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CHRISTIAN FAMILIES ON THE EDGE: AUTHORITARIANISM AND ISOLATIONISM AMONG US

by Rachel D. Ramer

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SYNOPSIS

In response to antifamily trends in recent decades, there has been a resurgence within Christianity to restore family integrity and values. Christians may agree on the importance of these issues, but there are very different views of the role of family within Christianity and culture. Some Christian groups, who see culture as adversarial to Christianity, believe the role of family is to protect its members from culture. Family certainly is to be a place of security; however, the principles of authority and isolation these groups often recommend are problematic and result in the family becoming a legalistic subculture even within Christianity. These groups often promote principles of parental authority based on shame. Their application of ancient biblical laws and examples to contemporary family situations and lifestyle issues is also questionable. Authoritarianism and isolationism provide a false sense of security from the moral and spiritual evils of the world, and merely result in a subculture that fails to interact with and transform culture in a redeeming way.

In an age of deteriorating families, deadbeat dads, and disregard for traditional family boundaries and values, Christians have responded by “focusing on the family.” Many aberrant groups and cults, on the other hand, compel followers to forsake family, interrupting this natural and significant expression of God’s protection and love. There are also those who encourage forsaking nearly everything *but* family. In light of our sinful “secularized” times, can the value of family be overrated?

Some Christians see family as the focal point of Christianity, relying on the teachings of leaders such as R. J. Rushdoony. Considered the father of Christian Reconstructionism, Rushdoony has stated, “All the basic governmental powers in society, save one, the death penalty, have been given [by God] to the family, not to the state nor to the church....A mark of anti-Christianity is the move to strip the family of these powers.”¹ In response to this idea, voices such as *Patriarch* magazine promote “home education, home business, home church, home birth, family ministry, family health, family worship...courtship and betrothal, family-based welfare.”² This view of the family may also include rejection of organized sports, church youth and singles’ groups, and neighborhood playmates.

Proponents portray this view as “balanced”³ and acknowledge that the home is under the authority of the church. In this paradigm, however, the church is a “home church” made up of like-minded *families* who isolate themselves from non-family-focused activities and from other Christians who do not share their particular view of family life and child-rearing values.

From within this structure, church leaders who let their wives work outside the home, use credit, limit family size, send their children to public schools, and so on, are viewed in a negative light. Concerning

such leaders, *Patriarch* asks, “Can I remain under the authority of someone who so denies the Bible by his life? Can my family continue to maintain fellowship in a church whose leaders so disregard the clear teachings of God’s Word?”⁴ *Patriarch* further suggests that youth groups and Sunday school programs demonstrate a “failure of the church to teach the principles of parental responsibility for child training and to reinforce it in the church’s programs,” and that the use of these programs in a church “may well be a reason to leave.”⁵

Isolationist Jonathan Lindvall of *Bold Christian Living* tried to answer his critics by affirming: “Yes, I am sheltering my children! I am convinced this is what God calls me to do.”⁶ Most Christians would probably agree that children need a certain amount of sheltering. The *concept* of sheltering is not the issue, however; the *extent* of sheltering is the real issue. Sheltering is a legitimate concept, but isolationists’ rationale for sheltering often does not convey the idea of the extent or limitations to the practice.

DISTURBING CHARACTERISTICS

Much good can be found within this parenting movement, and proponents do express concern for protecting children from harmful leadership and disciplinary tactics. The principles and techniques advocated throughout much of their material, however, convey mixed messages and therefore should be evaluated. Not everyone on the authoritarian/isolationist side of the debate agrees fully on the issues addressed in this article, but there are, nevertheless, some disturbing characteristics of this movement.

Authority or Authoritarianism?

