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Dr. Phil's New Family Book -Sound Advice? Part 2

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Dr. Phil addresses what he calls “parenting styles,” saying that people generally parent their children according to three different models: the authoritarian style, the permissive style, and Dr. Phil’s personal favorite, the “equalitarian” style.

In a fascinating section, Dr. Phil provides constructed dialogue to show these three parenting styles in action. The situation is defined as a child needing to do homework, but wanting to go to a movie with friends. The authoritarian parent instructs, “A movie is a lot less important to you than your homework. You will work from ten till twelve and three till five on Saturday in your room with no television blasting and no talking on the telephone. Then I will see how far you have gotten. When you finish, we’ll talk about a movie.” In this part of Dr. Phil’s suggested dialogue, the child has very little to say.

The opposite is the case when he depicts the permissive parenting style in operation. In this dialogue, the parent gently chides “Johnny” that he should do his homework in a timely manner. Parent and child have a conversation that meanders around the issue until Johnny has persuaded himself that he needs to get to the task in order to meet his own goals. “I’ll do it right,” he tells his parent. “After all, I need to do it for school, right?”

Readers who find that dialogue stretching the limits of fiction will find themselves stretched even further when Dr. Phil describes his favorite equalitarian style in operation. The parent advises, “Johnny, I noticed you have about four hours of homework to do before Monday. Do you agree that we need to make this a top priority?” Johnny responds: “Yes, I guess that’s at the top of my list or I’ll get in big trouble and fall behind.” Parent and child then work out a compromise so that Johnny will get his work done in a way that demonstrates his ingenuity and his parent’s flexibility. As Dr. Phil explains, equalitarian parents are prone to use phrases such as “We can approach this problem and be successful,” “Let’s roll up our sleeves to get it done,” and “We can get this done. I know that you have the ability and we’ll be a team.”

In all honesty, I found this dialogue utterly unconvincing. As a current parent and as a former teenager myself, I just can’t imagine that a parent and child would actually talk this way. If children were actually this mature and wise, they could raise themselves—or in some cases, even raise their own parents.

Dr. Phil doesn’t offer much advice about discipline, though he is a big advocate of “time-outs.” He suggests that parents should negotiate with their children, keeping avenues of communication open and rewarding children with positive reinforcement for good behavior.

Along the way, he offers some undeniably sound advice, such as his warning about overprogramming children and overscheduling sporting events, ballet classes, and various activities. As he warns, “Kids and parents shuttling back and forth seven days a week at all hours of the day is a higher form of insanity.” Much of his advice is similarly helpful, and in a sad testimony to our times, this may be one of the most profound books on parenting read by many of America’s parents.

Nevertheless, the book is replete with self-help jargon, a muddled psychological worldview, and a therapeutic approach that undercuts any real authority. The most distressing dimension of this book, however, is not what it contains, but what it lacks. From a Christian worldview perspective, it lacks any concrete understanding of the family in a biblical perspective. The family appears as a sociological unit, rather than as the God-given institution for the nurture and maturation of children. There is no sense whatsoever that the family is an objective given, rather than an evolving social reality. Likewise, the issue of authority is misconstrued and ill-defined. When Dr. Phil dismisses the authoritarian mode of parenting, he fails to acknowledge that God has assigned parents authority over their children, even as God exercises His authority over all creation. This warps Dr. Phil's understanding of parental influence, teaching, and discipline.

Added to all this, the book lacks any concept of human sinfulness. According to Dr. Phil's worldview, children and parents are to relate to each other in an "equalitarian" manner, because both parents and children are filled with potential each can draw out of the other. The omission of an understanding of sin is no small matter, for it leads to the book's inadequate understanding of parental authority, discipline, and child rearing.

Family First is likely to sit on the bestseller list for some time. Backed with Dr. Phil's incredible marketing ability and telegenic personality, the book will find its way into many hands and many homes. This book packages worldly wisdom in an accessible and user-friendly format. But cut off from a biblical concept of family, authority, sin, and purpose, it leaves the really big questions unasked and unanswered. It is a barometer for our times—self-help parenting for a self-help culture.

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