

“Cain and Lesson’s from the First Family’s Failure” Article for the Chalcedon Website

Ronald Kirk
Created June 4, 2002
Modified February 29, 2012

History illustrates the fruit of men’s thinking. More importantly, history unfolds God’s sovereign design for mankind. In both senses, history teaches something important. Original history is especially significant, setting the foundation for everything else to come. The story of the First Family’s woes in Genesis 4 provides, therefore, an important lesson regarding the centrality of the family and the problem of generational sin.

The Story of the First Family

After the Fall, Adam must face the responsibility for rearing a family in a sinful world. Apparently, Adam yet possessed the strength of character derived from his experiences and relationship with God to withstand temptation into wholesale debauchery. On the other hand, Adam and Eve must rear the next generation from infancy. Here, with sin now deeply rooted in the soul of man, the First Parents must face sin or all will bear the consequences. Sin, like leaven, moves through the whole community.

Genesis leaves much unsaid with respect to the details of the First Family story. We do not know with certainty, for example, whether Adam and Eve were permissive parents, born out of ignorance perhaps, or if they were strongly active parents. God chose Abraham, in part, because he would be a good father (Genesis 18:17-19). Biblical injunction, such as Proverbs 22:6 and Ephesians 6, clearly implies parental responsibility. Therefore, let us assume that the First Parents bear some responsibility for their children’s ultimate character. Although Cain certainly bears his own guilt, his rearing apparently affected his rebellion—his poor character with respect to moral matters. Adam and Eve were not likely well-prepared or skillful parents, for they had no experience upon which to derive wisdom for child rearing, and they had estranged themselves from the counsel of God. If Adam was at all culpable in Cain’s downfall, then we obviously likewise ought to tremble in our shoes over our children’s eternal end. While we share God’s mercy and grace with Adam, tremendous responsibility before God to “train up our children” rests with those given the Holy Spirit. For “to whom much is given, much is required.”

Early in Genesis Chapter 4, although now living with sin, Adam is yet ignorant of all the possible consequences. He would now know evil, as Satan promised, but firsthand in suffering, not in god-like oversight. His family will know that suffering also. One sign of good parenting and the grace of God appears in Cain and Able undertaking honest work in obedience to the provisions of the Curse. However, Cain’s manifest character gives reason to believe that he was permissively reared, and therefore of a childish character when grown to adulthood.

Eve apparently doted on Cain. Because of her comment in Verse 1 regarding getting a man, many commentators say that Eve may have believed Cain was the promised Deliverer of Genesis 3. Notwithstanding, she seems to have felt a particularly strong sense of pride, devotion, and perhaps even adoration of Cain. Such maternal pride is not unheard of. Though she acknowledged Cain as from the Lord, she may have thought too much of herself and of her son. Commentators thus interpret the purification time for new mothers as God’s communication that, though man is indeed special, he is born a sinner and unclean. It is not far-fetched to attribute child-worship to Eve, for such is often evident even in Christian homes. Such feminine idolization leads to permissiveness, which in turn leads to hardening the sin nature into an evil character.

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It is one matter to love one's child and nurture and care for him, and quite another to indulge his sin. Christians must never fail to correct their children out of a false sense of protecting them from the harshness of life. A literary and character education is necessarily demanding. The sin-indulging experts notwithstanding, to allow the child to choose learning times and experiences is to encourage the child to believe that he can control his destiny and make his own reality. Noah Webster, America's father of Christian education, said that to try to simplify and ease a God-given process already within the reach of a child's ability is “unphilosophical and wrong.”¹ If we make excuses for the child's sin and evil conduct instead of correcting him, we will rear a monster instead of a godly child. Children—from Cain, to the sons of Eli, the wicked stepsisters of Cinderella, King John of England, and the poet Byron—are mythical and real examples of this kind of parental misconduct. On the other hand, it is interesting to note how the Bible often names the mother of a godly king of Israel, suggesting her proper place in forming the king's character (e.g. Jehoshaphat's mother Azubah, 1 Kings 22:42).

Another manifestation typical of motherly dotage is overprotection. Though we cannot certainly attribute this fault to Eve, it is observably typical of the motherly idolization of children. In this *hothouse* approach to child rearing, mothers deprive their children of the ability to deal with the rigors of the real world on God's terms. If children never learn to face the dangers of life and to overcome their fears, they find other ways of coping—often through the escapism of addiction, laziness, irresponsibility, and suicide. Alternatively, they may abuse or manipulate others to find comfort and security. Rather, parents should teach children how to handle the difficulties of life through training—governing their actions, and closely supervising them until they are ready to practice righteous dominion. For example, I early taught my children the bicycling rules of the road and techniques of defensive cycling, so that they grew up riding safely on the street. Yes, dangers remain, but careful training ever so much reduces them. Teaching living skills in one area carries over to others so that the child builds an ever-increasingly broad and deep treasury of such skills. Finally, after doing everything to prepare the child, with the ability for self-government established in him, one must trust God. It is impossible to protect our little ones from every danger in life. Rather, life is an economic adventure where we hazard our lives and resources to serve God and push back frontiers for the Kingdom. Parents should educate—carefully prepare—their children for such an investment and adventure of faith.

