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DISCIPLING OUR CHILDREN WITH LOVE

BY DAVID AND BEVERLY SEDLACEK

Parents stand in place of God in the lives of their children. Before children develop a personal relationship with God, they learn about God experientially through their primary caregivers. The seeds of love are awakened in the loving welcome given to a newborn baby, the awe and wonder of their birth, and the adoring look of the parents in the child's eyes. During the child's development to maturity, these seeds sprout into plants that produce fruit, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, and so forth (Gal. 5:23).

Unfortunately, some parents are incapable of offering such a loving welcome. Parents who have unhealed trauma from their childhood, who have not experienced being seen, soothed, safe, or secure, cannot give their children what they have not received. Deuteronomy 5:9 declares that the iniquity of the parents is visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation. The word iniquity implies a bending or distorted shaping of the child. Trauma research helps us to understand that children experience the harmful effects of generational trauma. Let's explore the spiritual trauma that children experience at the hands of well-meaning parents.

Spiritual abuse in families is a form of emotional and psychological trauma or neglect. Some parents fail to pour into their children spiritually. They do not talk about God or spiritual realities. These parents may be kind and loving and, in that sense, reflect God's love, but the children have no spiritual framework in which to put these realities. A hunger for God is planted, but the seeds fail to sprout due to spiritual neglect.

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Other parents who identify as Christians may have been taught a fear-based view of God. Unless they have looked closely at how they experienced God through their parents, they will unconsciously pass this view of God to their children. This form of spiritual abuse has many faces. One form of spiritual abuse occurs when parents require children to obey to earn their love and acceptance. Jesus connected love and obedience when he said, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 15:9-10). When children are loved well, they want to do what their parents ask them to do.

One of the most common forms of spiritual abuse occurs when parents overcontrol their children and fail to teach them how to make decisions. When parents make decisions for their children, the message is, “I have to make decisions for you as you are incapable of doing so on your own.” Children must be encouraged and empowered to make age-appropriate decisions as early as possible. Children benefit from the guidance of parents when making decisions and grow in the process when parents help them review the outcomes. A by-product of these interactions between parents and children includes strengthening the relationship and passing on wisdom.

Another face of spiritual abuse is using the Bible or the writings of Ellen G White as a club to beat the child. Conveying to a child that they are not measuring up to what God expects in a way that is not lovingly instructional but demeaning or condemning creates shame in a child. False humility conveys the understanding that we will never measure up to God’s expectations, and it is difficult to please him. On the surface, this false humility looks very spiritual. However, it requires hypervigilance to perform perfectly to earn God’s love or to keep him from being angry.

Neuroscience reveals that hypervigilance creates anxiety and causes stress. The amygdala, found in the brain’s limbic system, is responsible for scanning the internal and external environment for danger. With imminent threat, the amygdala signals the sympathetic system to mobilize for a fight or flight response. If the threat is too overwhelming, the individual may freeze. When the sympathetic system is constantly under stress, the immune system is impaired, and the prefrontal cortex (the thinking part of the brain) becomes paralyzed. Love, growth, development, and healthy thinking decrease when fear increases (Jennings, 2020). None of these mechanisms foster intimacy or a trusting relationship with God. A child may know that God is real but must be kept at a distance because he is to be feared. A child’s unconscious thought might be, “If God knew me, he wouldn’t love me; he will reject me forever.” The truth that they are loved with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3) will always be elusive.

Even more damaging to a child is the spiritual trauma that occurs when parents physically abuse their child in the name of discipline. There is often a misunderstanding of the word “rod” found in texts like Proverbs 13:24, “Whoever spares the rod hates their children...” and 29:15, “A rod and a reprimand impart wisdom, but a child left undisciplined disgraces its mother.” This misunderstanding of the word has allowed parents to beat their children in the name of discipline. The shepherd’s staff was used to guide the sheep and the rod was used to

fend off predators. Ellen White suggests that corporal punishment should be used as the last resort when all else has failed and done with love, not anger. The child may receive the message that God is abusive and magnified even further when parents discipline their child when angry. Both the old and new Testaments teach that love is what must motivate a parent's discipline (Proverbs 3:11-12, Hebrews 13:5).

Words can also be very destructive. They are like arrows shot into the heart of a child that can wound deeply. One of the primary love needs of every child is affirmation. When a parent only points out the negative aspects of a child's existence, e.g., "You should have gotten all A's," "You are not as handsome/beautiful as your sibling," "You are damaged goods, and no one will ever want you," children form negative, shaming thoughts about themselves and this produces anxiety about their value and worth. These neuropathways are hard to eradicate. A child's sense of identity, value, and worth are formed by words and actions that convey negative messages. New neuro-pathways need to be formed based upon the truth of a child's value as a child of God, one of infinite worth.

Sexual abuse is especially damaging to a child's view of God. When a parent fails to protect a child from an abuser, the child's sense of God as a protector is damaged. The child's anger is often displaced onto God with thoughts such as, "God, why did you let this happen to me? If you loved me, you would not have let this happen!" If a parent, who professes to serve Christ, sexually violates a child, a question is often asked, "Why God did you give me these messed up parents?" The child's view of themselves may become so distorted that they internalize themselves as a sexual object and begin to embrace a sexually destructive life in the form of sexual promiscuity, prostitution, or even becoming porn stars.

The results of spiritual trauma include a shattered sense of self and a shattered worldview. A shattered self consists of a range of symptoms of post-traumatic distress, such as intrusive memories, hyperarousal, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, numbness, dissociation, compulsion to reenact, restriction of range of effect, and sleep disturbances (Freedman, 2006). The shattered worldview includes what a person thinks is true, such as believing oneself at fault for the trauma, thinking oneself to be unsafe, or believing certain kinds of people pose a risk to oneself or others (Panchuk, 2018).

Healing begins by recognizing that spiritual trauma has occurred. Many involved in unhealthy spiritual communities may be in denial of their spiritual trauma. They may be unaware or not realize what genuine spirituality is. There is often a need to deconstruct a person's erroneous view of God and to reconstruct a more accurate idea of who He is. Many adults still carry the picture of God they learned as children and must now re-consider the character of the God they choose to believe. Children and adults must also be empowered to learn to say "no" and set healthy spiritual boundaries on the healing journey. They will be better able to perform this vital task once they know the God of their understanding for themselves.

These steps open the door for the person to begin exploring the world around them in new and exciting ways. They will be out of the spiritual imprisonment they have been confined to for so

long. They have the potential to experience God in a way that engenders their personal growth. This journey aims to experience God being on the journey with them, leading them, and growing them. Some people learn from the experience of others who can relate to them and their stories. Others may need the help of a trauma-informed therapist. If you recognize that you are among those who have been spiritually traumatized, we would invite you to begin the painful, yet courageous journey of healing.

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