

Complex Questions

The Problem with Modern Christian Parenting

by William Michael, January 2011



In Christian circles, there are surely rules for what children are allowed to do and what they're not. This is understood even by the celebrities and performers themselves. The rapper Eminem, for example, refers to this in the song "Renegade"

***To shatter the picture in which of that as they paint me
as a monger of hate and Satan a scatter-brained atheist
But that ain't the case, see it's a matter of taste
We as a people decide if he's as bad as they say he is
Or is he the latter - a gateway to escape?
Media scapegoat, who they can be mad at today
See it's easy as cake, simple as whistlin' Dixie
while I'm wavin' the pistol at sixty Christians against me***

Now, you may not understand what he's saying, and you probably wouldn't want to read much further beyond these lines, for I was barely able to quote eight lines without any profanity. He's criticizing the parents who blame his music for their children's problems and calling them hypocrites.

My point in this is that the performers most Christians spend their time fussing about are conscious of the disapproval of parents, yet they know the restrictions are a joke. They sing of issues that aren't spoken of at the dinner table and of issues that most Christian children shouldn't ever know about: drugs, murder, fornication, organized crime, etc.. There's no reason for Christian children to listen to these stories from the ghetto, especially when many of them seek to glorify the evils known there. While he's selling millions of albums, it's easy for parents to say "No" to Eminem--his songs are disgusting and laced with profanity.

However, I'd like for you to watch the following video. It contains the music of Tiesto, one of the world's most famous DJs, who produces music that is used in dance clubs around the world. He is so well-known that he provided the music for the opening ceremonies of the 2004 Olympic Games. Watch the video--and don't ignore the size of the crowd:

Now, imagine that your teenage son asked if it was OK to listen to Tiesto. There are no bad lyrics. The music doesn't promote sex, violence, drugs or crime. The DJ and the audience are dancing and seem to be having a good time. They're even getting some physical exercise jumping around.

While it may be bad to listen to Eminem, is it OK to listen to Tiesto?

It is this kind of moral dilemma that many Christian parents face as they raise children in the modern world. The criteria for permissible behavior have become three questions: (1) Does it promote sexual immorality? (2) Does it contain profanity? (3) Does it contradict Christian teaching? If bodies are covered, talk is clean and there are no anti-Christian messages, it's hard for most parents to say "No". Parents can preview a video and know when to skip a bad part. They can take time to discuss some of the anti-Christian content so that the movie isn't spoiled by a little bit of false teaching or bad religion. In fact, modern technology allows Christian parents to eliminate the dirty talk from any show they're watching. The "TV Guardian" (TVG) is advertised as follows:

"TVG is technology that mutes bad language while you're watching LIVE TV, DVR Playback or DVDs. Works for Standard Televisions or HDTVs. So, now you can watch TV and movies live or play them back on your DVR and never let the worry of bad language spoil your family time. TVG filters out the bad words and has been so successful that more than 12 million TVGuardians are already in the homes of families."

Wow! Now, family time doesn't have to be spoiled by an unanticipated bad word. No more awkward moments when the kids turn to Mommy and ask, "What does \$#!@%&\$ mean, Mommy?" Now, with TV Guardian, our little angels are safe.

Are they really safe? I sure don't think so. If they are safe, after all, what are they safe from? Is it really hearing bad words that threatens our children's well-being? Is the Gospel of Christ brought to the brink of defeat by the uttering of a four letter word on a DVD? Is a child's soul protected by a father's careful fast-forwarding past a violent battle scene? Is this really what Christianity is about? Is this really what the next generation is supposed to embrace?

In this article, I'd like to suggest a very different approach to Christian parenting. I'm not writing as a theologian or pastor. I'm not relying on any religious authority to teach what I'd like to teach. I'm writing as a philosopher, who relies on reason to make decisions in light of my Christian faith. I'm submitting this article to you as a fellow Christian parent but also as one charged with the teaching of children. I believe that we, Christians, have wandered into a bad way and I'd like to propose a radically different course for us to take as we live out our Christian lives before God. I'd like to suggest a very different way of drawing lines in our lives that allows us to have limits and live well. I know that many people will hate what I have to say, but I'm not writing for them. I'm writing for those who, like me, are unhappy with the shallow answers children are given by Christians in our generation and the undeniably bad effects those answers can be seen to have.

A LIFE OF COMPLEX QUESTIONS

If you are a Christian parent who takes the moral formation of your children seriously, you've probably been criticized at some point for being too restrictive. You've probably been warned that children who are kept from doing the things other children do grow up to rebel against their parents and do them anyway. You've probably been warned that it is dangerous to shelter children too much because the only way to learn to resist temptations is to practice resisting them. If your child is kept from all dangers, you cannot be confident that your child is resisting them, only that he hasn't faced them yet.

