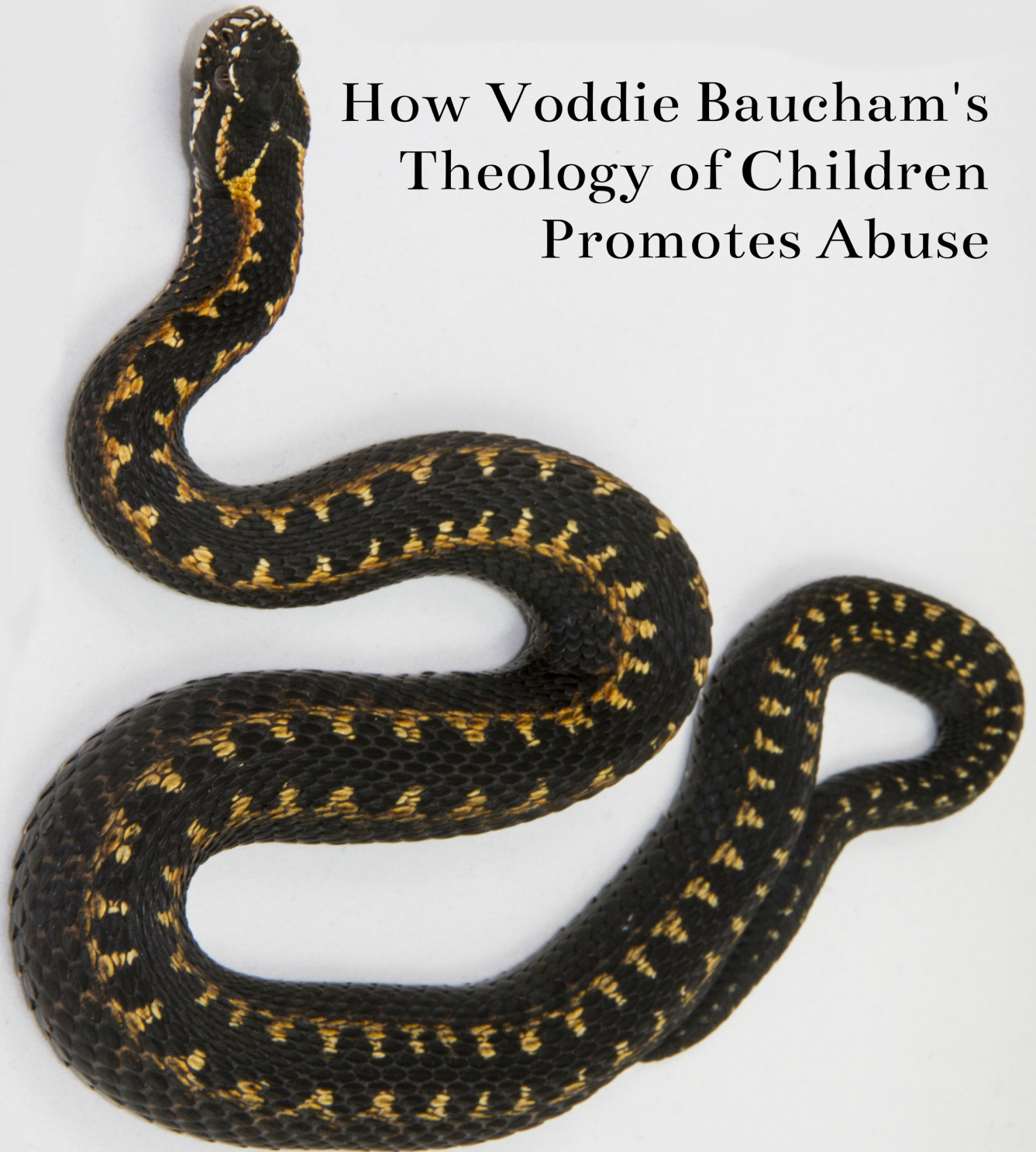


The Child as Viper

How Voddie Baucham's
Theology of Children
Promotes Abuse



By R.L. Stollar

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"One of the reasons that God makes human babies small is so they won't kill their parents in their sleep. They're evil."

~ Voddie Baucham

Introduction

Voddie Baucham is considered by some to be “the most sought-after homeschool conference speaker around the country.”ⁱ The Pastor of Preaching at Grace Family Baptist Church in Spring, Texas and founder of Voddie Baucham Ministries, he is a prolific writer as well as a skilled public speaker. Due to his tendency to cite and interact with the ideas of secular thinkers, he has been dubbed an “Evangelist to intellectuals.”ⁱⁱ

Baucham’s early life was difficult. As a young black kid, he was raised by a teen-aged mother after his father “went off to pursue a career in professional football.”ⁱⁱⁱ While his mother was a practicing Buddhist, Baucham converted to Christianity in college and went on to study apologetics and theology at Houston Baptist University and both Southwestern and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminaries.

Baucham has written a number of books, including *Family Shepherds*, *What He Must Be If He Wants To Marry My Daughter*, and *Family Driven Faith*. Due to his own experience of fatherlessness growing up, much of his work focuses on the importance of fathers playing not only an active, but controlling, role within families. “All I ever knew was fatherlessness,” he writes, a fact that gives him a passion “to train a generation to follow hard after God in spite of what their forefathers have done.”^{iv} His desire to see fathers become the active leaders — what he calls “patriarchs” — of their families has led him to support and associate with many of the most visible leaders and organizations of the Christian male supremacy movement, titled “Christian Patriarchy” within the homeschooling world. Baucham has aligned himself with people and groups like Doug Phillips and Vision Forum,^v Geoffrey Botkin and the Western Conservatory of the Arts and Sciences, Kevin Swanson and Generations with Vision,^{vi} and Scott Brown and the National Center for Family Integrated Churches.^{vii} Baucham is an outspoken advocate of Christian home education^{viii} as well as the stay-at-home-daughter movement, which calls for requiring daughters to remain under the authority of their fathers until marriage.^{ix}

Due to his engaging communication style and rhetorical prowess, he has become one of the most sought-after speakers for Christian homeschool conferences. Over the last decade, Baucham has

presented at an increasingly large number of such conferences all over the United States,^x often keynoting alongside other national homeschool leaders such as HSLDA's Michael Farris.^{xi} He has received national visibility beyond the Christian homeschooling movement due to his association with the Gospel Coalition and his controversial declaration that Michael Brown, a young black teenager shot multiple times by a white policeman, "reaped what he sowed."^{xii}

The Child as Viper

While there are many aspects of Voddie Baucham's worldview that deserve attention and introspection, this paper will focus on one specific aspect of his worldview: the image of the child as viper. Baucham frequently employs the image of the child as viper in his speeches and writings. It first appeared in Baucham's 2007 sermon on "Child Training" at Hardin Baptist Church, and later appeared in writing in his 2011 book *Family Shepherds*.

The image of the child as viper is intended to invoke the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity in relation to children. It is meant to transform the way we think about children's so-called "innocence" or "purity" and consequently transform the way we think about raising and disciplining children. Notably, it is meant as a criticism of modern child development experts and gentle parenting advocates who eschew authoritarian methods of parenting and harsh, punitive forms of corporal punishment. The child as viper is the foundation of Baucham's defense of spanking.

