

Helping Our Girls Become Christian Women

Matthew Hosier, August 2009

American theologian Vern Poythress has written a very interesting article about how he helps his sons become Christian men¹. I read this article years ago, but then forgot about it until Andy Haslam referenced it in his excellent, article on manhood in the July edition of the Newfrontiers magazine.

Unfortunately I lack the spiritual and intellectual rigour demonstrated by Poythress, but reading his article again got Grace & I thinking about what it means to raise our daughters to be Christian women. The current crisis of masculinity has led to an increasing amount of focus on raising Christian boys, but less attention has been paid to raising Christian girls. It is important that focus is paid to the boys, but we believe girls are just as important! As God has blessed Grace and me with daughters rather than sons (Georgina, 11; Suzannah, 9; Nancy, 8; and Felicity, 4), we thought we would make an attempt to define what our aspirations for them are.

We are unashamedly taking Poythress's (that's a lot of 's's'!) article as our starting point, and adjusting it to our purposes.

It is probably also worth stating at the outset that we fully recognize that ultimately the kind of women our daughters become is dependent on the grace of God rather than our parenting. We cannot ensure their salvation or discipleship, and as the years unfold there will be unexpected, as well as expected, challenges that confront us. However, we do deliberately reject the defeatism of those who so frequently say to us, "Just you wait till they're all teenagers..." and whose expectation is that all teenagers fall away from Jesus. We reject this attitude because we believe for something better, by the grace of God, and because we have many friends whose own daughters have safely made the transition from girlhood to womanhood faithfully honouring Jesus and being true to him. Low expectations have a tendency to lead to self-fulfilling prophecy. As Poythress puts it,

What do we do to give proper guidance? I know and you know that there is no magic formula. God must be at work in teaching us and our boys, and he must be the one who causes them to grow (1 Cor. 3:7). But you and I can plant and water.

We want to do all the planting and watering we can!

The Idea and the Challenge

Poythress writes,

Almost every culture in the world has something to mark the difference between a boy and a man. A boy goes through a "rite of passage," after which he becomes officially a man. The rite of passage may involve an ordeal, a test, or a training period of some kind. The boy who has reached a certain age must kill a crocodile, or train with a bow and arrow, or go on a long journey alone, or join in a dangerous hunt with the men.

¹ http://frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/1999How.htm

Poythress then goes on to describe how no such rite of passage exists in white American culture and how he and his wife decided to create one for their sons, culminating in a public 'Bar Jeshua' (Son of Jesus) celebration.

The thing is, that for girls there is no equivalent rite of passage in most cultures, not only contemporary Western ones. Whereas in most cultures a boy at around the age of 13 is meant to transform into a man, and take up the responsibilities and privileges of manhood, for women the transition has traditionally been in leaving the protection of her fathers house and entering the house of her husband, there taking up the responsibilities of being wife and mother. Traditionally women have been defined by their relationship to the men in their lives – as a girl they are the daughter of Mr X, and as a woman they are the wife of Mr Y, with little in-between.

This doesn't exactly tally with contemporary gender politics.

Contemporary society rightly offers women many experiences and opportunities besides the traditional roles of wife and mother, and we hope our daughters will pursue these opportunities as appropriate. However, while rejecting traditional sexual stereotypes, we believe marriage and motherhood to be a high calling and want our daughters to be women who are qualified to be godly wives and mothers.

Now for the necessary caveats: we recognize that not every woman gets married, for a variety of reasons, and – again – know that whether or not our daughters marry and have children is dependent on God's grace and sovereign plan rather than our expectations. We also recognize that Christians do not have to marry, and that celibacy is a grace gift which some are called to for the sake of the kingdom. However, we do believe that marriage is both *normal* and *desirable*. We also believe that the qualities that would establish a woman as ready for marriage and motherhood are those that would equip her for faithful discipleship of Christ, regardless of whether or not she does actually marry.

What, then, defines these kind of qualities?

Poythress writes,

I decided that one way I could help my sons was by showing them what it was to be a man. What is a man? What marks maturity? In the Bible, true maturity does not consist in being able to kill a crocodile! The true maturity is spiritual. It is wisdom in knowing God and his will, and being able to carry it out in your life (Prov. 1:1-7).

I must set an example by my manhood. I must be like Paul, who said, "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). That is an awesome challenge. I fail to live up to the biblical standard. But part of being a man is being able to admit it when I fail and then to ask forgiveness.

We believe that these points hold as true for us raising our daughters as they do for Poythress in raising his sons. We are looking for spiritual maturity, and we are looking ourselves to set an example that is worthy of following. Grace is to be the kind of spiritually mature women that my daughters emulate, and I am to be the kind of spiritually mature man that our daughters will look for in their own husbands.

