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Daring to Disagree with James Dobson

By A. Gregory Schneider

In his first book, *Dare to Discipline* (1970), James Dobson revealed his political edge by writing a tract that asked not just how to manage children, but also how to stem the tide of social and political chaos that he saw engulfing the United States and Western civilization.[1] Later in the 1970s, with the practiced indignation of a veteran stump speaker, he deplored modern psychology's attack on the "Judeo-Christian ethic." "Traditions which have been honored for several thousand years are suddenly vilified," he exclaimed. "Not even the flag, motherhood, and apple pie are safe; we burned the flag in the sixties, we are mocking motherhood in the seventies, and the way I've got it figured, apple pie is living on borrowed time!"[2]

Dobson may always have been political, but his assumption that God, flag, and motherhood have always been married in the cultural imagination of America or of the West is illusory. It is a conjunction less than two hundred years old.[3] Arguably, Dobson comes by his illusion honestly enough. As a southern Nazarene preacher's son who says the ideas for his books come directly from his father, his roots in the Church of the Nazarene connect him to American Methodism, the dominant religious influence in American popular culture when the God, flag, and mother amalgam was forged.[4]

This article is an interim report on an attempt to locate the "effective history" of the family ethic Dobson derives from that time and then passes off as the "Judeo-Christian" heritage handed down from the time of Christ, or Abraham, or Adam.[5]

Two parts of Dobson's family ethic reveal an influence other than strictly "Judeo-Christian." The first is about building children's self-esteem. In *Hide or Seek*, the book in which he first expounded his strategies of self-esteem, two images of the world emerge. The primary image is of a heartless world of young peers and crass media bent on imposing inferiority on children, evaluating everyone in terms of shallow standards of beauty and intelligence. The resulting epidemic of low self-esteem is a major cause of society's current chaos.[6] Dobson calls on the Christian family to stand as a bulwark of self-esteem, a sacred circle committed to the principle that all humans have worth because they are children of God.[7]

Dobson's secondary image of the world emerges as he addresses the practical question of just how the Christian family is to accomplish its task. His comment on the title of his book hints at a less rejecting view of the world. The issue, he suggests, is whether children will hide in shame or be given "courage to seek the best from their world."[8] What kind of world, then, has these best things on offer? It is a world where all must compete to earn respect. Mere parental love at home will not do.

Love is private; respect and admiration, the foundations of self-esteem, are social, having implications for people outside the home.[9] *Compensation* is Dobson's key concept for the task of winning the necessary admiration. Parents must find skills at which their children excel, and they must teach the children to turn the negative emotions of inferiority into energy for developing those skills. This compensation strategy will allow children to win some niche of respect and thus protect their self-esteem.[10]

A world that judges human worth in the "gold coin" of physical beauty or the "silver coin" of mere intelligence is a world that stands condemned in Dobson's understanding of biblical values. Nevertheless, a competitive world where one must fight for self-worth in the face of challenges from others seems all right with Dobson, or at least a simple reality—like the weather—with which everyone must cope.

This acceptance of aggressive challenge as an aspect of the natural social order connects to his philosophy of child discipline, which demands that parents look for and conquer defiant, self-willed challenges to parental authority. Do not try to reason a child out of defiance, he argues, because the issue with children is not who is right but "who's toughest." Just as every child who moves to a new neighborhood must fight to establish himself in the hierarchy of strength, and every teacher must show the entire class whether he's strong or weak, every parent must show his child who is in charge.

This is why it is nonsense to say that spanking teaches the child to be violent. What the parent does in spanking a defiant child is like what a hot stove does when the child bumps up against it. Bumps and bruises through childhood do not damage self-esteem or make a child vicious, they only acquaint him with reality. Spanking just teaches the child that there are social dangers—selfishness, defiance, dishonesty, unprovoked aggression, and so forth—as well as physical dangers to be avoided.[11] Dobson finds the same natural order in marital relationships.

He says he learned the basic lesson in high school when he had to jump a guy who was harassing him in the football stands, and meet another on a Saturday morning for a bloody fight to a draw. Both battles resulted in deep, lasting, mutually admiring friendships. In the same way, wives with wayward husbands may generate respect when they stand up for themselves. It makes no sense that we so often test the limits of the ones we love, but it seems to be human nature. "What is required in each instance is discipline and self-respect by the one on trial."[12]

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Dobson's world of competition for respect stands in remarkable continuity with the world his forebears in religion battled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Early American Methodism defined itself against the ethos of honor found in much of late colonial and early national America, especially in the upper South, where Methodism first flourished.

The sovereignty of the patriarch defined the family in this ethos. The man's woman was hidden in his per-

son, legally, as a femme covert. Their children were his children. "Family" meant all those dependent upon the order and productivity of the man's estate. Challenge and response among men were the governing norms of interaction. "Show us you can defend and govern yourself and your property, especially your sexual and generational property," was the implied message.

Why? The world was seen to be a dangerous place. Your neighbors must trust your manliness when external threats demanded that men band together to defend hearth and home, women and children. The proper patriarch must show that he knew the boundaries within the community of patriarchs, neither yielding to challenge nor overreaching. To do either was to lose respect and suffer shame.

