

What is Happening to our Children?

Dr Jon Garvey looks at the influences on Christian children which are encouraging them to rebel against the faith and offers suggestions as to how these influences could be curtailed

There was recently a survey of the children of Christians, which looked at their attitudes and behaviour in areas like alcohol, drugs and sex. To everyone's surprise, there was little difference in lifestyle between them and the children of non-Christians. We really shouldn't be surprised. For teenagers to abandon their parents' faith is so common that it's actually the norm. Even where faith itself is not abandoned, our teenagers (openly or secretly) often buy the same drinks and visit the same clubs as their friends, and as any Family Planning Clinic will tell you, use the same contraceptives. Many Christians live in hope that, after the 'normal' phase of rebellion, their children will return to embrace the faith.

But is rebellion 'normal'? The Bible certainly doesn't seem to think so. If we were to put into effect the law God gave Israel in Deut. 21.18-21 our youth groups would be depopulated overnight. Neither does it seem 'normal' to believers overseas. They would surely be surprised not only at our situation, but at our complacency. To them the Bible's teaching seems quite clear: 'Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul' (Prov. 29.17). 'If you exerted Scriptural discipline as parents,' they might say, 'then you wouldn't have these problems.' There is much truth in this – but it is not the whole truth.

I remember, in the Cold War days, reading about a Soviet Christian woman who was forced to sell her daughters into prostitution to avoid starvation. 'How could any Christian even consider that?' I thought. 'Even death would be better.' But I'm older now, and I realise that different circumstances lead to different

temptations. Rather than judge those in an alien situation, I do better trying to understand why *I* fail in *my* situation, and then repent of that.

Spiritual Needs

So what is happening to our children? The first thing, it must be said, is that we do lack a sense of urgency about their spiritual need. How many young families have devotional times together? How many parents make their children familiar with the Bible as soon as they can read? Do our Sunday Schools and Youth Groups teach that without Christ they are eternally lost, or only that with him life will be really good fun? Do our churches pray earnestly that children will be saved, or have we all bought into the unscriptural idea that if we wait long enough, they're bound to get to heaven? There is certainly much need for repentance here, and for action too, lest we end up like Eli and his sons did in 1 Sam. 3-4.

But there is more, for Samuel's own sons rebelled against the Lord (1 Sam. 8), and God did not blame Samuel as he had Eli. We are living in a society that actually teaches children to rebel against God. Not only that, but it is a society that has more influence on how they think than any other in history.

Negative Influences

Just think about it. From babyhood, our children have a TV in the corner that talks to them more than we do. Even when we monitor what they watch, they are taking in a secular, not a Christian, worldview. When they are older, or round at their friends' houses, we can no longer act as censors, and the TV sits there like a dirty uncle, seducing them from God's ways.

At the age of five they disappear off to school. Their daily prayers have been abolished. There a good proportion of their classmates and teachers come from broken homes (even if their own parents are still together – for Christian adults, too, have learned to follow this world's patterns). Fewer of their friends will come from Christian homes than at any time since universal education began.

Recent research has shown that the biggest single influence on the development of a child's personality is not his family, but his peer-group (*The Independent*, 3 December 1997). If you doubt that, the same is true of language development – do your children speak like you, or like their schoolmates?

They learn religion at school – but to ensure that there is no unfair bias towards Christianity, the Bible is subjected to rigorous criticism. Meanwhile, to avoid giving offence to minorities, other religions are taught completely uncritically.

Pop Culture

At last, they reach teenage, which was actually *invented* in the 1950s to foster and capitalise on adolescent rebellion. 'Youth Culture' has since become a multi-billion pound industry which stirs up the particular temptations of the young for financial gain. Teenage magazines, TV programmes, Internet sites and record companies invest heavily to groom teenagers for selfishness and immorality. The most popular young teens' magazines in the 50s were *Eagle* and *Girl*. They often carried Bible stories. Can you even *imagine* such a thing in today's magazines?

Meanwhile the adult world bemoans teenage smoking whilst lowering the age of homosexual

consent, and wrings its hands about the increase in AIDS whilst encouraging children to get contraceptives behind their parents' backs. The wonder is that any of our children remain loyal to Christ at all.

Gospel Power

And indeed, God's grace is a wonder. Although we are foolish to presume that children will automatically get through rebellion and return to the Lord, it's amazing how many do. The Gospel is 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes'. If we're tempted to despair, let's remember that it has wrenched each one of *us* from the kingdom of darkness into God's light.

But let's also recognise that Satan has for the moment gained a strong foothold amongst our young people, and let us start getting mobilised to push him out again. How?

Protecting Children

One answer might be to try and cut our children off from the world. Ban the telly, teach them at home, forbid parties, play worship tapes all day long, and so on. It's certainly possible to create a ghetto culture, as the exclusive brethren and the ultra-orthodox Jews have. But

even if that doesn't produce its own (more legitimate) rebellion, it is a denial of the Gospel, which God designed to overcome the world, not to retreat from it (1 Cor. 5.9-10). So what *can* we do? Here are some suggestions.

We really do need to repent of our complacency towards our children's salvation – and to repent of our own part in the decline of our nation. God actually means it when he tells us to teach our children the way they should go, and we often haven't.

Right Foundation

We need to be more committed to grounding our children in the Biblical worldview. That means establishing patterns of home life that include Christ day by day before the children pick up other norms. It means Sunday Schools that are life-changing as well as entertaining. It means youth groups run *by* disciples to *make* disciples, not by good communicators to make fans.

We shouldn't separate our kids from the world, but we can try and mould their environment. So there *may* be a place for forgetting to buy a TV, or sending them to a Christian School, or moving to a church with a stronger youth work, and so on. And there certainly *is* a place for

discipline over where they go, what they do there, and when they come home.

Persistent Prayer

We must pray harder, too, not only for the young people we know, but strategically that God will bring about a sea-change in the culture of godlessness into which Britain has slipped. I asked a friend in Sri-Lanka to pray for some personal needs. 'Certainly,' he replied, 'our prayer time starts at 4am every day, and every Friday we have all night prayer from 10pm to 5am.'

Most of all, we need to have faith in God. Not in a passive, 'Let go and let God' way. God will work as we trust in him to work *through* us. That's whether we're at home struggling to do right by our own children, or visiting the school to make comments about the curriculum, or even lobbying (or standing for?) parliament. But in the end, all faith stems from the realisation of helplessness. If things are to change, we will not change them, for it is our sin which has messed things up to begin with. But with God, all things are possible. And he just loves little children. **PT**