This image is also invoked in an attempt by Baucham to separate his ideas about child training from the ideas of people who (allegedly) deny total depravity, most notably Michael and Debi Pearl. In Baucham's worldview, children are inherently broken and comparable to serial killers in their desire to shed blood. Thus the iconography of the child as viper is not simply intended to be humorous or poetic. It is intended to be concrete and applicable: just as one must restrain and control a viper from following its own, potentially murderous, nature, so too must one restrain and control a child from following their own, potentially murderous, nature.

This paper examines the relationship between Voddie Baucham's iconography and theology of children: how the iconography of the child as viper relates to his theology of children. There is also a greater question: When one examines the words of Jesus of Nazareth in the Christian Gospels, what theology of children does *Jesus* give us? What iconography does Jesus bestow upon children? Is that theology one that emphasizes the systemic sinfulness of children or bestows upon them a preferential treatment in the Kingdom of God? Is Jesus's iconography of the child congruent with Baucham's iconography of the child as viper or does it differ?

As Baucham so frequently likes to remind his audiences, ideas have consequences. And if the ideas underlying Baucham's theology of children do not match Jesus's own words and attitudes towards children, there will likewise be consequences.

The Patriarch as Animal Control

Voddie Baucham articulates his theology of children most clearly in his 2011 book *Family Shepherds*. The book is a defense of Baucham's belief in Christian male supremacy and the importance of fathers being the ruling spiritual patriarchs of their families. "The rule of men in their families is so important," Baucham claims, "that God honored it by conferring upon us his own title, Father. We're the governors and guides of our families."^{xiii} His book's title is derived from his belief in the importance of patriarchy: "The very term *family shepherd* assumes that a man is the head of his household"^{xiv} (emphasis in original).

To Baucham, child training is key to the father's role as family shepherd. Thus he dedicates an entire section of the book, Part 4, to "The Training and Discipline of Children." The purpose of such training and discipline is "to raise kingdom-minded warriors."^{xv}

Calvinism and Total Depravity

The cornerstone of Baucham's child training system begins with propositional theology, namely, the Calvinist doctrine of *total depravity*. This doctrine is best expressed by Calvinist theologian Loraine Boettner who said every single human being is "is so morally blind that he uniformly

prefers and chooses evil instead of good, as do the fallen angels or demons.”^{xvi} Total depravity is an amplified version of the more universal Christian belief in original sin, the belief that “our nature as human beings since the fall has been influenced by the power of evil.”^{xvii} Total depravity is original sin on theological steroids.

That every human being, even a newborn child, is totally depraved (like “fallen angels or demons,” as Boettner said) underlies Baucham’s worldview. Thus he begins his “Training and Discipline of Children” section with a chapter on “Remembering The Fall,” where he stresses the importance of placing total depravity as the starting point for child training: “Most men are completely unaware of the impact their theology has on their parenting. This is a fact that cannot be ignored when it comes to equipping family shepherds.” Baucham explains that all theological systems come down to an ancient debate between two people: Augustine and Pelagius. “The battle between Augustine and Pelagius, contrary to popular belief,” Baucham argues, “was not just about explaining how people are saved. It was a clash between two radically different understandings of humanity.”^{xviii}

Baucham argues that the Augustinian position, which was later “completed in Calvinism,” is that “man is fallen and utterly incapable of any good.” He contrasts this with the Pelagian position, which he describes as the belief that man is a “rational free agent” who is “essentially good, or at least neutral morally,” and has “the capacity to choose righteousness.” Baucham holds to the Augustinian/Calvinist position and is thus dismayed about “the prevalence in our Christian culture today of Pelagian, or at least Semi-Pelagian doctrine, and how this influences the way we view child training.”^{xix}

Critique of Michael Pearl and Behaviorism

Baucham then dedicates 5 pages to attacking a curious target: Michael Pearl and his child training book, *To Train Up A Child*. Michael Pearl is a widely known homeschool leader and speaker, and *To Train Up A Child* is one of the most well-known books on child training within the same Christian homeschooling circles in which Baucham travels. (In fact, Baucham himself says that “the influence of Pearl’s work in certain circles cannot be overestimated. This is

especially true in homeschooling families.^{xxx}) Like Baucham, Pearl is a zealous advocate of corporal punishment. This makes Baucham's critique particularly conspicuous. He argues that Pearl is "the seminal example of the influence of Pelagian/Semi-Pelagian theology and behaviorist psychology on child training," and is "influenced by the twentieth-century psychologists B.F. Skinner, Carl Rogers, and Carl Jung."^{xxxi}

Baucham justifies this critique by citing passages from *To Train Up A Child* where Pearl refers to a child as "incomplete creation" and "not a morally viable soul," and therefore, "before [a child] can decide to do good, his parents must CONDITION him to do good"^{xxii} (emphasis in original). Baucham interprets this as Pearl making a theological, rather than a behavioral, argument, and thus argues it is "Pelagianism 101" because "Pearl, far from employing a gospel-centered approach" to child training, "introduces classic behaviorism." When Pearl argues that parents must condition a child to "do good," Baucham assumes Pearl is saying "'doing good' is something that one can accomplish apart from Christ through proper conditioning. This," Baucham declares, "is a direct contradiction of Jesus's teaching."^{xxiii}

Pearl actually argues that every child "will inevitably partake of the forbidden fruit," which is an *affirmation* of the doctrine of original sin. However, when Baucham cites Pearl saying that, he emphasizes Pearl's next sentence that says "you can make a difference in how he [your child] will respond after he has 'eaten'"^{xxiv} as proof that "Pearl denies original sin outright." This is clearly twisting what Pearl said. Pearl's argument is that all children will/do sin, but parents can influence how their children respond to that fact. Baucham misreads the passage so that he can claim that Pearl's system results in "a child-training approach that relies on behavioral modification as opposed to spiritual transformation. Instead of the child's greatest need being the gospel, his greatest need is a parent whose 'role is not like that of policemen, but more like that of the Holy Spirit' ... Repitition, correction, and conditioning are the hallmarks of Pearl's 'method.'"^{xxv}

This is a key section because, as we will see, Baucham actually believes in behavioral training just as much as Pearl does. However, Baucham desperately wants to distinguish himself from Pearl. Curiously, the main distinction for Baucham is the *metaphor* used: whereas Pearl believes

parents should be more like “the Holy Spirit” in their children’s lives, Baucham believes parents should be “like that of policemen.” Baucham’s system thus ends up being *more authoritarian* than Pearl’s, and that is caused by the fact that Baucham not only believes in original sin (as does Pearl), but *also* total depravity. How Baucham applies his belief in the latter (total depravity) makes Pearl’s child training system appear gentle and weak in comparison.