Cain's Story

Many contemporary expositors make much of Cain's error in his offering to God. God accepted Abel's blood sacrifice, but rejected Cain's grain offering. Therefore, they say, He rejected Cain. This is wrong. God does not expect sinful man not to sin; He expects man to walk with Him by faith. Such harsh criticism on this point likens to a teacher chiding a student because he cannot read, write or spell at his first attempt. Parents must often correct their children. Fuzzy perceptions of reality create real problems. Children must replace the reality they create in their own image with God's reality, represented by their parents. One story tells of young George Washington's mother correcting him over his gift of picked flowers. Those flowers were not his to give! The child violated an important principle in spite of his intention for good. Correction is the point, and correction is good!

Thus, God rejects Cain's offering. However, like so many spoiled and selfish children of a bad temper, Cain reacted to God's loving correction with anger. Cain may have better responded, “I have erred. Please forgive me, Lord. Teach me how I may do better next time.” With the benefit of Scriptures, we know Cain should have acknowledged God's choice. All he needed to do was repent. Rather, Cain put

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himself above God, his own childish feelings placed first. He was not correctable or teachable. Cain’s anger suggests God was wrong in rejecting the offering. This is a typical response in the spoiled child who thinks he is the center of the universe, because his parents will not systematically correct him. His sinful passions thus rule him.

We see this frighteningly often. Children grow sullen, rude, lawless, and angry. They become sullen, rude, lawless, angry, and often violent adults. The sin nature thus hardens into a law of character, corrected only with great difficulty and often not at all. One of our worst modern problems is the childish man who persists in his childish ways. He marries, but refuses to grow up. He abuses his wife and children. He reproduces his poor character in his children. He abandons his family. He makes no end of trouble to the generations which follow. Growth is exponential, including growth in evil. Christian parents should watch for the earliest signs of childish willfulness. We ought never to let a tantrum have its way. We must—for the sake of the Lord, the child, and all those who will have communication with him in the future—correct him and require cheerful obedience.

God next asks Cain why he is angry. He argues that Cain has no legitimate complaint. Next time he could do better. “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.”² God knows Cain’s heart and so blames him. God's advice is very good: watch out for sin and take dominion over it. Do not let sin take control. The Lord here hints regarding sin, that by faith, a remedy exists. God gave Cain counsel, as a loving parent, correcting him for the future. However, Cain could not accept this correction because he had no character for self-restraint and humility. He lacked the character required to support a life of learning, correction and growth in wisdom.

The result is history’s great first murder. Cain killed Abel, his brother, in a tantrum—the consequences of uncorrected sin. Yet, Cain’s wickedness is manifest here. He pretended friendship. They spoke as if nothing was wrong. This is clearly premeditated murder, not a mere act of passion.

Cain answers God’s inquiry as to Abel’s whereabouts, “I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?” Aside from the outright lie, Cain is wickedly clever. He twists a good principle to justify himself. The true principle requires the responsibility of love toward another, as opposed to a general socialistic responsibility. Sinners are excellent legalists and know how to obfuscate an issue. Moreover, practiced deceitfulness results from seeking the easy way out of difficulty, particularly difficulty arising from a previous sinful act. The child breaks the lamp playing football in the living room, which is of course, against the rules. He is not allowed to play such games indoors. He knows he is guilty. But the anticipated pain of correction is too much to bear. Therefore, he creates a lie to cover the iniquity. “The dog (or cat, or baby brother, or the wind) did it!” says the culprit. Parents must do everything possible to cut off this practice. We must teach our children truthfulness as a matter of course. Truthfulness is an exercise of faith. The alternative rots the heart through the violation of the conscience.

Imagine speaking to God in Cain’s manner. Indeed, every careless word we speak amounts to the same contempt for God (Matthew 12:36-37). Cain is insolent. Disrespect is another trait of hardened sin. Apparently, Adam and Eve did not carefully teach Cain to respect others, likely not themselves, for his tone characterizes profound disrespect to the Almighty God. This trait begins early, especially against mother, who often absorbs such abuse, rather than take dominion over it. Here every dad should recognize his important place in establishing respect for mother as well as for himself. He possesses the command to do so much more readily than mother does. Nonetheless, moms should work to overcome

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their tendency to overlook personal abuse, for they are not the ultimate objects of it. It is simply not a personal matter.

