



This article was written by John Angell James (1785-1859), and English Congregationalist preacher. It is quoted from *A Theology Of The Family*, Pollard, Jeff & Scott Brown, eds. ©2014 The National Center for Family-Integrated Churches. pp. 325-332. It was an article that I found extremely helpful for showing the importance of Parental involvement in children's spiritual formations.

Principle Obstacles in Bringing Up Children for Christ

John Angell James (1785-1859)

That, in many cases, the means employed by Christian parents for their children's spiritual welfare are unsuccessful in a melancholy fact established by abundant and, I fear, accumulating evidence. I am not now speaking of those families – and are there indeed such? – where scarcely the semblance of domestic piety or instruction is to be found, where no family altar is seen, no family prayer is heard, no parental admonition is delivered! What! This cruel, wicked, ruinous neglect of their children's immortal interests in the families of professors! Monstrous inconsistency! Shocking dereliction of principle! No wonder that their children go astray. This is easily accounted for. Some of the most profligate young people that I know have issued from such households. Their prejudices against religion and their enmity to its forms are greater than those of the children of avowed worldlings. Inconsistent, hypocritical, negligent professors of religion frequently excite in their sons and daughters and unconquerable aversion and disgust against piety, which seems to produce in them a determination to place themselves at the furthest possible remove from its influence.

But I am now speaking of the failure of a religious education where it has been in some measure carried on, instances of which are by no means infrequent...Too often do we see the child of many prayers and many hopes forgetting the instructions he has received and running with the multitude to do evil. Far be it from me to add affliction to affliction by saying that this is to be traced in every case to parental neglect. I would not thus, as it were, pour niter and vinegar upon the bleeding wounds with which filial impiety has lacerated many a father's mind. I would not thus cause the wretched parent to exclaim, "Reproach hath broken my heart, already half-broken by my child's misconduct." I know that in many cases no blame whatever could be thrown on the parent. It was the depravity of the child alone, which nothing could subdue but the power of the Holy Ghost, that led to the melancholy result. The best possible scheme of Christian education, most judiciously directed and most perseveringly

maintained, has in some cases totally failed. God is a sovereign, and He hath mercy on whom He will have mercy (Rom. 9:15). Still, however, there is in the order of means a tendency in a religious education to secure the desired result. God usually does bless with His saving influence such efforts. "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). This is certainly true, as a general rule, though there are many exceptions to it.

I shall now lay before you the principal obstacles to the success of religious education as they strike my mind.

FIRST. It is frequently too negligently and capriciously maintained, even where it is not totally omitted. It is obvious that, if at all attended to, it should be attended to with anxious earnestness, systematic order, and perpetual regularity. It should not be maintained as a dull form, and unpleasant drudgery, but as a matter of deep and delightful interest. The heart of the parent should be *entirely* and *obviously* engaged. A part of every returning Sabbath should be spent by him in the instruction of his filial charge. His concern should be embodied, more or less, with that whole habit of parental conduct. That father may lead the usual devotions at the family altar. The mother may join with him in teaching their children catechism, hymns, and Scripture. But, if these be unattended by serious admonition, visible anxiety, and strenuous effort to lead their children to think seriously on religion as a matter of infinite importance, little good can be expected. A cold, formal, capricious system of religious instruction is rather likely to create prejudice against religion than prepossession in its favor.

Then again, a religious education should be *consistent*. It should extend to everything that is likely to assist in the formation of character...It should select the schools, the companions, the amusements, the books of youth. For if it do nothing more than merely teach a form of sound words to the understanding and to the memory, while the impression of the heart and the formation of the character are neglected, very little is to be expected from such efforts. A handful of seed, scattered now and then upon the ground without order or perseverance, might as rationally be expected to produce a good crop as that a mere lukewarm, capricious, religious education should be followed by true piety. If the parent be not visibly in earnest, it cannot be expected that the child will be so. Religion, by every Christian parent, is theoretically acknowledge to be the most important thing in the world. But if in practice the father appears a thousand times more anxious for the son to be a good scholar than a real Christian, and the mother more solicitous for the daughter to be a good dance or musician than a child of God, they may teach what they like in the way of good doctrine, but they are not to look for genuine piety as the result. This can only be expected where it is really taught and inculcated as the one thing needful.

SECONDLY: The relaxation of domestic discipline is another obstacle in the way of a successful religious education. A parent is invested by God with a degree of authority over his children, which he cannot neglect to use without being guilty of trampling underfoot the institutions of heaven. Every family is a community, the government of which is strictly despotic, though not tyrannical. Every father is a sovereign, though not an oppressor. He is a legislator, not merely a counselor. His will should be law, not merely advice. He is to

command, to restrain, to punish; and children are required to obey. He is, if necessary, to threaten, to rebuke, to chastise; and they are to submit with reverence. He is to decide what books shall be read, what companions invited, what engagements formed, and how time is to be spent. If he sees anything wrong, he is not to interpose merely with the timid, feeble, ineffectual protest of Eli – “*Why do ye such things?*” (1 Sam. 2:23) – but with the firm though mild prohibition. He must rule his own house and by the whole of his conduct make his children feel that obedience is his due and his demand.