Vipers in Diapers

The child is, Baucham declares, a “viper in a diaper.” While this might at first sound like simply an attempt to humorously rhyme “viper” with “diaper,” he means it seriously: “Our children are not morally neutral or incomplete beings; they’re sinners.” But they’re not only sinners; they are *diseased*: “Remember, your child has a disease.” As diseased sinners, children are hellbent on evil and thus must be restrained like law enforcement officers restrain criminals: “We don’t ask police officers to change hearts, but to *restrain* evildoers! And that’s precisely what parents are charged to do” (emphasis in original). “Family shepherds do not engage in corrective discipline because we believe it’s efficacious,” Baucham claims, but rather because fathers “have a duty to restrain our children.”^{xxvi}

Because Baucham believes children are inherently evil and viper-like, he believes that child training based in behaviorism (what he claims Michael Pearl advocates) is insufficient. Child training must not consist only in behavior modification but also enforcement of certain thought patterns. There must be not only outer, but inner, change: “We must therefore view the gospel, not behaviorism, as the ‘central focus on parenting.’ . . . In short, our children must learn that they’re sinners. They didn’t simply ‘pick up bad habits’; they *sin*” (emphasis in original). Children must be taught that they are inherently broken: “Formative discipline begins with the reality that our children’s greatest need is regeneration. . . . Johnny doesn’t disobey because he’s cranky, tired, or hungry. . . . He does it because he’s a descendant of Adam.”^{xxvii}

Baucham heaps immense praise on a Puritan minister, Cotton Mather, for his view of children as depraved. Mather, who was responsible “more than almost any other”^{xxviii} for the Salem Witch Trials in 1692, penned a book called *A Family Well-Ordered* in 1699, which Baucham says is his

“favorite book on the Christian family.”^{xxxix} In that book, Mather describes children as “slaves of devils”: “Devils are worse than Indians, and Infidels: till thy Children are brought home to God, they are the slaves of Devils.” Mather instructs parents that “your Children, are the Children of Death, and the Children of Hell, and the Children of Wrath, by Nature.”^{xxx} Because children are “defiled, depraved, horribly polluted,” Mather believed they were “better whipt, than damn’d.”^{xxxi}

One sees Baucham’s admiration for Mather (and Mather’s understanding of children as “defiled, depraved, horribly polluted”) in Baucham’s emphasis on children needing to be “restrained,” rather than simply “trained” (as Pearl advocates): “A police officer doesn’t watch a criminal commit a crime and refuse to act due to his inability to change a man’s heart. No, he does what he can to resist the criminal and restrain him, knowing that his duty—while limited in its ultimate effectiveness—is necessary. It’s the same for parents.”^{xxxii}

Child training, therefore, is about restraining the depravity in children. Baucham thus goes further than Pearl. Whereas Pearl believes one can actually train children to do good, Baucham believes this is an impossibility. Parents not only cannot “change a man’s heart,” they cannot even expect decent behavior: they must treat their children as criminals deserving of restraint. Parents must expect and see the worst in their children, as seen in the following passage about how Baucham advises parents to handle an argument between two kids:

“The next time those two daughters of yours quarrel, don’t ask them what happened; tell them! Remind them of the essential reason for their disagreement, and that God knows exactly why they don’t get along: ‘What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel... (James 4:1-3).’ And what’s the solution? Is it that they need to learn to share? Perhaps. But there’s a deeper issue, one that gets to our need for repentance and dependence on God: ‘Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you... Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep... (James 4:7-10).’”^{xxxiii}

In other words, when your two young kids have a disagreement, Baucham suggests you do not ask them what happened. You should instead assume they are disagreeing because they are naturally covetous and murderous and must repent of their depravity. But Baucham also goes a step further. Not only should parents assume the worst, they must also threaten their children with eternal torture in the flames of hell:

“Tell them what God threatens to those who so behave. Let your child know that God is serious about what they’ve done, and show them what his Word threatens for those who continue to do it. This may seem like manipulation, but it isn’t. If God has warned us against something in his Word, we owe it to our children to point out the warning. If our neighbor has a sign up that says, ‘Beware of Dog,’ we certainly have no qualms about warning our children to stay off of his property. So why should we feel the slightest apprehension about telling them that God says, ‘But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death’ (Rev. 21:8)?”^{xxxiv}

The threat of eternal torture by hellfire is a driving concern for Voddie Baucham (as well as his favorite author, Cotton Mather). But more than that, the driving concern is that one’s children do not end up among such “detestable” people as murderers: “Family shepherds are responsible for restraining the sin in their children,” Baucham warns. *Restraint*, rather than behavior modification, is the goal as behavior modification is ultimately doomed due to children’s evil (unless God sovereignly intervenes according to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination). Thus “the Bible’s chief form of corrective discipline” is “corporal punishment,” to strike fear into children so they will not act on their natural, depraved desires — desires that include murdering their own parents, a desire that Baucham believes all infants have (as we shall later see). Physical punishment is “the authoritative response that reminds the child the parent, under God, has the final word.” And children only become “too old” to be physically hit by their parents when they are “twenty or twenty-one,” Baucham says. Until then, because “your child has a disease,” “we must *train* our children. Just like an athlete training for a big game, our children need multiple

repetitions in order to master their discipline.”^{xxxv} Thus, whereas Pearl believes training is for children to do *more good*, Baucham believes training is for children to do *less evil*. This is a small but profound difference.

Finally, it must be noted that, to Baucham, all of the aforementioned sentiments are not only necessary for child training, they are — more importantly — expressions of *love*. To *not* physically hit one’s child — to keep them from acting on their depraved nature — is child abuse. And according to Baucham, “A family shepherd would never abuse his children.”^{xxxvi}

Multigenerational Faithfulness and Wombfare

While the previous section likely strikes the reader as intensely anti-child, especially since Baucham sees children as not only “vipers” but “defiled, depraved, horribly polluted” vipers, it is important to note that Baucham also believes children to be *blessings*. While this might seem contradictory, it is consistent to Baucham because children — though inherently broken — have a *utility*. Insofar as they have utility, they are blessings to families. In fact, Baucham encourages parents to not only conceive children, but conceive as many as possible. To understand these points, we will next examine Baucham’s 2009 book *What He Must Be If He Wants To Marry My Daughter*.

What He Must Be is Baucham’s list of requirements that must be fulfilled by his daughter’s future husband (and any Christian parent’s daughter’s future husband). These requirements are typical of the Christian male supremacy (or “Christian Patriarchy”) movement to which he adheres:

- The future son-in-law must believe in a “multigenerational vision.”^{xxxvii} “Multigenerational vision,” or “multigenerational faithfulness,” is a catch phrase within the Christian male supremacy movement. It was popularized by two of Baucham’s fellow Christian male supremacy advocates, Geoff Botkin of the Western Conservatory of the Arts and Sciences and Doug Phillips of the now-defunct Vision Forum. It is essentially a four-generation plan established by a family’s patriarch to achieve “a new,

conscientiously Christian dynasty^{»xxxviii} If each subsequent generation is faithful to the original patriarch’s vision, there will arise “a blessed, elect, fourth generation.”^{»xxxix}

- The future son-in-law must hold to male headship in the home (or what Baucham terms “Gospel Patriarchy”^{»xl}).
- The future son-in-law must be committed to the idea that “the father is the one responsible for protecting his daughter’s virginity” because “our job as fathers is to present our daughters to their husbands as virgin brides.”^{»xli}
- Finally, the future son-in-law must be “committed to having children” — and by that, Baucham means “not simply receive children passively—this is a man who desires children, who seeks children.” Baucham requires his future son-in-law to want “lots of them.”^{»xlii}