We usually brush these warnings off when we hear them, but in our hearts we know that there is some truth to them and, at times, they haunt us. This is why we are often stressed about our children's spiritual lives. We monitor their music. We limit their television watching. We prevent them from spending time with bad kids. Nevertheless, we still see bad behavior in them. We punish them. We *still* see bad behavior in them. We punish them more. We *still* see bad behavior in them. If our children are thus protected from the world and disciplined--but are still found to have worldly tendencies, are we really accomplishing anything? Is their rebellion inevitable? Are we doing something wrong? While we wrestle with these questions, I believe our problem is being revealed and it's this way of thinking about education and parenting that I'd like to go after here.

The problem that I believe exists in this approach to parenting is that it is entirely *negative*. "Being good" means not doing evil. Evil is understood to mean the committing of bad deeds. Fighting is bad. Stealing is bad. Cursing is bad. Disobedience is bad. Good children don't do those things. Bad children do them. The ideal child is one who does not do bad things. The good parent is one who keeps his children from doing bad things. His children do not curse. His children do not fight. His children do not steal. His

children do not have sex before they are married. His children do not do bad things. They are good children.

That view of family life, parenting and education is the view held by many, many Christian families. Christian families send their children to Christian schools because they believe they will be less likely to do bad things there. Christian families homeschool because they believe that their children will be less likely to do bad there. They want their children to be good and are willing to take great measures to prevent them from "falling away", i.e., from doing bad things.

Here's where things get complicated, though. Different Christian families have different opinions about exactly what bad behavior is. Some think that watching bad TV shows is bad, while others think that TV is bad in and of itself. Some think that the skimpiest outfits at the mall are bad while others think that an exposed ankle is bad. Everyone has their own set of standards, but at different times these standards are challenged. The looser families may see a teenager "falling away" and regret being as loose as they had been. The stricter families may see a teenager suffering from a chronic unhappiness and regret being too restrictive. When the families get together, a looser parent may admire the children of a stricter parent, while the stricter parent may think that the looser children really aren't so bad after all. What, then, should the standards be?! The common American answer, "Well, everyone is different.", doesn't help and isn't true for morality. God is not different for every person. The ten commandments aren't different for every person. The Christian faith isn't different for every person. There must be a better answer. What does GOD say about skirt lengths, song lyrics, video games, make-up, candy, boyfriends, war movies! There must be an answer.

Well, actually, no. There doesn't need to be an answer to these questions, especially from God.

When has God ever taught men how to brush their teeth? Never. Men do not need to be told to brush their teeth or how because reason tells them that and divine revelation isn't given where reason is sufficient. Men know that if they leave their teeth un-brushed, bad things will happen. No one waits for God to confirm these fears, but they take care of their teeth without ever wondering whether it is God's will or not. Reason guides us and we seek nothing more.

The problem with the questions of Christian parents mentioned above is that, for some reason, they are not covered in divine revelation and can't seem to be resolved by reason. They fall into what are popularly called "gray areas", but I'd like to describe these questions differently. (By the way, I've never heard a classical philosopher or theologian speak of "gray areas".)

I argue that these so-called "gray area" questions are really questions that reveal a bigger problem in our lives and that they cannot be answered as they are being asked. They are what logicians would call "complex questions". The questions are not innocent and open to a clear answer. They force the answerer to accept certain ideas that have not yet been granted. For example, if you and I stood in front of a group of your friends and I asked you, "Are you still covering up your drug addiction?", you can't simply answer "Yes." or "No." The question implies that you did, in fact, *have* a drug addiction and you would seem to accept that implication if you answered, "No, I'm not still covering up my drug addiction." This is the reason why the "gray area" questions in Christian parenting cannot be answered. They begin with unfair assumptions and then appear to have no authoritative answer. When no authoritative answer can be found, those asking act as though they must be free to do as seems best to them. However, this is not true. These questions are not so innocent.

This brings us back to our original question about the music of Tiesto. When a child asks, "Mom, can I listen to the music of Tiesto?" we are stuck with a complex question. First, music listening is not a necessary part of the child's life, nor is it a human right. Whether the music comes from Tiesto or Eminem or even Mozart makes no difference. The first thing we have to deal with is the assumption being made: that the boy should be listening to music at all.

A LIFE OF DAILY DUTIES

What all of these complex questions of modern parents assume is that Christian people have time for all sorts of leisurely activities. They wake up in the morning with a blank schedule and then begin their questions: "Can I watch TV?", "Can I play outside?", "Can I go to the mall?"--on and on and on. The parents are led to believe that good parents have good answers to these questions, or consistent policies that direct their rapid-fire responses. Parents fail to recognize the assumption that runs through them all: that there is nothing else to do.

Here is where I'd like to propose a radical solution:

Let's provide ourselves and our children with a schedule full of things we SHOULD be doing and eliminate all these questions.