The want of discipline, wherever it exists, is supplied by confusion and domestic anarchy. Everything goes wrong in the absence of this. A gardener may sow the choicest seeds; but if he neglect to pluck up weeds and prune wild luxuriances, he must not expect to see his flowers grow or his garden flourish. So a parent may deliver the best instructions. But if he does not by discipline eradicate evil tempers, correct bad habits, repress rank corruptions, nothing excellent can be looked for. He may be a good prophet and a good priest; but if he be not also a good *king*, all else is vain. When once a man breaks his scepter or lends it to his children as a plaything, he may give up his hopes of success from a religious education...The misfortune in many families is that discipline is unsteady and capricious, sometimes carried even to tyranny itself, at [other times] relaxed into a total suspension of law, so that the children are at one time trembling like slaves, at others revolting like rebels; at one time groaning beneath an iron yoke, at others rioting in a state of lawless liberty. This is a most mischievous system, and its effects are generally just what might be expected.

In some cases, discipline commences too late. In others, it ceases too early. A father’s magisterial office is nearly coeval with his parental relation. A child, as soon as he can reason, should be made to feel that obedience is due to parents. For if he grow up to boyhood before he is subject to the mild rule of paternal authority, he will very probably, like an untamed bullock, resist the yoke. On the other hand, as long as children continue beneath the paternal roof, they are to be subject to the rules of domestic discipline. Many parents greatly err in abdicating the throne in favor of a son or daughter because the child is becoming a man or a woman. It is truly pitiable to see a boy or girl of fifteen ... allowed to sow the seeds of revolt in the domestic community and to act in opposition to parental authority until the too compliant father gives the reins of government into filial hands or else by his conduct declares his children to be in a state of independence. There need not be any contest for power. For where a child has been accustomed to obey, even from an infant, the yoke of obedience will generally be light and easy. If not, and a rebellious temper should begin to show itself early, a judicious father should be on his guard and suffer no encroachments on his prerogative. At the same time, the increased power of his authority, like the increased pressure of the atmosphere, should be felt without being seen. This will make it irresistible.

THIRDLY: Undue severity, in the other extreme, is as injurious as unlimited indulgence. If injudicious fondness has slain its tens of thousands, unnecessary harshness has destroyed its thousands. By an authority that cannot err, we are told that the cords of love are the bands of a man. There is a plastic power in love. The human mind is so constituted as to yield readily to the influence of kindness. Men are more easily led to their duty than driven to

it... Love seems so essential an element of parental character that there is something shockingly revolting not only in a cruel, not only in an unkind or severe, but even in a coldhearted father. Study the parental character as it is exhibited in that most exquisitely touching moral picture, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When a father governs entirely by cold, bare, uncovered authority; by mere commands, prohibitions, and threats; by frowns, untampered with smiles; when the friend is never blended with the legislator, nor authority modified with love; when his conduct produces only a servile fear in the hearts of his children instead of a generous affection; when he is served from a dread of the effects of disobedience rather than from a sense of the pleasure of obedience. When he is rather dreaded in the family circle as a frowning specter than hailed as the guardian angel of its joys; when even accidents raise a storm or faults produce a hurricane of passion in his bosom when offenders are driven to equivocation or lying with the hope of averting by concealment those severe corrections which disclosure always entails” when unnecessary interruptions are made to innocent enjoyments; when in fact nothing of the father, but everything of the tyrant is seen: can we expect religion to grow in such a soil as this? Yes, as rationally as we may look for the tenderest hothouse plant to thrive amidst the rigors of eternal frost.

It is useless for such a father to teach religion. He chills the soul of his pupils. He hardens their hearts against impression. He prepares them to rush with eager haste to their ruin as soon as they have thrown off the yoke of their bondage and to employ their liberty as affording the means of unbridled gratification.

Let parents then in all their conduct blend the lawgiver and the friend, temper authority with kindness...Let them so act that their children shall be convinced that their law is holy and their commandment is holy, and just, and good and that to be so governed is to be blessed.