Excessive authority is the primary issue when addressing the harmful characteristics of some child training/ education materials. Many authoritarians mimic Bill Gothard’s “chain of authority” or “chain of command” teachings.⁷ God certainly ordained an authority structure within the family, but demanding unquestioning obedience from children goes beyond what He instructed. In their article “Training Roseanna’s Flesh,” Michael and Debi Pearl, for example, argue that training a child properly is not a matter of focusing on any particular training issue itself, rather, “IT IS A MATTER OF ESTABLISHING AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHO IS IN CONTROL” (emphasis in original).⁸ They continue, “You must look for opportunities to demonstrate that you have the last word, that your authority is to be obeyed without question....If, during the course of a day, no contest arises naturally, you should arrange one. Seek opportunity to thwart the child’s will, to cause him to submit to your command.”⁹

Kelly Crespin of the Eclectic Homeschool Association gave the Pearls’ book, *To Train Up a Child*, a less-than-glowing review: “They compare the training of a child to the training of a dog or mouse. I feel that many children who receive this type of ‘training’ grow up to fear their parents, or any adult figure.”¹⁰

Author Reb Bradley, however, echoes the Pearls: “Keep your objective in mind — subjection of their will....Teach your children to obey without being told ‘why.’”¹¹ Authors William and Colleen Dedrick also concur: “When your child disregards or disobeys your command, he breaks fellowship with you and offends you as his God-ordained authority.”¹² Concerning permissiveness, lack of restraint, and neglect, the Dedricks state, “Every minute you spend with your child there is a battle in one or more of these areas.”¹³

Authoritarianism goes beyond healthy, positive discipline and demands absolute submission. From a biblical viewpoint, human authority is to be respected; yet, when the religious rulers were wrong, Peter and John disobeyed them (Acts 4:15–21). The Jewish midwives in Egypt also disobeyed authority for ethical reasons (Exod. 1:15–21). Parents who equate their authority with godlike sovereignty create confusion for a child. At some level, parents must become, for the child, models of humility instead of models of sovereignty. Parental overidentification with God’s authority confuses the child who eventually witnesses the parents’ imperfect/sinful humanity. This absolutizing of authority fails to recognize nuances and variables in human communication and situations and ignores possible emotional control issues and sinfulness within parents.

Some parenting books teach a calm, nonangry approach to asserting authority, while characterizing abuse as out-of-control reactions on the part of parents.¹⁴ Out-of-control anger is obviously a negative manipulation, but manipulation can happen without anger, and often does. A calm approach to subjugating a child's will and leading him or her to equate the parent's will with godliness on all issues is simply a more insidious form of abuse.

Some authoritarians redefine child abuse as a lack of authority: "Real child abuse is allowing a child to be overtaken by the destructive forces of sin and rebellion."¹⁵ Not so! Real child abuse is the misuse or overuse of authority. This overuse of authority can also occur with older children, for example, when parents make decisions for them in areas such as vocation, as well as some cases of courtship/betrothal. Jonathan Lindvall's Web site has an account of how one father micromanaged the relationship between his daughter and future son-in-law. He manipulated the couple emotionally into giving up their interest in each other, in order to test them, when he fully intended for them to marry.¹⁶ This deception in the name of authority carries harmful moral implications, since ends do not justify means in this case any more than in a case of physical abuse.

In his book, *Imperative People: Those Who Must Be in Control*, Christian psychotherapist Les Carter points out the result of excessive control: "Listen for the words *should*, *supposed to*, *got to*, *have to*, *ought to*, *must*, *can't*....Technically speaking, nothing is wrong in stating what *should* be done. After all, in a world that shuns absolutes, it's refreshing to feel like you *do* stand for something." He adds, however, that "you are in essence stating, 'I'll accept you only after you meet my conditions.' And since each of us responds negatively to this kind of emotional blackmail, we become angry and tense" (emphases in original).¹⁷ Children who emerge from such an environment may carry with them a distorted concept of God as an emotional blackmailer interested only in behavior. Parents who assert excessive control are prone to exasperate their children (Eph. 6:4), as their wills are consistently suppressed and their desires thwarted.

In contrast to the concept of establishing unquestioning obedience, Christian counselor Jeff Van Vonderen states:

Though most Christian parents have been trained to balk at this concept, it is our job to help [children] develop a strong *no*. They are going to need a strong *no* when they are fourteen years old and someone wants to be sexually intimate with them, or shoves a bottle of alcohol in their hand. Our job is to recognize opportunities for them to exercise their *no* — not to strip them of their will in the name of maintaining authority as a parent....In that light, actively look for opportunities to give them practice saying *no*, those times when a *no* would be an appropriate answer.¹⁸

Won't sheltering prevent 14-year-olds from being in situations where they need to say *no*? Not entirely. Children will also need to say *no* to the errant religions and philosophies presented from "authorities" they will encounter later in life. The ability to say *no* comes not simply from learning correct behavior and doctrine but from living in a healthy emotional environment. Moral behavior and correct doctrine are often sacrificed because of emotional neediness.

