive? I believe that the church is the ideal community, the context best suited to the needs of the present cultural climate. This view suggests that the family should live in the context of the church, with beliefs and an identity that provide support, encouragement, and standards by which parents can raise their children. But to accept this view, we must give up the more individualistic and privatized view of responsibility for children and take a stance of mutual responsibility within the church. In a pluralistic arena of competing values, the church and its families have formidable influences to combat in transmitting the Christian faith to their children. Thus it is even more necessary to see the church as a strong and potent influence in the battle for the minds of children. The



church must be a community that upholds its own culture and transmits that culture from one generation to another. It must be a place where values and beliefs are institutionalized; the church's collective life must support meanings, beliefs, and ways of behaving that are inherited from previous generations and are preserved. This means that the culture of the church is communal, not individualistic.<sup>15</sup>

It is true that there are always interconnections and reciprocal influences between families and the communities, culture, and society in which they live. Each element is constantly influencing and being influenced by all the others.<sup>16</sup> I am arguing that although we cannot escape the influence of the culture and society in which we live, the church is the primary community in which values and standards should be taught and received. It is no longer possible to expect the popular culture to support the moral and ethical teaching of the church. It is the task of the church to live a life "worthy of God" (1 Thess 2:12)<sup>17</sup> as a community that maintains and upholds its own standards. It does not expect society to support its values, but understands its mission to live in the midst of the rest of society as an influence that will attract and draw others into it. This view calls for the church to be capable of forming and sustaining the culture in which it lives.<sup>18</sup> In the context of the strong community of the church, families raising children are supported and sustained by values and behavior that are "worthy of God." Parents are not isolated as they attempt to teach their children to go against the culture. They see others in the church as those who share the same beliefs and accept part of the responsibility for the task.

### Context of the Early Church

In the Restoration tradition, our first and ultimate appeal for authority is to scripture. Yet even in scripture we find that the early church existed in its own culture. To understand scripture, then, we must see it in light of the culture in which it found itself. In the era in which the church began, the family was the transmitter of culture. Inside the family, societal values were taught, whether Roman, Greek, or Eastern. Although society was not homogenous, the context of the family was where children learned proper behavior and values, and families were held respon-

sible for the conduct of their members.<sup>19</sup> The New Testament does not give extensive instruction about parenting.<sup>20</sup> It does, however, contain references to household codes (Eph 5:21–6:4; Col 3:18–21), which give specific instruction about passing on values to children: "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that household codes are given in the context of the teaching of Christian values and conduct in the church. There appears to be no real boundary between church and family in teaching good con-

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duct. Put another way, the values to be taught in the family and the church are indistinguishable.

### Theology of Parenting

Parenting, then, is an enterprise that takes place in the community of the church. The following principles suggest a theology of parenting within the church.

1. The church, as the community and culture in which its children are raised, has its primary allegiance to God.
2. Parenting is understood to be in the context of the church community, and provision is made to support and augment parents by other church members' taking mutual responsibility for children in the church. The biblical metaphor of church as family<sup>22</sup> is taken seriously, so that there are not only brothers and sisters but also those who function as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins.
3. The church understands its responsibility to be examples of faith and Christian living to the young of the church, as well as to the wider community outside the church, and to be accountable to each other, in contrast to an attitude of "what we do is nobody else's business."



4. Families support and encourage each other in their struggles in raising children, upholding standards of faith as being mutually responsible to each other within the church.

### Youth Ministry

Most congregations have some program of involvement with the youth of the church. It may range from informal meetings and activities with parents or other volunteers to a formal program with a fully paid staff. In many churches the youth program is primarily social and the activities are recreational. Increasingly, youth ministries include full-scale teaching and involvement in faith development and evangelization training.

How does the ministry of the church to the youth become an integral part of the community of the church? Put another way, how does the ministry of the church to the youth avoid being detached from and uninvolved with the rest of the life of the church? Surdacki argues that youth ministry separated from the rest of the church widens the cultural gap between teens and other generations and may leave teens unable to integrate into the larger church community once they graduate.<sup>23</sup> This viewpoint emphasizes the integration of a youth program as a part of the mutual responsibility of the whole church, not just something that is funded by the congregation without further involvement. It suggests that a variety of people of varying ages be a part of the youth ministry and its activities.

### Conclusion

The notion of the church's being the extended family is not new to those in the Restoration movement, where a sense of belonging is understood not only in the local churches but also brotherhood-wide. The implications of mutual responsibility for the rearing and outcome of children's lives, however, may not yet be fully realized or understood. The pressure from society to privatize the parenting of children to within the family is great. But the added support, encouragement, and influence of the congregations in which families live can be liberating and invigorating. Children's lives can be enriched by the additional people to whom they can look for nurture and guidance. Families' feelings of isolation can

be dissolved. Consciously and deliberately developing congregational life to include mutual responsibility for parenting is, it would seem, a biblical mandate. This is not to suggest that the church and its families should isolate themselves from the rest of the world. Far from it—strong families within strong churches should participate actively in their communities. By doing so, Christian families and churches serve to strengthen and influence the society in which they live. However, we must remember that the church's life and work often run counter to the prevailing cultural climate. It is as leaven that Christian families and churches permeate and change society from within, and it is this same leavening influence that draws others to Christ and the church.

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### Notes

1 Robert Beavers and Robert Hampson, *Successful Families: Assessment and Intervention* (New York: Norton, 1990).

2 Cleopatra Howard Caldwell, Angela Dungee Greene, and Andrew Billingsley, "Family Support Programs in Black Churches: A New Look at Old Functions," in *Putting Families First*, ed. Sharon L. Kagan and Bernice Weissbourd (New York: Jossey Bass, 1994), 137.

3 *Ibid.*, 147.

4 Frank Farrow, "Family Support on the Federal Policy Agenda," in *Putting Families First*, ed. Sharon L. Kagan and Bernice Weissbourd (New York: Jossey Bass, 1994), 360.

5 Sharon L. Kagan, "Defining and Achieving Quality in Family Support," in *Putting Families First*, ed. Sharon L. Kagan and Bernice Weissbourd (New York: Jossey Bass, 1994), 375–82.

6 Kenneth A. Myers, "Popular Culture and the Family: How Mass-Mediated Culture Weakens the Ties That Bind," *Family Policy* 11 (July–August 1998): 5.

7 William J. Doherty and John M. Beaton, "Family Therapists, Community, and Civic Renewal," *Family Process* 39, no. 2 (2000): 150.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, 149–50.

10 *Ibid.*, 149.

11 William Damon, *The Youth Charter: How Communities Can Work Together to Raise Standards for All Our Children* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 43–50.

12 The literature on social support of parents who deal with a wide variety of problems indicates the crucial nature of that support. Some diverse examples are Antionette L. M. Harmer and Jennifer Sanderson, "Influence of Negative Childhood Experiences on Psychological Functioning, Social Support, and Parenting for

(Notes cont'd on pg 50)