FOURTHLY: The inconsistent conduct of parents themselves is a frequent and powerful obstacle to success in religious education...What then must be the influence of parental example? Now, as I am speaking of religious parents, it is of course assumed that they do exhibit in some measure the reality of religion...Religion may be seen in dim outline by the children in such a mist of imperfections, that it presents little to conciliate their regard or raise their esteem. There is so much worldly-mindedness, so much conformity to fashionable follies, so much irregularity of domestic piety, such frequent sallies of unchristian temper, such inconsolable grief and querulous complaint under the trials of life, such frequent animosities towards their fellow Christians observable in the conduct of some Christians that their children see religion to the greatest possible disadvantage. The consequence is that it either lowers their standard of piety or inspires disgust towards it altogether.

Parents, as you would wish your instructions and admonitions to your family to be successful, enforce them by the power of a holy example. It is not enough for you to be pious on the whole, but you should be wholly pious; not only to be real disciples, but *eminent* ones; not only sincere Christians, but *consistent* ones. Your standard of religion should be very high. TO some parents I would give this advice: Say less about religion to your children, or else *manifest more* of its influence. Leave off family *prayer*, or else leave off family *sins*. Beware how

you act, for all your actions are seen at home. Never talk of religion but with reverence. Be not forward to speak of the faults of your fellow Christians. When the subject is introduced, let it be in a spirit of charity towards the offender and of decided abhorrence of the fault. Many parents have done irreparable injury to their children's minds by a proneness to find out, to talk of, and almost to rejoice over the inconsistencies of professing Christians. Never cavil at nor find fault with the religious exercises of the minister you attend. Rather, commend his discourses in order that your children may listen to them with greater attention. Direct their views to the most eminent Christians. Point out to them the loveliness of exemplary piety. In short, seeing that your example may be expected so much to aid or frustrate your efforts for the conversion of your children, consider "*what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness.*" (2 Peter 3:11)

FIFTHLY: Another obstacle to the success of religious instruction is sometimes found in the wild conduct of an elder branch of the family, especially in the case of a dissipated son. The elder branches of a family are found, in general, to have considerable influence over the rest and often times to give the tone of morals to the others. They are looked up to by their younger brothers and sisters. They bring companions, books, amusements into the house and thus form the character of their juniors. It is of great consequence therefore that parents should pay particular attention to their elder children. If unhappily the habits of these should be decidedly unfriendly to the religious improvement of the rest, they should be removed, if possible, from the family. One profligate son may lead all his brothers astray. I have seen this, in some cases, most painfully verified. A parent may feel unwilling to send from home an unpromising child under the apprehension that he will grow worse and worse. But kindness to him in this way is cruelty to the others. Wickedness is contagious, especially when the diseased person is a brother.

SIXTHLY: Bad companions out of the house counteract all the influence of religious instruction delivered at home. A Christian parent should ever be on the alert to watch the associations that his children are inclined to form. On this subject, I have said much to the young themselves in the following work. But it is a subject that equally concerns the parent. One ill-chosen friend of your children's may undo all the good you are the means of doing at home. It is impossible for you to be sufficiently vigilant on this point. From their very infancy, encourage them to look up to you as the selectors of their companions. Impress them with the necessity of this and form in them a habit of consulting you at all times. Never encourage an association that is not likely to have a decidedly friendly influence on their religious character. This caution was never more necessary than in the present age. Young people are brought very much together by the religious institutions that are now formed...Yet it is too much even for charity to believe that all the active young friends of Sunday Schools, Juvenile Missionary Societies, etc. are fit companions for our sons and daughters.

SEVENTHLY: The schisms that sometimes arise in your churches embitter the minds of Christians against each other have a very unfriendly influence upon the minds of the young. They see so much that is opposite to the spirit and genius of Christianity in both parties and enter so deeply into the view and feelings of one of them that either their attention is drawn

off from the essentials of religion, or their prejudices raised against them. I look upon this as one of the most painful and mischievous consequences of ecclesiastical contentions...

[LASTLY]: The spirit of filial independence, which is sanctioned by the habits if not by the opinions of the age, is another hindrance and the last that I shall mention to the good effect contemplated and desired by a religious education. The disposition, which is but too apparent in this age to enlarge the privileges of the children by diminishing the prerogative of their parents, is neither for the comfort of the latter, nor for the wellbeing of the former. Rebellion against a justly constituted authority can never be in any case a blessing; all wise parents, together with all wise youth, will unite in supporting that just parental authority, which, however the precocious manhood of some might feel it to be oppression, the more natural and slowly approaching maturity of others will acknowledge to be a blessing. Children who find the parental yoke a burden are not very likely to look upon that of Christ as a benefit.

Such, my dear friends, as they appear to my mind, are the principal obstacles to the success of those efforts that are carried on by many for the religious education of their children. Seriously consider them and, having looked at them, endeavor to avoid them...and while you neglect not any one means that can promote their comfort, reputation, and usefulness in this world, concentrate your chief solicitude, and employ your noblest energies in a scriptural, judicious, persevering scheme of *religious* education.