The reason for this last requirement — desiring lots of children — is not because children are enjoyable. After all, Baucham considers children to be “defiled, depraved, horribly polluted.” Nonetheless, he repeatedly cites Psalms 127:3-5a,^{xliii} where children are declared to be “a reward” and “like arrows in the hand of a warrior.” The man “who fills his quiver with them” is “blessed.” (This is a favorite passage of Christian male supremacy advocates. It is also the foundational verse for the “Quiverfull” movement,^{xliv} a movement promoting Christian “wombfare”^{xlv} for the sake of out-breeding non-Christians, particularly Islamists.^{xlvi})

In his 2011 book *Family Driven Faith*, Baucham declares it is those who reject large families — rather than those (like himself) who consider children evil — who are creating an “anti-child culture” in the United States. People who use birth control are “hir[ing] a doctor to speak on our behalf” to God. (Elsewhere he describes using birth control as body “disfigurement” and/or “mutilation.”^{»xlvii}) The message from such doctors to God is that their patients “hereby declare they no longer trust, nor welcome you in this area of their lives.” Baucham cites fellow Christian Patriarchy advocate Albert Mohler who says, “This rebellion against parenthood represents nothing less than an absolute revolt against God’s design.”^{»xlviii}

Thus to Baucham, real love for children comes from seeing their multigenerational utility — and also the multigenerational utility of having *many* children. To value children apart from their utility is anti-child, not pro-child. Furthermore, because having a large family is necessary to successfully achieve the patriarch's "multigenerational vision," wanting to have autonomy in one's parenthood plans is also anti-God. Since a commitment to having many children is "essential to a multigenerational marriage,"^{xlix} the more children one has the more "blessed" one is in this task of multigenerational faithfulness.

Technique and Thought Reform

For someone who writes about family as frequently as Baucham, it is remarkable how infrequently he writes of children or family life bringing joy or happiness into parents' lives. Instead, there is a consistent emphasis on finding the most efficient methods for family organization. Such an emphasis is what sociologist Jacques Ellul termed *technique*, or "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity."^l Baucham "has his eyes on the prize," as it were, and that prize is not the health and well-being of his children. Rather, the prize is the most efficient method by which one restrains the sins of one's children in order to maximize one's multigenerational success. As Ellul observed, "Technique requires predictability and, no less, exactness of prediction. It is necessary, then, that technique prevail over the human being... The individual must be fashioned by techniques...in order to wipe out the blots his personal determination introduces into the perfect design."^{li}

Since, for Baucham, the goal of child training is implementing the best technique by which one restrains the sins of one's children in order to maximize one's multigenerational success, the means are of absolute importance. In fact, finding the right means becomes the driving concern. As Baucham says in *Family Driven Faith*, "I desperately want my sons and daughters to walk with God, and I am willing to do whatever it takes."^{lii} This is reminiscent of Ellul's observation about a technique-driven society: "Our civilization is first and foremost a civilization of means; in the reality of modern life, the means, it would seem, are more important than the ends."^{liii} For

someone “willing to do whatever it takes” when it comes to child training, the means — or technique — will take center stage as they are justified by the ends.

Children as Brutish Beasts

The problem that Baucham faces in finding the right technique comes from the theological proposition with which he begins: the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. There is a tension here: if children are born “radically depraved,” as he claims in his 2010 sermon on “The Doctrine of Total Depravity,” how can parents actually expect productive results from child training? If one believes in total depravity, therefore, that fact must be front and center in one’s technique. Baucham makes this observation in his aforementioned 2010 sermon: “One implication, for example, is the way we discipline our children, or discipline our children. If you disciple a child, or discipline a child, and don’t believe in the doctrine of total depravity, it will change the way you approach the discipline of that child.”^{liv}

In that sermon (which received widespread attention after football player Adrian Peterson was charged with physical child abuse^{lv}), Baucham begins with describing the “fallen” state of mankind, the state of total depravity:

“Fallen man has fallen desires and his feet are swift to shed blood. Why? Because he wants what he wants and everyone else is an obstacle to his own satisfaction. So fallen man apart from God is swift to shed blood. Fallen man apart from God reeks havoc on his fellow man. Fallen man apart from God wars with his fellow man.”^{lvi}

Baucham then argues that this fallen state is, apart from the divine intervention of God, a permanent state. It is not a state that one can “educate” or “discipline” a human out of:

“This is what it means to be lost. You can’t educate a man away from this. You can’t argue a man out of this. You can’t discipline a man into this. You can’t coax him, you can’t — there is nothing that you or I can do about this because the blinders on his eyes are there supernaturally and must be removed supernaturally.”^{lvii}

Supernatural, divine intervention is thus the only solution. However, at the same time, Baucham agrees that one can “condition” a human to act “better.” This conditioning is behavioral modification — the sort of modification that (as we noted earlier) he attacks Michael Pearl for allegedly advocating. Baucham says,

“Here’s what we often do: we find man in this condition and we try to compromise with this man. We find a man in this condition and we try to clean him up on the outside. We find a man in this condition and we begin to work with him and we say, ‘Don’t talk like that, talk like this.’ And if you get a man who is in this condition to talk differently because of behavioral modification, what you have is a man who inwardly is still corrupt but outwardly has learned to use his tongue, his throat, his lips, and his mouth in order to get what he wants by being deceptive about it. If you can somehow guide his feet so that he is no longer as quick to shed blood, if perhaps you can incarcerate him so that he longer has the opportunity to shed blood, what have you really done? You have merely put a man in a position where what he is on the outside — what he is on the inside cannot be expressed on the outside.”^{lviii}

So humans are universally “swift to shed blood,” are “radically depraved,” and can only become “good” by means of divine intervention. However, they *can* be trained, their behavior can be modified, so as to exhibit outer morality. Baucham considers this to only be a temporary fix that inherently creates its own set of problems: “what he is on the inside cannot be expressed on the outside”; in other words, behavior modification by itself can create cognitive dissonance within a human being.

Finally, Baucham notes that, while we’re willing to admit a serial killer is “radically depraved,” we are unwilling to admit newborn babies are the same as serial killers. That is wrong, he says:

“Your problem and my problem is this: we believe this about everyone else but not about us. We believe this about the serial killer but we don’t believe it about me... If we don’t understand this — I’ll say it again — if we don’t understand our children and their

greatest need, and we look at these behaviors of our children, and yes, we want to correct those behaviors but we do not understand that the reason our children — these small little cherubs — these so-called ‘innocent ones’ — the reason that they do what they do is because they are every bit of Romans, Chapter 3, Verses 9-18. They come into the world like this. One of the reasons that God makes human babies small is so they won’t kill their parents in their sleep. They’re evil. Yes, this is true of children: ‘None is righteous; no, not one. None understands. No one seeks God. No one does good.’ Yes, that little, precious one — you better believe it. If you don’t, you miss the big picture and you don’t realize your desperate need to get the gospel to your child again and again and again and again.”^{lix}

To Baucham, children and serial killers should be placed in the same category of depravity: the category of total depravity. In fact, they are not only in the same abstract, spiritual category of total depravity, they also share a common desire to murder. Infants are so naturally evil that they would kill their parents in their sleep if they were larger. The solution, then, is not simply behavior modification. As we noted earlier, Baucham believes *restraint* is the end goal of child training — restraint so that less evil is achieved, rather than the achievement of more good. After all, humans cannot have their evil “educated” or “disciplined” away, but the evil *can* be restrained. But this solution requires something extra: the enforcement of certain thought patterns. In this case, Baucham expresses that enforcement as a “desperate need to get the gospel to your children again and again and again and again.”