These messages were sent and received typically in rituals of convivial contest. Drinking bouts and gambling in the taverns, shooting or wrestling matches or cock fights or horse races somewhere around town on court days, corn huskings or dances or balls at or around the homes of prominent men in the neighborhood—all these put men together and pitted them against each other as they strove to prove manhood and reliable belonging.

The dances or cornhuskings or other events of mutual aid and sociability included women and upped the ante for young men to prove a manhood that was attractive to women. Included in what won respect were good looks, wit and intelligence in verbal exchange, and skill in the various forms of contest.[13] The first two of these categories of traits are close to the qualities of beauty and intelligence Dobson excoriates as false bases of self-esteem in the modern world. The third category, however, seems akin to the skills that Dobson recommends as the basis for effective compensation.

There is historical irony in this tacit endorsement of a latter-day culture of honor. The early American Methodism at the root of Dobson's own Wesleyan heritage was a fellowship of spiritual equals that challenged the substance and style of eighteenth-century honor codes. The early Methodists evangelized women and men who valued family lineage and kin loyalty above virtually all else. They felt the authority of age over youth—male over female and white over black—to be central to the good order of households and society.

In contrast and confrontation, the early Methodist fellowship undermined distinctions of kinship, age, gender, and even, to some degree, race. The Methodists forged their community in and through a revivalism that starkly separated God's people from the world, demanding of all—young and old, male and female, white and black—a surrender of self-will and humiliation of self before the cross of Christ. They demanded of each other an intimacy born of personal introspection and testimony, testimony rendered with such depths of emotional expression as to challenge norms of masculine self-possession and emotional restraint.

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Nevertheless, the community of feeling enjoyed by those set apart from the world felt more like a family to the converted than the literal families from which they came. Children defied parents and wives defied husbands to become a part of it. Women, youngsters, and even slaves spoke in testimony, exhortation, and even preaching to build up their community, and early Methodism recognized and supported their spiritual authority to speak.[14]

Southerners especially, and Southern men even more strongly, had a hard time with this challenge to their privileges, their sense of social order, and their very manhood. It took a long time, therefore, to evangelize the South, and the route to the Bible Belt was marked by major compromise and accommodation, with more compromise coming from the evangelical communities than from the Southern traditions.[15] Thus, resistance to slavery died early in Southern Methodism, whereas resistance to the authority of age followed a generation or so after. Loyalty to kin was accommodated as the churches' metaphorical family of God settled in to nurturing literal families for God.

But this domestication entailed some compromise on the part of Southern traditions of masculinity as well. The evangelical communities forbade most of the contest pastimes whereby men proved their manhood. Drinking, gambling, horse racing, duels, brawls, and such were still proscribed. Dancing for men and women

alike also continued to be forbidden. All were expressions of sinful pride and lust against which Christianity had always battled.

The message of the new evangelical domesticity, moreover, was that the home, centered on the moral influence of the self-sacrificing mother, was the engine of virtue for all members of the household and therefore the foundation of the American Republic.

The republican ideology that fueled the American Revolution had long held that only the frugal, industrious, and self-sacrificing virtue of the citizenry made possible a republic. A republic was a society of defiantly independent men who needed no king to enforce order or any court to offer hope of advancement through dependence upon and deference to their supposed betters.

The mid-nineteenth-century evangelical vision of Home and Woman promised to redeem the republican vision. Pious Christian women as wives and mothers located in their proper domestic sphere were the morally pure and spiritually powerful presence that restrained their husbands from vice and taught their children the ways of virtue, insuring a prosperous and patriotic life here as well as heaven and homeland hereafter.[16]

This is the historically conditioned ideology of the family that James Dobson has enshrined as the everlasting gospel. Dobson's stance as a Christian warrior for God, flag, and motherhood, moreover, reveals something like an old-time Southern patriarch underneath a veneer of therapeutic talk about self-esteem that turns out to be mainly about honor's thirst for respect. Honor presumes a dangerous world, however, and even as Dobson half relishes a good fight, he also complains of getting no respect for his causes, using the energy of inferiority to stoke his combative indignation.[17]

At no point does Dobson's indignation appear to be more stoked than over a second part of his family ethic: the need for traditional gender roles. His understandings of sex and gender are fundamental to his theory of God's will for the social order. By the end of the 1970s, when he sat down to write *Straight Talk to Men*, his alarm over America's sexual libertinism and gender bending was palpable.

Dobson told his readers that his message to men was the most critical topic he had ever addressed and thus might be "the task for which I was born." The survival of Western culture and of America as a people was at stake.[18] The book was surrounded, furthermore, with stories of remarkable providences directed both to Dobson and his father, messages from God that made it clear this book, inspired by the life of the elder Dobson, was God's will, and that the younger Dobson's whole Focus on the Family ministry was blessed by God as an extension of the Reverend Dobson's gospel evangelism.[19]

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By the mid-1990s, in a revised version of *Straight Talk*, Dobson was growing ever more strident. He posed an imaginary conversation between traditional men of about 1870 and a modern man that portrayed today's society in the most lurid extremes of sexual violation and gender confusion that extended even to women fighting in the military while men stayed home. This latter fact was, to Dobson, the most dramatic evidence of the loss of dignity in modern manhood. It was like a man staying in bed with the covers over his head while his wife goes to confront an intruder. The men of 1870, he concludes, would hold us in utter disdain. They knew intuitively that a man is designed by God to protect and provide for his wife and children. Take that away, and society falls apart.