Arguing for strong parental authority, author J. Richard Fugate states, "It should be no surprise that leaderless children respond to cults, such as the Moonies and the Jones groups....These counterculture groups all have one thing in common — they **demand** followership. They each provide strong leadership, teach and enforce rules, and set a purpose for the life of the follower. Dare we as parents offer less?" (emphasis in original).¹⁹ Susceptibility to cults, however, can result not only from children being "leaderless" but also from being *overled*. Jesus contrasted authoritarianism with humble leadership: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Matt. 20:25–26 NIV). Humble leadership that is open to questioning and focused on relationship will provide emotional protection from cults; demanding leadership will not.

Head over Heart

Authoritarians tend to view all “heart issues” as sins, such as greed, rebellion, and lust. Blanket statements such as, “The loving parent will address the heart of the child through requiring confession”²⁰ center on Scriptures such as, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9 KJV). The sin aspect of the heart is not the only aspect to which the Bible refers, however. Consider the use of the term “heart” in “did not our heart burn within us?” (Luke 24:32 KJV) and “let not your heart be troubled” (John 14:1 KJV). Authoritarians mistakenly believe that emotional issues are being adequately dealt with by addressing all heart issues as sin issues. Tedd Tripp, author of *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, argues that addressing the heart's sin issues should also include concern for the emotional health of the child. He suggests approaching a child's heart issues by asking, “Help me understand what you are feeling.”²¹

VanVonderen explains that in shame-based families, emotions and feelings are minimized: “Talking about feelings or needs leaves you feeling ashamed for being so ‘selfish’....The measuring stick becomes: how things look; what people think; religious behavior....Children must learn to act like miniature adults in order to avoid shame...fault and blame are the order of the day.”²² The Pearls, for example, warn against expressing feelings, seeing them as selfishness: “For your children's own good, teach them to maintain control of their emotions. If you do not want to produce a sissy who uses adversity as a chance to get attention, then don't program them that way.”²³

VanVonderen notes that families who devalue emotions are “strong on ‘head skills’” and “weak on ‘heart skills.’”²⁴ He is not criticizing thinking skills; rather, he is suggesting the need for balance. The perception that feelings need to be conquered, denied, and shamed creates the kind of environment that one former Jehovah's Witness likened to the dissonance he felt within the Watchtower structure. The head knows all the “right” answers, as defined by the system, but the repressed, controlled emotions leave a person susceptible to harm and error.²⁵

Emotions, while not always accurate, *can* serve as an alarm, alerting one to distorted “truths.” A former Children of God member describes his release from the guilt he had experienced as a result of seeing nearly all feelings as sinful responses of the heart: “I had to come to the place where I regarded my feelings as friends rather than foes, that they weren't moral acts which I was judged for, but gifts of God given to help test reality.”²⁶

For many authoritarians, devaluing emotions also impacts the courtship/betrothal issue. John W. Thompson, for example, states, “Emotional romance, God says, is to be reserved for the betrothal stage of a relationship after a binding commitment to marry has been made, preventing the broken heart syndrome.”²⁷ This approach, however, contributes to suppressed emotions, and, while it may prevent broken hearts before marriage, it does nothing to prevent broken hearts *after* marriage, and it may very well cause them.

Shaming the Parents

Authoritarians not only promote shaming children, but their teachings also have a shaming tone toward parents. If a parent does not teach a child to obey the first time a command is given, the child may be hit by a car or be bitten by a poisonous spider. This fear tactic insults both parent and child, who understand the difference of importance and tone between “Time for bed” and “STOP!” (The Pearls advocate no change in voice tones or emotion for different commands.) Now, the point is well taken that parents often give too many warnings, but this authoritarian approach becomes manipulation of another sort, where every command is a crisis by definition.