The Three Phases in Child Training

Baucham expands on this “desperate need” for the enforcement of certain thought patterns in another sermon of his, a 2007 sermon delivered to Hardin Baptist Church entitled “Child Training.” In this sermon, he describes children as “brutish beasts” and once again invokes the image of the child as viper: “When it was small, we laughed about it. It was cute. ‘Oh aren’t they cute at that age?’ No, that’s a viper in a diaper and you better get it under control. It’s not cute. It’s not funny.”^{lx}

To get the viper that is a child “under control,” Baucham argues for three phases in child training:

First, the discipline and correction phase: The discipline and correction phase is for “the first few years of [a child’s] life.” This phase involves demanding children give their attention to their parents so that children realize parents are the center of their lives: “In this phase we’re saying to our children, ‘Give me your attention. Give me your attention. You need to pay more attention to me than I do to you. Give me your attention. The world doesn’t revolve around you. Your world revolves around me... Your world, toddler, revolves around me, around me.’”^{lxi}

Second, the catechism phase: The catechism phase is for children ages 3-12. During this phase parents are supposed to teach children “what to believe.” Baucham says, “We tell them, ‘Give me your mind. Give me your mind.’ That happens as soon as they become verbal — we start working on that.”^{lxii}

Third, the discipleship phase: The discipleship phase begins when a child reaches 12 years of age. Baucham explains that, “Biblical adulthood is considered from age 12 or 13 to age 30. You ever notice we only see Jesus at two ages in the Scripture? At 12 and at 30. Why? Because according to the biblical model, childhood is from birth to 12. At 12 there is a ceremony... At 30 you’ve entered into senior adulthood... They’re the two breaking points in the life cycle and development cycle.” (Notably, Baucham neglects to mention we see Jesus also as an infant in the Gospel Nativity stories. This is understandable, though, since that would require a complete rethinking of his theology of children.) Baucham describes this third and final child training phase with the phrase, “Give me your hand.”^{lxiii}

The three phases of child training, then, are: the discipline and correction phase for newborns through 3 years old, where you demand that children “give me your attention” and teach them that their worlds revolve around you; the catechism phase for 3 year olds through 12 year olds, where you tell children what to believe and demand that they “give me your mind”; and finally, the discipleship phase for 12 year olds and up, where you demand that they “give me your hand” and teach them how to act.

Thought Reform and Self-Erasure

Note that all three phases of child training involve the parent *demanding* something of the child: the child's attention, the child's mind, or the child's hand. Training, therefore, entails a child giving up some part of their *self* (up to and including their own thoughts and will) so that the parent can replace the child's thoughts and will with the parent's. It does not entail the care and guidance of that child's *own* self. Rather, it is the erasure of that child's self and the replacement of the child's self with the parent's self. This is the enforcement of certain thought patterns, or what psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton called "thought reform."^{lxiv} It is directly linked to the future development of dissociative identity disorder, as "loss of control over parts of one's mind—identity, memory, and consciousness" induces "traumatic stress."^{lxv} It can also lead to a child later self-harming "out of dissociative experiences."^{lxvi}

Additionally, this process of erasure must be immediate. To Baucham, every stage of training requires that a child responds to the parent's commands without hesitation. Hesitation implies a disobedient, and thus sinful, will:

"If I tell them to do something and they don't do it when I tell them to do it? That's delayed disobedience and the technical Greek word for delayed disobedience is disobedience... And according to Scripture, I cannot tolerate that. If I tolerate that, I'm tolerating sin."^{lxvii}

Part of child training, therefore, involves not merely the erasure of the child's self. It also requires that a child willingly erases any and every aspect of their self *as soon as the parent demands it*. Thus, self-erasure is — slowly but surely — trained into the child as *the natural*, rather than unnatural, response to the demands of the parent. The Christian message of "dying to self" becomes a developmental and psychological, rather than spiritual, command. Furthermore, the this message becomes linked to the parent rather than God.

The final observation we need to make about the connection between Baucham’s doctrine of total depravity and his ideas on corporal punishment is that the act of physically hitting a child is — to Baucham — the ultimate parental tool or weapon in achieving the child’s self-erasure, otherwise called “breaking the child’s will” by Christian disciplinarians.^{lxviii} (And in contrast with Pearl’s technique, which Baucham claims creates cognitive dissonance by changing a person’s actions but not that person’s will, Baucham’s technique avoids that — not by respecting the person but — by changing a person’s actions *and* beating down that person’s will.) It becomes the catch-all technique: when all else fails, use it until it works. Use it over and over and without ceasing as long as is necessary until the child finally breaks, until the child finally agrees to erase their self.

The Sin of Shyfulness

The following passage from Baucham’s child training sermon is crucial in understanding exactly how this method is to be implemented. Please note that if you find intense descriptions of corporal punishment to be triggering, that you might want to skip this quotation:

“God says your children desperately, desperately need to be spanked. Amen, hallelujah, praise the Lord! — and spank your kids, okay? They desperately need to be spanked. And they need to be spanked often. They do. I meet people all the time, you know, and they say, ‘Oh yeah, I can think of maybe 4 or 5 times I’ve ever had to spank Junior.’ Really? That’s unfortunate, because unless you raised Jesus the Second, there were days when Junior needed to be spanked 5 times before breakfast... When they were 2 and you said, ‘Come here,’ and they said ‘No,’ — you should have worn them out... You might feel like picking up the phone going, ‘I think I’m gonna kill him.’ That’s ok. ‘Cuz you know what Proverbs says about that? It says don’t spare the rod! ‘Cuz ‘though you beat him with the rod, he will not die but you may save his very soul from destruction.’

“...Let me give you an example — the prime example. The so-called shy kid, who doesn’t shake hands at church, okay? Usually what happens is you come up, you know — and here I am, I’m the guest, and I walk up and I’m saying hi to somebody and they say to

their kid ‘Hey, you know, say good morning to Dr. Baucham!’ And the kid hides and runs behind the leg — and here’s what’s supposed to happen. This is what we have agreed upon silently in our culture. What’s supposed to happen is: I’m supposed to look at their child and say, ‘Hey, that’s okay.’ But I can’t do that. Because if I do that, then what has happened is, Number One, the child has just sinned by not doing what they were told to do. It’s direct disobedience. Secondly, the parent is in sin for not correcting it. And thirdly, I am in sin because I just told a child that it’s okay for them to disobey and dishonor their parent in direct violation of Scripture. I can’t do that. I won’t do that. I’m gonna stand there until you make them do what you said.

“...I have a pastor friend of mine. One of his daughters was just really defiant in this one particular area. And they had one instance where they had drawn the line and they were like, ‘This has to end today.’ And they told her, did the training, everything else. And so they were leaving and there was a deacon — there was a deacon family — and they walk out, you know, supposed to greet, say bye to the deacon, shake the deacon’s hand. She won’t do it. Pastor goes back in the office, goes through that whole process — spank the child, comes back out, child won’t do it again. Goes back again, asks the deacon, ‘Will you please wait here?’

“Thirteen times.

“Thirteen times.

“That deacon was like, ‘Little girl, please...’