Looking for updated social science support, he borrowed from right-wing ideologue George Gilder an argument that portrayed single men as loose cannons on the decks of America's ship of state. Men are a danger to society, Gilder suggests, because their sexuality pushes them to sow their wild oats. Women, in contrast, have natural maternal inclinations that motivate them to seek long-term stability for themselves and their children.

Taking no notice of the roots for this argument in neo-Darwinian evolutionary psychology, Dobson makes a remarkable leap. "Suddenly," he declares, "we see the beauty of the divine plan." When a man falls in love with a woman, dedicating himself to her protection and

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9. In an unpublished paper titled "Yes, There is No Judgment," I have outlined the significance of denying the pre-advent judgment. Logically, anyone who does so has to adopt at least one (and probably many) of the following positions as a result: atheism/agnosticism; universialism; immortality of the soul; some form of postmortem "second chance"; unconditional election and perseverance of the saints (Calvinism); antinomianism; or amillenialism, with a postadvent judgment.

10. As with the brief discussions of the views of Thompson, Davidson, Provonsha, LaRondelle, Rice, and Canale, the purpose of the discussion of Ford's views is not intended to present a defense or rebuttal of either his proposals or Shea's. At issue is whether or not the table of Adventism is large enough to include him, and if not, why. Fritz Guy's evaluation that "subsequent [that is, since Glacier View] Adventist thinking in North America seems to have moved closer to his [that is, Ford's] position and further away from that of those who dismissed him" suggests that the issue deserves attention. See, F. Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University, 1999), 90.

11. A. Zytkoskee, "Interview with Desmond Ford," *Spectrum* 11.2 (1980): 57–58. Brinsmead's critique of the Adventist understanding of the judgment, *1844 Re-Examined*, was published in 1979, before Ford made his notorious Pacific Union College Forum presentation.

12. L. Pahl, "Where is Robert Brinsmead?" *Adventist Today*, May/June 1999, available online: <http://www.atoday.com/magazine/archive/1999/mayjun1999/articles/WhereIsBrinsmead.shtml>.

13. Ford, *Daniel 8:14*, 296–97.

14. See, G. R. Driver, "Sacred Numbers and Round Figures," in *Promise and Fulfillment* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 62–90.

15. It is illegitimate to determine the year of Jesus' passion from the prophecy of Daniel 9 and then, in turn, demonstrate the accuracy of the prophecy from the fact that Jesus came "right on time."

16. See, J. Clark, *1844*, 3 vols. (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1968).

17. The point here is this: If Jesus does not come in my lifetime, then his return is not soon for me. The affirmation that Jesus is coming soon is an existential one. Once my existence ends, it is irrelevant to me if the second coming is a day away or a millennium away. The clock, in a very real way, has stopped.

18. For a recent provocative discussion of this issue see, E. W. H. Vick, *The Adventist Dilemma* (Nottingham, Eng.: Evening Publications, 2001).

19. This is one of the texts that spoke directly to the experience of the pioneers after the Great Disappointment.

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care, "he suddenly becomes the mainstay of the social order....His sexual passions are channeled. He discovers a sense of pride—yes, masculine pride—because he is needed by his wife and children. Everyone benefits from the relationship."[20]

In ideas of gender, as in theories of self-esteem and views of discipline, it would seem that James Dobson shapes his family ethic as much or more by the honor-shame codes of early Anglo-American patriarchy as by Christian faith or Scripture. This kind of honor-shame response showed up vividly in his polemical work of cultural politics, *Children at Risk*, coauthored with Gary L. Bauer, head of the Family Research Council, "the Washington office of Focus on the Family."[21]

In a vituperative discussion of Planned Parenthood and SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States), Dobson portrays the access of young minor women to contraception and abortion without parental notification as an assault on the liberty of the local community and its individual households:

> Imagine how your father or grandfather would have reacted if a school official had secretly given contraceptives to you or arranged a quiet abortion when you were a teenager. The entire community would have been incensed. Someone may well have been shot! Yet today's parents have tolerated this intrusion without so much as a peep of protest. Why? What has happened to that spirit of protection for our families—that fierce independence that bonded us together against the outside world? I wish I knew.[21]

To what conclusions does this brief analysis of the Dobson family ethic push me? Not that Dobson is guilty of sponsoring authoritarian abuse of women and children. Such crude generalizations and wild charges are unfair to his explicit prescriptions and fail to square with current sociological evidence.[23]

Rather, I believe it fair to suggest that the boundary posturing entailed by Dobson's deeply ingrained stance as pugnacious patriarch encourages a politics of enmity, absolutism, and the scapegoating of minority groups perceived as sources of impurity and disorder. Homosexuals,