The Pearls also tell parents, “Fail to use the rod on [a disobedient, bullying child] and you are creating a ‘Nazi.’”²⁸ Fear of producing a Nazi may compel parents to use a “rod” even when their intuition tells them there is a better option in a particular situation. The Dedricks shame parents with, “It is disgraceful to hear a grown man putting on his ‘I'm afraid you're not going to like me’ voice when negotiating with a two-year-old.”²⁹ They also state, “The parent who neglects or refuses to discipline his child [according to their idea of discipline] is himself undisciplined and disobedient to God.”³⁰

CULTURE CONFUSION

Authoritarianism and isolationism are often married. Christian isolationism endorses a “godly” subculture, encouraging separation even from other Christians who do not conform to the ideals of that subculture. Isolationist Steve Schlissel states, “The naiveté of modern Christians concerning the religious character of the so-called Culture War is astonishing. Culture, Henry Van Til taught us, is simply religion externalized and made explicit...We have been raised to believe that culture is religiously neutral rather than religiously determined.”³¹ Religion certainly does influence culture, but this all-or-nothing view sees nearly every expression of culture as a religious statement, either heathen or nonheathen.

There are, however, other approaches to understanding how Christians relate, or don’t relate, to the culture in which they find themselves. Professor and author Michael Horton draws from H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* to explain five different approaches: First, *Christ against culture* holds that “the world is evil, but the realm of the Spirit is good; earthly things are inherently sinful, while heavenly things are inherently virtuous.”³²

Second, *Christ of culture* views Christianity as an extension of culture. Niebuhr states, “The movement that identifies obedience to Jesus Christ with the practices of prohibition, and with the maintenance of early American social organization, is a type of cultural Christianity... Christ is identified with what men conceive to be their finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophy.”³³

Third, *Christ above culture* “suggests neither antagonism nor assimilation.”³⁴ This is an attempt at neutrality toward culture and is directly opposite Schlissel’s view.

Fourth, *Christ and culture in paradox* sees the kingdom of God and the kingdom of humankind as “different spheres with different purposes...Culture can never be an avenue of finding God...But neither can culture be an object of disgust, since culture never promises to save or redeem.”³⁵ In this view, while not all pleasurable aspects of life are spiritual in the salvific or godly sense, God is still present in them.

Fifth, *Christ the transformer of culture* is distinct from the *Christ against culture* and the *Christ of culture* views by holding that, “The problem is not the world, but the willful opposition of the world to God and His Christ. This frees the believer to participate in the world as a full-fledged citizen and to view it not as inherently wicked [or as an expression of false religions], but as a theater in which both God’s glory and human sin are displayed.”³⁶

Isolationists embrace the *Christ against culture* and also the *Christ of culture* views, and create their own culture, often based on ancient cultural practices found in the Bible. Horton explains that “there is great danger in mixing a ‘Christ against culture’ and a ‘Christ of culture’ paradigm...this mixture leads us to simply replace one culture with another and confuse the latter with God’s will and kingdom.”³⁷ *Christ against culture* and *Christ of culture* are two sides of the same coin. A true transformer of culture does not seek to create a separate culture; rather, he seeks to transform the existing culture.

Biblical Support for Isolation?

A look at Old Testament theocracy shows how covenants between a ruler and his people found in ancient Near Eastern culture were used as a pattern for God’s covenant with Israel. Theologians Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart state, “God constructed the Old Testament law on the analogy of these ancient covenants.”³⁸ Even the God-given Mosaic laws were not entirely divorced from the culture in which they were given.

Horton argues that, “Scripture admonishes us, [with Christ’s words ‘my kingdom is from another place’] to avoid either the tendency to confuse the kingdom of God with an earthly nation (Israel, America, etc.) or, on the other hand, to view citizenship in one kingdom as completely antithetical to citizenship and participation in the other.”³⁹

There certainly are cultures that adopt God’s laws more closely than others, such as those that abolish slavery or ban the exploitation of children; nevertheless, like the once-godly Pharisee sect, there are dangers from within once we’ve “arrived.” Jesus neither endorsed, nor participated in, a separatist

lifestyle (such as that of His contemporaries, the Essenes); rather, He took positive illustrations from, and participated in, His culture. His prayer to the Father for believers was “not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15 NIV).

Fee and Stuart argue that “there is no such thing as a divinely ordained culture; cultures are in fact different, not only from the first to the twentieth century, but in every conceivable way in the twentieth century itself.”⁴⁰ They caution against applying a biblical passage to a present-day situation when particulars in the passage are not comparable to the present-day situation. Even if a biblical *principle* is evident, they counsel, “the ‘principle’ does not now become timeless to be applied at random on whim to any and every kind of situation. We would argue that it must be applied to *genuinely comparable situations*” (emphasis in original).⁴¹

Isolationists’ belief that God has a particular culture in mind for His people influences how they interpret the Bible. Schlissel, for example, addresses the cultural craze over body piercing. He uses Leviticus 19:28 – “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you” (KJV) – to conclude that (male) body piercing is scripturally wrong.⁴² To apply this verse to today, however, would also mean we should not wear clothes made of two fabrics, since the same passage also instructs, “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (19:19 NIV).