“They never dealt with it again.”^{lxix}

There are several important observations we need to make about this passage:

First, this passage begins with Baucham’s underlying assumption about children’s nature. Since children are “radically depraved,” it only makes that they would “desperately need” to be

physically hit. In a worldview colored by total depravity, children are in a perpetual state of being one step away from becoming serial killers. It makes sense, therefore, that they need to be watched — and treated — like they are a danger to not only themselves, but more importantly to those around them. Physical restraints (including physical punishments) are required.

Second, since children are “radically depraved,” it also makes sense that they would “desperately need” to be physically hit *often*. That a child would *not* need to be spanked “5 times before breakfast” is understandably a surprise to Baucham. In his mind, of course a child would require so many spankings. Every potential action, facial expression, emotion, and other expressions of a child’s feelings, needs, or will could be declarations of war, declarations of an infant’s intent to murder the parent in his or her sleep. Thus an oppositional and antagonistic interpretation is forced upon the parent-child relationship. The parent cannot let even one potential declaration of war go unpunished, lest the child be allowed to run roughshod over the patriarch’s authority.

Third, natural stages in child development should be the last way that a parent interprets its child’s communications. Every potential action, facial expression, emotion, and other expressions of a child’s feelings, needs, or will could be declarations of war. Note that Baucham says a child who exhibits what most people would consider shyness is *not* a shy kid. Rather, that kid is “the so-called shy kid.” This is identical to when Baucham refers to mental illness as “so-called mental illness” in his sermon on total depravity.^{lxx} The implication of both of these statements’ “so-called” phrase is obvious: shyness is not really shyness; mental illness is not really mental illness. Rather, both “shyness” and “mental illness” are excuses modern secularists give for *sin*. The “shyness” of a child is willfull disobedience to a parent’s orders. Similarly, the “mental illness” of an adult is simply that adult reaping the consequences of living life in opposition to God’s commands.

Fourth, and finally, we see how exactly Baucham desires his technique to be implemented: until it achieves the desired result(s). There is no alternative; there is no safety hatch; there is no escape clause. In the disturbing example of the pastor who had *thirteen* spanking sessions (*sessions*, not just spankings!) with his young daughter, we see that — once the parent has established that he and his daughter are in an antagonistic situation where one will must be

broken by another — there is no option to switch tracks. A common sensical solution — such as asking the young girl *why* she does not want to greet the deacon (could the deacon have abused her? could the deacon remind her of some other adult that abused her?) — is out of the question. In fact, to pursue any other solution would be to allow the child's will to triumph over the parent's. Thus the child must be physically hit ad nauseum until the child finally is exhausted and agrees to erase the part of their self they are desperately trying to protect.

The end result of all of this is, as we have seen, *thought reform*, or the enforcement of certain thought patterns. The child must come to see their self as inherently broken, as unworthy of being the focus of attention or deserving of the right to assert self, and as deserving of self-erasure and physical punishment. This is what it practically means to Baucham that there exists a “desperate need to get the gospel to your children again and again and again and again.” The child must “learn their place” at all costs, child development experts be damned — even if it requires thirteen spanking sessions.

But at the risk of sounding trite, there is a question we must present to Voddie Baucham: *What would Jesus do?* As we consider this question, we encounter a number of critiques of Baucham's technique and worldview. To these critiques we now turn.

Critique #1: Baucham's Theology of Children is Unbiblical

As we consider Jesus of Nazareth's own words concerning children and their place in the Kingdom of God, there are many questions that might arise. For example, how do Jesus's words about children relate to traditional Christian doctrines such as Augustinian original sin, Lutheran bondage of will, and Calvinist total depravity? While such questions are certainly important and worthy of examination, they are tangential to this section's purpose and will thus be put in brackets. This section's focus will simply be on *what* Jesus says about children and what theology and iconography of children we can deduce from his sayings.

Jesus and Children

We shall start with the earliest passage in the Gospels in which Jesus mentions children, Mark 9:33-37:

"And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you discussing on the way?' But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And He sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.' And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.'"^{lxxi}

In this passage we see Jesus take a radical departure from the ideology of his historical context. In the ancient Palestinian context, children were considered the lowest of the low, legally on par with slaves. They had no rights. They were considered property of their family's patriarch. As theologian Joyce Ann Mercer observes about this passage,

"In Mark's story, the child becomes the occasion for Jesus to explain (yet again) the reordering of social relationships and power made real under the reign of God, a concrete way of showing the meaning of 'being last of all' (paston eschatos, Mk. 9:35).

Horsley describes the issue in terms of children's social status: 'In ancient Palestine, as in most any traditional agrarian society, children were the human beings with the lowest status. They were, in effect, not-yet-people. The [language that] "the kingdom of God" belongs to children sharpens the agenda of the whole Gospel story that the kingdom of God is present for the people, the peasant villagers, as opposed to the people of standing, wealth, and power.' In the patriarchal honor/shame society being described, children were quite literally the possession of their fathers. Thus in this story the child's low social standing accentuates Jesus' message that [we should] lift up the lowliest.^{16xxii}

One thus cannot overstate the iconographic significance of the act of Jesus taking a child, placing that child in the center of the people's midst, and declaring that whoever loves a child — loves this lowly piece of property with no legal standing — is loving divinity itself, is loving the very manifestation of the incarnate God.

The Gospel of Mark continues this theme of children as images of God in the next chapter. This is from Mark 10:13-15:

"And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.' And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.^{16xxiii}

In this chapter Jesus is engaging the religious teachers of his time in a serious debate about marriage and divorce. (Mark 10 begins with the controversial "divorce passage.") Right in the midst of this debate, parents are bringing their children to Jesus to bless. Considering how theoretically important the divorce conversation was, the disciples try to shoo away the children. Yet Jesus was "indignant." He "rebuked" the disciples in public and declared, "Let the children come to me." Jesus not only prioritized the child over and against a doctrinal debate; Jesus declared that "the kingdom of God" belongs to the child. The child is not only inherently a manifestation of the incarnate God, the child is also inherently a possessor of God's kingdom and

the model by which one enters that kingdom: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

These passages about Jesus’s interaction with children were so important — and so revolutionary in terms of their historical context — that the other Gospel writers also included them. They are repeated by both Luke and Matthew. In Luke’s version (seen in Luke 18:15-17), Jesus is busy lecturing to the crowds about parables and other serious, adult matters. As in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gets interrupted by parents bringing children to him. And also as in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus prioritizes the child over his adult audience:

“Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.’”^{lxxiv}

Once again, Jesus asks that the children come to him — and that the *adults* do not hinder them. And yet again, the child is held up by Jesus as the model by which one enters the Kingdom of God. This is repeated a third time in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 19:13-15), the context being the same debate about divorce as seen in the Gospel of Mark:

“Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’ And he laid his hands on them and went away.”^{lxxv}

The Gospel of Matthew goes even further than the other Gospels in establishing how Jesus thought of, valued, and gave preferential treatment — or what some theologians call “preferential option”^{lxxvi} — to the child. In Matthew 21:14-16 we see Jesus envisioning the child as ecstatic worshiper of the divine:

“The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant, and they said to him, ‘Do you hear what these are saying?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read, “Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise”’? ”^{lxxvii}

Here we have Jesus healing the blind and the lame. These miracles are so overwhelming that children are running around the temple screaming — likely with either joy or astonishment. Either way, the children are being racous and making a scene — enough so that the religious authorities are becoming annoyed by their unruly behavior. They point out the children’s behavior to Jesus, yet Jesus points out to these authorities what the Psalmist David in the Tanakh wrote in Psalm 127:3-5:

“Lord our Lord, your name is the most wonderful in all the earth! It brings you praise everywhere in heaven. From the mouths of children and babies come songs of praise to you.”^{lxxviii}

From the mouths of children and babies come songs of praise to God.

