

# **When Parents Fail to Parent**

By Beverly K. Yahnke

For as long as I can remember, many have shared the quiet confidence that Christians just might be insulated from the travail or breakdown that occurred in “other” families. Growing up in a traditional Lutheran home, I genuinely believed that all Christian parents loved one another and raised disciplined, respectful, and God-fearing children

After serving as a Christian psychologist for the last couple of decades, I can assure you that Christian families are not exempt from pain, sin, failure and a hunger for truly loving and satisfying relationships. Yet, Christian families that have established Christ as the centerpiece of their homes live in the context of a Divine fugue. Temptation, sin, repentance, absolution and a life of prayer and praise are the keynotes of the refrain. God’s will and God’s way inform all the tasks of daily living for such families. Yet so many Christian parents seem to have lost their way. How is this possible? God’s Word teaches that Satan is surely much at work. Yet, Christian parents must be keenly aware of how the relentless drumbeat of our culture undermines parenting and families alike!

## **When Tolerance Becomes Neglect**

Parents usually share the goal of raising God-fearing children. Yet by very small increments, parents have begun to tolerate behavior that is increasingly less acceptable. Parents explain their tolerance by admitting to personal exhaustion. Parents now “pick their battles” and “don’t sweat the small stuff.” As a result when it comes to actively teaching their children the most fundamental Christian virtues, parents teach less, expect less and discipline less.

Some parents have never communicated a standard of conduct, or rules to their children, while others have rules as impermanent as soap bubbles. These days, after all, tolerance is regarded as the primary virtue. The Christian parent who is tolerant of a disrespectful child, or who is tolerant of children who lie, break rules, or who speak unkindly to others is a parent who is neglecting his child. Children must understand that obedience is God’s way for us and that we really need to take the Fourth Commandment seriously. God’s Word can’t be misunderstood as an irrelevant historical relic. Nevertheless, one father told me angrily, “Obedience is for dogs; not for children.”

The gentlemen didn’t understand that Christian living requires the death of the old Adam – even the old Adam of children. Neither tolerating the Old Adam, nor behaviorally modifying the Old Adam will do. Children must be taught to bludgeon the foe to death daily as we believe the promises of God and receive His gifts of contrition and repentance. Parents teach their children that we are to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect; yet we are reassured that God, in His infinite mercy, will always forgive the sins of His children for Jesus’ sake. Parents teach their children the joy of confessing sin without fear, so that even the littlest child can receive with a joyful heart God’s own full forgiveness from the lips of a parent. How else can children learn to live in glad obedience to our Heavenly Father (and one’s earthly parents, as well)?

## **When Time Becomes Too Precious**

We might be better parents if time weren't the most precious commodity in life. Parents are frenzied and some now purchase all of the professional services essential for their children's edification and entertainment. As a result, children are scheduled to meet with a blizzard of experts: coaches, therapists and tutors on a weekly basis. And, children are signed up for countless sports each semester, virtually guaranteeing no one will ever sit together at a dinner table. Worse, as the children's schedule is cranked up to head spinning levels, parents are even more over-scheduled than their kids, digitally tele-connected to pagers and e-mail, building little offices in their basements at home so that they can work 24/7 without interruption.

Our children are in the midst of a famine. They are starving for parent time, parent love, parent authority and parent teaching. The most crucial thing that our children miss is the chance to learn the faith from their parents. Our children are rarely learning prayers, hymns, Bible stories, and the Catechism from their parents. One dad told me, "I can't be bothered with that; that's why I send my kids to St. Paul's. That's what I'm paying them to do." He went on to explain, "My time is just too precious."

## **A Campaign of Merciful Teaching**

Why would a magazine entitled, "Mercy Works" worry itself with something as fundamental as Christian parenting? Quite candidly, our church must seize the opportunity to provide Christian families with guidance and help. We need vivid and patient preaching and teaching about the vocation of being a parent. We must learn anew what it means to be a Christian mother or father. Families are unlikely to stumble upon such wisdom without the counsel of the church.

Pastors, deaconesses and teachers, as well as healthy parent role models throughout our church, must join the teaching campaign. What a gift it is when you teach us that parenting is a loving, sacrificial relationship which is about self-denial and self-sacrifice – a notion that flies in the face of our culture. How powerfully you serve our Lord when you encourage the weary mom and the over-committed dad to continue to hold family devotions, to pray with their children and for their children regularly. How pleasing it is to God when you underscore the importance of family attendance at the Divine Service and Sunday school. Clock-bound parents who are blinded to God's vision for His children will remain in the dark and never get it right about parenting. We need, throughout the church, people who will be torchbearers, bringing Light and patient encouragement to parents and their children who may struggle.

Yet where will we find the confidence and conviction to be such torchbearers? We come to our church each Lord's day, for God has promised to meet us there in His Word and Holy Sacrament. He has promised to be present to bestow upon us the gifts of His forgiveness, Life and salvation. He has promised that amid the chaos and turmoil of our lives we will receive His own Divine Rest, for there is always rest of body and soul in the presence of our Lord. He feeds our souls with His holy food, nurtures and sustains our faith and renews us to do faithfully the tasks He would have us do, in His name and to His glory. And having received the gifts of

Christ, we are then equipped to give away to others everything that we have received from Him: forgiveness, patience, encouragement, hope, strength, mercy and kindness, as we bring the liberating Light of Christ into the darkness of many families.

We also need our pastors, deaconesses and teachers to teach vividly and patiently about the vocations of husband and wife, for nothing could be more important to the health and well being of our families. We need to be reminded that marriage is a crucible in which God uses every challenge, every hurt and every disappointment to draw us ever closer to Him, so that we might share his forgiveness and love with that man or woman whom He has given us. We need to hear that the marriage relationship is holy and sustained by God and not something we euthanize simply because the relationship is difficult or no longer seems fulfilling. Some pastors have begun to teach that one of the finest gifts a father can give his child is to love the child's mother. Perhaps we can rekindle within our church an understanding of God's vision for marriage, as well!

Families are not petri dishes, parents are imperfect and children will forever delight in testing their parents' boundaries and patience. Yet as the result of Christ's stunning resurrection, our Lord assures us that we are, through Him, triumphant over the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. And, as long as we continue to receive the love of the living God, in faith, He will continue to bless us to be a rich blessing to our neighbor – who just might be our child or our spouse.

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