The Training

Poythress lists a rather intimidating training program for his sons, seeking to develop skills that will qualify them as men. We have taken his list, almost verbatim, as we consider it as appropriate for our daughters as for his sons,

1. Knowledge of the contents of the Bible.
 - Know the names of books of the Bible in order.
 - Know Bible history.
 - Read the Bible all the way through.
 - Know main themes of biblical books.
 - Understand how Biblical teaching centers on Christ.
2. Memorization of selected verses and passages of the Bible.
3. Knowledge of the major teachings of the Bible (doctrine).
 - Be able to explain doctrines and respond to questions using one's own words.
4. Personal piety.
 - Using devotional materials.
 - Prayer diary.
 - Day-long personal retreat for prayer and fasting with Grace.
 - Growth in understanding of means for overcoming sin.
5. Projects of service and mercy.
 - Serving the church; serving the needy.
6. Wisdom in dealing with various spheres of life.
 - Finances: learning to work for pay; tithing; drawing up a budget.
 - Etiquette: table etiquette, greeting etiquette, letter etiquette, conversational etiquette, sexual etiquette.
 - Apologetics: answering questions and objections about Christian faith; understanding the Christian world view and the main competing worldviews in our culture.
 - Sexuality: knowing Christian teaching and standards for thoughts and actions. Understanding how God designed male and female bodies.

Poythress expects his sons to have completed this training by the age of 13. We are setting our targets for achieving it with our daughters to age 16.

At this point in his paper, Poythress goes on to discuss what happens at his sons coming of age ceremony, and how things change in the house following this. So here is where we branch out more on our own in terms of what we are hoping to cultivate in our girls...

Training in Action

We have some broad characteristics that we want to see our girls grow in on the path to spiritual maturity and womanhood, These are *security, confidence, boldness* and *humility*.

In our pastoral work we have seen too many women and girls over the years who lack godly confidence, with all kinds of negative consequences. We want our girls to be confident because they are secure in our love for them, and more importantly in the love of Jesus for them.

Confidence works out in such things as being able to talk with strangers, being able to speak in public, being able to argue their point, and so on. The way in which we develop this confidence varies according to the child's age and personality. For instance, one daughter might need to learn the difference between disrespectful speech to her parents and arguing her own position cogently – she needs to learn that mum and dad are not always right, and so can be debated with, but at the same time that they are always worthy of respect. Another daughter might need to learn how to look guests in the eye and greet them politely.

We encourage our girls to take whatever opportunities they can that will stretch their confidence, for example, by taking a leading role in a school play. At the same time we want to teach them that their security is not in how they perform, and to be confident in themselves, because they are confident in God, even when they fail or are embarrassed.

In thinking how we prepare our daughters for marriage we want them to have the kind of confidence that means they don't have an emotional need to throw themselves on any man that shows them interest. We also want them to bring confidence into their marriage so that they are a delight to their husband rather than a burden and that with their husband they might lead lives of confident faith.

Security and confidence should lead to boldness. We deliberately encourage our girls to take risks – physically and intellectually. We do not want them to be limited in their experience of life or discipleship of Jesus by fear or timidity. We would rather say, "Give it a go" than, "Don't do that – you might get hurt." This means we have encouraged them to climb trees, they have been allowed to have knives, I took our ten-year-old on a ministry trip to Zimbabwe, we expect them to do well at school, and so on.

In thinking about how we prepare them to be wives and mothers we want to encourage a boldness in our daughters that makes them dangerous and far too hot to handle by any weak or sleazy man. We want them to live adventurous lives and share in adventures with their husbands and children. We want their lives to be full colour and high-def, not monochrome.

While encouraging our girls to be bold and confident, we do so against a backdrop of teaching humility. We want them to live in constant thankfulness to Jesus for all he has given them, and to be ready to bless and serve others at all times. We want them to learn a godly submission to authority.

This means our daughters need to have a good attitude and show proper respect to adults, and especially to those adults in authority over them – their parents, church leaders, teachers. We want them to learn to speak words of thanks and gratitude before grumbling and complaint.

We want our daughters to become wives and mothers who have the humility to serve their husbands, children and churches in the way that Jesus loves his Church. We want them to have a humility that, as CJ Mahaney puts it, exemplifies true greatness. We want them to be attractive to humble men, who place discipleship of Christ and service to others before their own agendas and desires. And we want them to teach our grandchildren the way of the cross.

Conclusion

There is a lot more that could be said about raising daughters. This is not intended as a complete parenting guide but as a discussion starter for parents, and as a clarifying statement of intent for Grace and me.

Much parenting is necessarily done on the hoof, but we believe there also needs to be intentionality in raising a child. We need to have a philosophy of parenting, that sets the parameters for what happens in the home.

Because we are clear about our end goal – that our girls should be raised to be ready to marry and have children – the subject of marriage and children is allowed to naturally arise in our conversations. When a daughter starts to talk about how her friends at school are getting boyfriends, we turn the conversation to what she should be looking for in a husband and why now is too young to start! When we eat plums and play ‘tinker, tailor, soldier spy’ with the stones, the last character in the rhyme is always ‘someone like dad’, and that is the one to aim for! We pray for our girls husbands. We pray with our girls for their husbands – the boys who somewhere right now are also growing up and discovering what life is all about. We honour marriage, because in the end it is a model and reflection of the relationship between Christ and his Church.

This is not culturally normal; but it is how we have chosen to live.

We are so blessed by our children and love watching them grow and develop. Our earnest desire is to see them change from girls into women; women who themselves know a full measure of the grace of God.