First, we have one goal in life and that is the salvation of our souls. Jesus asked, "What does it profit for a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" and that is the ultimate question we must ask ourselves and our children every day. This is how Jesus answered the complex questions we face. He didn't wrangle over music lyrics or the lengths of dresses. He cut to the heart and got after the main thing. We are going to be judged at the end of our lives and be assigned to an eternal place of pleasure or pain. We have to save our souls. That is what we are to be doing, "mourning and weeping in this valley of tears". This is not our home, not where we are designed by God to be. It is a brief time of probation, which, if rightly used, can gain for us everlasting life.

Once we nail down the chief end of our lives, and commit to obtaining that end, our schedule will be quite full, every day, for the rest of our lives! We need to pray. We need to study God's word. We need to do penance. We need to obey our Lord's commands and live out the Christian life. For example, consider the works of mercy:

Corporal Works of Mercy	Spiritual Works of Mercy
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To feed the hungry;• To give drink to the thirsty;• To clothe the naked;• To harbour the harbourless;• To visit the sick;• To ransom the captive;• To bury the dead.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To instruct the ignorant;• To counsel the doubtful;• To admonish sinners;• To bear wrongs patiently;• To forgive offences willingly;• To comfort the afflicted;• To pray for the living and the dead.

When can anyone ever be done with all of these wonderful works? Is it not plain that the only reason we are discussing the "gray area questions" is that we are idle and neglecting the works we should be engaged in? Yes, if we would start not with an empty schedule to be filled by spontaneous decisions made by parents every day, but with a prioritized and busy schedule of prayers, studies and good works, would not all of the parenting troubles disappear? Would not the idle children's fights over toys come to an end? Would not the movie selection debates cease? Wouldn't the arguments over fashions and friends be avoided? Surely, they would. This, I argue is the real solution to our parenting problems. It is not so much the children who are being bad as the entire household that lacks a real Christian mission.

Thus, I recommend that we stop thinking that saints are made by restrictions--"Do not touch", "Do not taste", "Do not watch". The saints weren't holy because they never desired anything that their parents denied them, but because they lived with purpose. A clear mission allowed them to live with zeal and their missions led them to consider all the things of the world to be, as St. Paul says, "garbage". The saints didn't live telling themselves "No!", they lived telling God "Yes!". This is the life we and our children need.

The good news is that our children are not eager for bad things or that they are "falling away" from Christianity. The problem is that Christianity is being presented to them in such a boring and lifeless way that the trash of the world is being made to look like treasure. The bad news is that we have a lot of work to do. We need to fill our homes and our lives with true, fiery Christianity--the Christianity of prophets, martyrs, saints and missionaries. We don't need to order new movies or paintings for the wall. We don't need to throw out our old clothes and buy new "Christian" clothes. We don't need to work harder to develop more cunning answers for our children's complex questions. We must fill our days with works that should fill a Christian's days: prayer, study, work, charity, worship, evangelism, teaching, visiting, helping, serving, clothing, feeding, comforting, and so on. We must take up the Great Commission, to go out into the world and make disciples. Like David, we must enter the battlefield and take on Israel's enemies.

We will know when we have improved our lives when we no longer discuss the "gray area" questions in our homes.

CONCLUSION

The problem with Tiesto's music is not in the lyrics or in the behavior of his concert-goers. The problem is that people listen and dance to Tiesto's music instead of praying, studying God's word, meditating on the law and wisdom books, doing the works of mercy and other activities with eternally meaningful consequences. The question is not whether a certain movie or dress is good or bad, but whether we couldn't be doing something more important with our time, resources and energy. We can blow up these complex questions by living out the Christian faith as the saints did, but to do this, we must radically re-orient our lives. We must find missions for our families and then devote all that we have to successfully completing those missions. In my family, we are starting a free boarding school for poor children brought to us by the Missionaries of the Poor, along with running the Classical Liberal Arts Academy. For us, our mission is more exciting than any movie, more satisfying than any meal, more comforting than any vacation and we never stop working as a family. I encourage you to abandon the negative philosophy of parenting that leads to endless wrangling over nonsense, and to embrace an active, mission-oriented and heavenly-minded life that can set your family free and make you and your children truly happy.

WILLIAM C. MICHAEL



William C. Michael is the founder and director of the Classical Liberal Arts Academy. He and his wife, Dania are the parents of eight Catholic Christian children and live in rural North Carolina. Mr. Michael serves with the Missionaries of the Poor overseas as a visiting formation instructor and advisor and, in collaboration with the MOP, is soon to open the CLAA's Beatitudes Charity School--a free boarding school for orphaned and abandoned mission children in his home town of Monroe, NC. Mr. Michael can be contacted by e-mail at the CLAA: wmichael@classicalliberalarts.com.

Comments? Questions? E-mail Mr. Michael at mail@classicalliberalarts.com.