Schlissel also points to ancient practices of piercing slaves for subordination purposes (Exod. 21:6; Deut. 15:17) to argue that body piercing should not be practiced today.⁴³ Mosaic laws concerning the treatment of slaves, however, fail as bases for transcultural principles about body piercing. Fee and Stuart address the pierced-slave passage (Deut. 15:12–17), calling it a casuistic law. “Such casuistic or case-by-case laws,” they say, “constitute a large portion of the more than six hundred commandments found in the Old Testament pentateuchal law....Because such laws apply specifically to Israel’s civil, religious, and ethical life, they are by their very nature limited in their applicability and therefore unlikely to apply to the Christian.”⁴⁴ Today, bondage is not in the piercing of a body part but in making such cultural issues absolutes. Paul warned regarding such bondage to the Mosaic Law, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1 NIV).

Isolationists also draw universal principles from biblical narratives. One area in which they do this is courtship/betrothal. From biblical accounts of betrothal Thompson concludes, “Biblical courtship isn’t simply an option, it’s an obligation....God established the courtship approach to marriage as transcultural, and thus normative for all people in all cultures and in all times.”⁴⁵

Fee and Stuart, however, also sound a warning against drawing universal moral principles from each biblical narrative: “The fallacy of this approach is that it ignores the fact that the [biblical] narratives were written to show the progress of God’s history of redemption, not to illustrate principles. They are historical narratives, not illustrative narratives.”⁴⁶ Confusion concerning what is or is not universal can result in creating a subculture based on ancient culture. The goal should rather be a transformed community acting as salt and light within the larger culture, based on the culturally transcendent principles of the Word of God (Rom. 12:2; cf. Matt. 5:13–16).

Finally, we might ask what was Jesus’ view concerning the role of the family. Consider His radical “anti-family” statements, such as: “I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother....Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:35, 37 NIV). Jesus also said, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:50 NIV). Now, we understand that Jesus was using hyperbole to make His point and not discounting the value of family, but we can gather from these statements that He did not view the biological family as the center of Christianity, but rather *Himself* and His kingdom.

What about Homeschoolers?

Is homeschooling a form of isolationism? It is true that considerable questionable material is directed to homeschoolers, and isolationists often homeschool; yet, this does not make all homeschoolers

isolationists. It would be inaccurate to view all homeschoolers, or even all Christian homeschoolers, as being on the same side of this issue. A growing segment of home educators question isolationist tendencies. Probably the most prominent evangelical homeschool curriculum company that rejects isolationism is Sonlight Curriculum Ltd. Sonlight's general manager Wayne Griess states that their philosophy is "to educate, not indoctrinate. We wish to grow learners aware of the world around them."⁴⁷ Sonlight owner John Holzmann plainly states that parents may *not* want to purchase Sonlight materials if "they want to shield their children as much as possible from contact with the world and the world system."⁴⁸ Home education is a viable philosophy in its own right and is not necessarily an expression of isolationism.

CONCERN FOR EVANGELISM

The issues of authoritarianism and isolationism carry grave implications concerning evangelism. First, to what do they convert people? The yoke of Christ is easy and His burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30). Authoritarianism and isolationism create an environment that is heavy and burdensome.

Second, isolationism is not the agent for evangelism it may claim to be but is busy converting people from one culture to another. Lacking interaction with current culture, isolationism creates a closed system, where, as author John Fischer points out, "a separatist Christian monologue has replaced meaningful dialogue with the world around us."⁴⁹

In contrast, viewing culture as a theater where God's glory interacts with humanity, both sinful and needy, and where Jesus stepped into a broken world to eat, drink, and *abide* with us, *is* biblical (Luke 7:34; John 1:14). Fischer sums up an alternative to isolationism: "I would suggest that we as Christians need to learn to *embrace* the danger of living in a dangerous world and trust not a safe subculture to protect us, but a praying Savior."⁵⁰

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