

Calvinistic Child-Rearing

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For twelve hours, from Taipei to San Francisco, I sat by a “challenging” three-year-old. From the gate to the runway, from take-off to cruising at 37,000 feet, from descent to landing, he screeched at an ear-piercing pitch. And whined. No one within ten rows was spared. Surely he will tire, I assumed. But he did not... for 12 hours. His parents alternately tried multiple toys, video games, food, and holding him with no success. He was determined to be miserable and to share his misery with others. What might have helped his parents were some biblical lessons in Calvinistic child-rearing. Is there such a thing? Indeed there it. Think not that this vital task of child-rearing is left untouched by Christian truth. Think not that all we can do is turn to our own devices to learn how to rear our children. The Bible says quite a bit about human nature, and human nature is precisely what we must understand if we are to rear and love our children aright.

Original sin

The single most important fact about humanity when dealing with little people as well as big people is the doctrine of original sin. Regarding big people, this is why we put locks on our doors, why businesses hire auditors, and why governments have police forces, courts, jails, and armies. Regarding little people, this is why we shouldn't entertain foolish notions about our infants' innocence or purity. They are neither. Our infant granddaughter, Audrey Boone Girgis, is as beautiful and precious as she can be. She is already full of spunk and personality (at six weeks, mind you; with Emily as grandmother and Sally as mother, who could have guessed?). Nevertheless, she is still a “little viper(s) in covenant diapers,” as Henry Krabbendam so memorably expressed it. “You will be fighting them for control of the household from the moment you bring them home from the hospital,” Jim Baird (my mentor in ministry and father of four sons) advised me. Truer words were never spoken, I can say after rearing five children of my own.

Children enter the world thinking they are, or ought to be, the center of the universe. All the descendants of Adam would “be like God” (Gen 3:5, NASB). Consequently, they are born thinking

all the world should serve them. Every demand should be met. Immediately. Now. Whatever they want, they should get, whether food, playthings, or attention.

Wise parenting

Wise parents will begin early to rebut this egocentric view of reality. How? Children will want to eat, sleep, play, and later speak when they want to. They will require the whole household to revolve around their demands... if allowed. Wise parents will quickly begin to make newborns part of the household routine that is already established. Children, more or less, will learn to eat, sleep, and play when the family does. Early and frequent exposure to the word “no” is vital. When they refuse to lie quietly in bed at bedtime; when they demand food when dinner is soon to be served; when they interrupt adult conversation, the word *no* is salutary. A dozen times a day they are thereby reminded that they don’t come first and that all the world doesn’t exist to serve them. Compliance to directions should be immediate. As Elisabeth Eliot was fond of saying, “Slow obedience is no obedience.” If in the end compliance will be required on the 25th warning, why not on the first? All this to say, our natural desire as parents and grandparents to love our children, to do for them whatever needs to be done, and to do it now, must be tempered by regard for their built-in idolatry of self. We traveled with toddlers. We know what it is to navigate airports and airlines. The inconsolable child of my recent flight was a creation of his parents’ indulgence. The pattern of tantrums was established long before they got on the plane.

Ironically, the happiest of children are those accustomed to hearing the parental “no.” The fussy, whiney, miserable child has too many options and not enough maturity to make choices. He doesn’t know what he wants. He needs his parents to say, “Here is what we are doing next.” And follow through, parents! He needs to hear all day long, now it’s time for breakfast... now it’s time for nap... now it’s time for lunch, and so on. Then when he hears, now it’s time to get on the airplane, he will comply, without argument, without complaint.

Someone may object that they know children who were not reared this way and today those now-grown children are very committed adult Christians, serving Christ faithfully. This objection misses the point. There is no formula that guarantees that we will successfully transmit our faith to our children. Love covers a multitude of parental sins. Some very undisciplined parents have

wonderful adult children. The point is, why should today's parents, today's children, and everyone around them be miserable in the meantime? The point is, why not rear them in a manner that is consistent with fallen human nature? The point is, why guarantee an unhappy childhood, unhappy parenting experience, and isolate the family from others? Take my counsel or leave it: original sin implies conforming infants to the family schedule, parental insistence on immediate compliance from children, and generous use of the word "no." Establish a routine and they'll love it. As my brother-in-law says, "Children are the original conservatives." They *live* for things to be always the same. They thrive in a reliable, dependable, predictable environment. They are unsettled by irregularity and change. "That's not my chair," they'll let you know in a hurry.

Is original sin the only truth that needs to be understood? Of course not. Still, a large part of parenting involves restraining our children's idolatrous impulses.



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