Parents must establish respect for themselves early in the child’s life. This is not because of a self-indulgent demand for personal recognition and self-importance. Rather, it is to establish due respect for all rightful authority, especially God's. The child who learns respect for mom and dad will much more readily learn respect for God. On the other hand, requiring respect for God, but none for men is a contradiction. The adult will live what he *practiced* unto habit as a child, and not what he heard. Timing of such training is important because children are far easier to correct when young. Parents should quickly establish authority over infantile willfulness.

God says, in verse 10, “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.” We cannot underestimate the gravity of this crime. In our age, murder is so rampant that we have become hardened to it. Consider the Victorian Era in England. Dickens, in *Oliver Twist*, characterizes all England as extremely revulsed by the murder by Bill Sykes of but one immoral woman. The community of low characters, especially thieves of various kinds, which made up the neighborhood, were shocked by the murder. The reason? Murder was virtually unheard of in those days. One of the consequences of permissiveness, of humanistic justification of ourselves, is acceptance of worse and worse crimes against God. A child’s early sins, uncorrected, lead to a conscience which will tolerate greater and greater ones. Christians must recognize the significance of sin, so that we are mobilized as parents and citizens to do what we are able to efface sin in our families and society.

As God declares punishment, which later would be capital for murderers, Cain cries, “My punishment is greater than I can bear!” Though ready to do anything to satisfy his selfish passions, we recognize Cain is in no way ready to accept the consequences of his own actions. He is a baby. The bad guy is typically a coward. Since by his sinful devices he is used to getting his own way, he has never really learned to accept adversity. He always has a scheme, a self-manufactured quick fix. This is a clear circumstance where accepting God's Providence in faith is warranted as the answer to life's difficulties. Strength of faith results from overcoming difficulties on God's terms and not leaning on our own devices. Children can be and must be taught to accept God on His terms unconditionally. One way parents can do this is in practice, aside from teaching the principle from the Word of God itself, is to be God to the young child, to make the child learn early to trust the parent, even for correction, because it is in his own best interest as well as pleasing to God. An example is making a child trust a parent to do something he is frightened to do, such as learning swimming or riding a bicycle. In this case, the phrase "trust me" is truly warranted, if the parent is willing to be trustworthy, which he must be. (Modern parents often reject this responsibility because they in turn do not trust God to enable them. It is pride and a lack of faith, the same sin of which the children are guilty.)

Cain is more worried over his skin than over his crime. He may yet have had God's grace had he not continued to harden himself. Job 15:20-26 speaks of the anguish and madness of the hardened sinner. Satan's character is one of insanity. He rebelled against the Almighty, clearly an irrational posture. Jesus refers many times to the sinner becoming like their father, the devil. This means losing touch on reality, especially with making reality in one's own image--increasingly separating oneself from God and men. Such is the essential nature of insanity. Murder—with rape, homosexuality and other gross misconduct—are crimes exemplary of complete annihilation of the conscience of man. Separation from God and man is the abject sinner’s goal, for he desires sovereignty. He cannot have sovereignty if he

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relinquishes liberty in relationship. This complete isolation is typical of the psychopath. Yet isolation brings him increasing anguish, because Satan has increasing power over such a one. Rather than sovereignty, he establishes himself as a slave to Satan, sin and death. Satan is the universe's quintessential destroyer of humanity. He loves to torture, maim, and murder. Such is the agony of the one who has sold himself out to Satan.

No child starts as a murderer. This is why any sin equally violates the Law of God. Any sin sets one on the path of searing the conscience, so that future sin becomes easier. Do I hate my circumstances? I commit a crime to fix it for myself. This is why Jesus said it is better to pluck out your eye or cut off your right hand than to give in to sin. Every act of sin is another nail in our coffin. Headlong practice of sin is the way to ensure to myself that God did not call me to Him for eternity. On the other hand, a clear indication of one's calling in Christ is the ability to overcome the temptations of sin. For, “greater is He who is in me, than he who is in the world.” Regarding innocent blood shed. Psalm 9:12--God avenges. Revelation 6:10-11--The saints must wait patiently but not indefinitely for the vengeance for innocent blood. Matthew 23:35--Those who reject Christ bring on themselves all of the innocent blood ever shed.

We may forgive Adam and Eve for their ignorance of the ugly impact of sin in their own family. We Biblically minded Christians also receive the grace of God. However, repentance by faith is a right response to God’s grace. Our repentance in the ways of child rearing should effect great generational changes for the glory of God and the growth of His Kingdom.

¹ Chauncey A. Goodrich, “The Life and Testimony of Noah Webster” in *Teaching and Learning America’s Christian History* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1975), p. 294.

² Bible quotes are from the *New King James Bible*, Parson’s Technology Quick Verse, 1996.