Let me repeat that:

From the mouths of children and babies come songs of praise to God.

This is a far cry from the image of the child as viper or a theology of children that considers the child to be a miniature serial killer in the making. Rather, this is Jesus affirmingly quoting the Psalmist who declares songs of praise to God are on — to borrow Baucham’s phrasing — the mouth, throat, tongue, and lips of children. And Jesus affirmingly quotes this imagery to remind the religious authorities of his day that children — even (and perhaps especially) in their racous, unruly behavior in the temple — are signals of transcendence, are miniature reminders of how we should all be related to God.

The final passage we must look at is Matthew 18:1-6 and 10-14:

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea...’

“‘See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.’”^{lxxix}

This passage summarizes everything we have thus observed about Jesus’s attitude towards children: Children represent to Jesus “the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” They are the image of what one must “become like” if one wants to “enter the kingdom of heaven.” Not only that, they also serve as a litmus test: whoever accepts a child in Jesus’s name is accepting Jesus himself. They also serve as a warning: whoever rejects a child might as well drown “in the depth of the sea.” These are nothing short of serious exhortations, which Jesus reminds his audience when he says, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones.” Jesus also reminds his audience just how important they are: God would not let even one — not even a single child — go missing. God would not rest until a lost child is found. Children are valued simply for who they are, not for their utility.

This is the immense value that Jesus places upon the child. And this immense valuation of the child is exactly what is missing from Voddie Baucham’s teachings.

Jesus and Vipers

While we must conclude, then, that Baucham's iconography and theology of children directly contradicts Jesus's, we must note that Baucham has at least one thing right: Jesus of Nazareth *does* speak of vipers. In fact, Jesus employs the imagery of vipers on several occasions in the Gospel. However, in contrast with Baucham, Jesus does not invoke that imagery in the context of children. Rather, he invokes the imagery of vipers when talking about people like Baucham: religious leaders.

Before looking at Jesus's use of the viper, it is important to understand the imagery of the viper or snake within the Judaic worldview. The snake is one of the first characters introduced in the Book of Genesis and its role within the narrative is the antagonist against the paradise that is humanity's original home, the Garden of Eden. The snake's personality is made immediately apparent in the narrative in Genesis 3:1-5:

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden”?’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”^{1xxx}

The reader is made aware from the beginning that the snake is “more crafty” than all the other animals. Its antagonistic role in the story is to be the cunning deceptor: the teacher that uses rhetoric and intelligence to convince someone that what is true is false and what is false is true. It is the snake's false teaching that thus propels the entire story of humanity forward — out of the paradise that is Eden and into the broken, hurting world that we all know and experience.

One cannot overemphasize the importance of the snake playing this role in the context of the Judaic worldview. The snake's role in this worldview is markedly different from other ancient religions' worldviews. "The snake," says scholar Joseph Campbell, "in most cultures is given a positive interpretation. In India, even the most poisonous snake, the Cobra, is a sacred animal...The serpent was revered in the American Indian traditions...In the Christian story the serpent is the seducer...The serpent was the one who brought sin into the world."^{lxxxix}

Thus the Judaic worldview stands out in contrast to other religions at the time in portraying the snake in a negative light. That negative light is textually obvious: the snake represents cunning and deception; the serpent is the false teacher who deceives.

When we look, therefore, at how Jesus employs the imagery of the snake or viper in the Christian Gospels, we see continuity. Jesus employs this imagery in the exact same way it was employed in the Book of Genesis. Namely, he invokes the viper in the context of religious authority — teachers who use cunning to deceive and mislead their followers. As many as three times in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus refers to religious authorities as vipers:

- Matthew 3:7: "*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'*"^{lxxxix}
- Matthew 12:34: "*You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*"^{lxxxix}
- Matthew 23:33: "*You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?*"^{lxxxix}

What is important to note here for our purposes is that in every example of Jesus referring to vipers, it is in the context of *the powerful*, the religious authorities and teachers, the world power structures, the ruling classes. Those are the individuals who hold the power to deceive. Those are the forces that hold the means to marginalize and oppress. The image of the viper is never used

in reference to *the powerless* — most notably, the children that Jesus says shall inherit the Kingdom of God because they are “last” in the kingdom of earth.

Frankly, it would not even make sense for Jesus to refer to children as vipers or snakes. Since the imagery of the viper or snake — in both the Tanakh and the Christian Gospels — invokes the imagery of the cunning machinations of authorities, such power would not be available to infants or children simply by virtue of age. A newborn infant cannot even communicate their basic needs apart from wailing. A young child is entirely dependent on their elders for sustenance and nurturing. How would it be possible for an infant or child to be an authority, let alone an authority with the ability of cunning machination? Such Machiavellian technique is the domain of adulthood — the adulthood to which Baucham, not a child, belongs.

“Children,” notes theologian Janet Pais, “are inherently disadvantaged.” In contrast, “adults have power over children and the warning of the gospel is for those who have power. We are not to lord it over those who are weaker, but to serve them. The child is Jesus’ specific example of those whom we are to serve (Mk 9:33-35).”^{lxxxv}

Implications

As stated in the beginning of this section, we are putting in brackets larger theological conversations about systematic theology. So while we have observed that (1) Jesus’s iconography of children involves not vipers but rather manifestations of the incarnate God itself, (2) Jesus’s theology of children involves children being the model by which we enter the Kingdom of God and deserving of preferential treatment by those in power (namely, adults and religious authorities), and (3) Jesus’s imagery of vipers is only used in the context of and against the religious authorities of the day who took advantage of their position and power to hurt and oppress the powerless and vulnerable, we will leave it to professional theologians to work out what these observations mean for doctrines like original sin and total depravity. Our purpose here is simply to point out that Jesus of Nazareth used very specific imagery and emphases when talking about children — imagery and emphases that directly contradict those employed by Baucham. In the Gospels, children are spoken of and treated with a historically revolutionary

amount of respect, love, and value — the very respect, love, and value that are grossly absent in Baucham's worldview.

In short, Voddie Baucham's theology of children contradicts the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as evidenced in the Christian Gospels and is thus unbiblical.

Critique #2: Baucham's Theology of Children Encourages Contempt for Children

The next critique of Baucham's theology of children is that his theology of children encourages contempt towards them. One observes this fact simply from any of Baucham's teachings or writings. Let us review the words and phrases used by Baucham (and his favorite author Mather) to describe children:

- viper in a diaper
- diseased
- slaves of devils
- defiled
- depraved
- horribly polluted
- like a criminal
- murderous
- like a serial killer
- evil
- desiring to kill their parents
- needing to be controlled
- desperately needing to be hit

All of these words and phrases are overwhelmingly negative. But more than that, their purpose is to conjure up *contempt*. These are not the words and phrases that one would use to conjure up, for example, *empathy*. An empathetic response to the frailty and imperfection of an infant or child would use vastly different adjectives and nouns. Whereas describing an infant or child as “murderous,” or analogizing between an infant or child and a serial killer, is meant to stir up feelings of negativity. One does not respect or empathize with a serial killer; one finds a serial killer repulsive and disturbing (as Baucham himself states). Thus one ought to — if one follows the analogy — find children repulsive and disturbing as well.

The issue of *contempt* deserves our attention because contempt towards children is a foundational motivating factor in the *abuse* of children. When one holds a child in contempt, one is dehumanizing and devaluing that child — which makes the abuse of that child easier in one’s mind. Not only that, but when one holds a child in contempt, one is directly in defiance of Jesus of Nazareth — because Jesus granted revolutionary humanization and value to children. Contempt for children is the very opposite of Jesus’s welcoming of children. Just as Luke said in Acts 4:11 that, “Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone,” so too does Baucham reject (via contempt) children, who are explicitly said by Jesus to be the immanent manifestations of God.

Theologian Janet Pais provides a helpful and relevant explanation of what it means to have contempt for children:

“Just as ‘the problem’ of racism or sexism or poverty does not reside in the person who is black or female or economically disadvantaged, ‘the problem’ of children does not reside in children. The problem is an adult problem, and in particular a problem stemming from the attitude of many adults toward children... This attitude is contempt... Having contempt means that our behavior towards the smaller, weaker, needier person is different from the way we would behave toward the same person if she or he were as big and strong as we are... We say to a child, ‘Don’t be a baby,’ thus at the same time expressing our contempt for the child and teaching the child to have contempt for anyone who is smaller and weaker. We say that ‘childish’ is not the same as ‘childlike,’ the one undesirable, the other desirable. This is an expressing of contempt for the child’s point of view. We say, ‘Don’t be a child!’ Jesus tells us the opposite: Be a child! Be the child you were and still are.”^{lxxxvi}

We see this attitude of contempt in Voddie Baucham’s theology of children most directly in how he applies the doctrine of total depravity to the specifics of child training. Instead of respecting children as autonomous, valuable human beings who can speak for themselves, he insists, for

example, that parents should impose their own interpretation upon a quarrel between two siblings:

“The next time those two daughters of yours quarrel, don’t ask them what happened; tell them! Remind them of the essential reason for their disagreement, and that God knows exactly why they don’t get along: ‘What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder... (James 4:7-10).”^{lxxxvii}

In this example, the two daughters are not allowed the chance to speak up for themselves (even if one was legitimately wronged by the other). They are smaller than the parent, and thus the parent is encouraged to ride roughshod over the children and their experiences. This erases the children. The children are treated simply as property on which the parent has the right to impose its own interpretation of events, regardless of what truly happened. And as Pais notes, treating children as property is a perfect example of adult contempt for children:

“The contemptuous adult views the object of contempt indeed as an object, not a person worthy of respect. Contempt itself thus is abusive and oppressive. Adults, often unconsciously, act toward children out of an attitude that the child is a possession properly subject to their control...An adult may value a child for what the child can do or achieve, but this is not the same as valuing the child simply for being who and what the child is. With a contemptuous attitude, an adult may use the child for the adult’s own purposes, mold the child to be what the adult wants the child to be.”^{lxxxviii}

As we have seen in Baucham’s child training system, this is exactly the goal Baucham has in mind: to “mold the child to be what the adult wants the child to be” — or as Baucham put it, to “desperately want my sons and daughters to walk with God, and [to be] willing to do whatever it takes.” Yet such desperate attempts at molding inevitably lead to erasing who the child is and the fact that child stands before God — not their parent(s) — and must give their own account. By erasing the child’s self, Baucham’s technique — and its underlying theology — directly encourages an insidious and destructive form of contempt towards children.

Critique #3: Baucham's Theology of Children Promotes Abuse

The third and final critique of Baucham's theology of children is that it promotes child abuse. This is due to a number of reasons, the first of which is related to our last point: encouraging contempt towards children increasing the risk of child abuse. This is due to the statistical likelihood of child abuse occurring in homes where parents view their children with contempt. Thus by encouraging parents to view their children as brutish beasts, poisonous vipers, or potential serial killers, Baucham is increasing the chances of those children being hurt by the adults in their lives.

A 2009 New Zealand study by the Ministry of Social Development found a correlation between people's attitudes about children and how those people treat children. The study found that people who view children as "innately bad" are more likely to support physically hitting children. This is because those people saw children as being "born with a sinful (rebellious) nature" and thus "one of the duties of the parent is to curb rebellious expressions by the child." These same people were okay with "treatment that is less respectful than that which is available to adults."^{lxxxix}

Similarly, a 2009 study in the United States found that parents who have a higher risk of physically abusing their children are more likely to be people who have difficulty interpreting the ambiguous behavior of a child (like an infant crying) in positive terms. The study discovered that, "While both low and high CPA [child physical abuse] risk parents appear to be equally likely to encode ambiguous behaviors (e.g., infant's crying) in negative terms (e.g., difficult, uncooperative); low risk parents appear to have a somewhat greater capacity to also encode such behaviors in positive terms (e.g., sweet, loving)." What makes a difference in situations that could escalate into the physical abuse of a child is a "greater capacity to encode ambiguous or challenging moments in parenting in positive terms" That capacity "may buffer against pervasively negative interpretations and attributions and thus protect against angry or aggressive reactions."^{xc}

These results — and others like them — have been replicated numerous times. The implications are clear: if you view your child negatively, you are more likely to get negative results. “Parents high in [child physical abuse] risk,” for example, were found to be “especially likely to rate children displaying neutral emotional expressions as hostile and difficult.”^{xc} Thus, “problems can...arise when parents engage in maladaptive thinking. Mothers at a higher risk of child abuse, for example, are more likely to attribute negative traits to children who demonstrate ambiguous behaviour, and see this behaviour as intentional.”^{xcii} Or as Janet Pais succinctly puts it, “Believing in ‘a bent toward evil’ in children can only produce evil.”^{xciii}

Baucham is encouraging parents to do exactly this: to view emotional expressions of their children as hostile, even evil; to attribute negative traits to their children; to see children’s behavior as intentionally sinful; and to be less empathetic towards children. This is a direct recipe for increasing the risk of a child experiencing abuse.

The second reason why Baucham’s theology of children promotes abuse is because it encourages the erasure of children’s selves, which grooms those children to either be future abuse victims or future abusers. To understand this point, let us return once again to Baucham’s example of the two daughters quarreling:

“The next time those two daughters of yours quarrel, don’t ask them what happened; tell them! Remind them of the essential reason for their disagreement, and that God knows exactly why they don’t get along: ‘What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel... (James 4:1-3).’ And what’s the solution? Is it that they need to learn to share? Perhaps. But there’s a deeper issue, one that gets to our need for repentance and dependence on God: ‘Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you... Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep... (James 4:7-10).’

“...Tell them what God threatens to those who so behave. Let your child know that God is serious about what they’ve done, and show them what his Word threatens for those who continue to do it. This may seem like manipulation, but it isn’t. If God has warned us against something in his Word, we owe it to our children to point out the warning. If our neighbor has a sign up that says, ‘Beware of Dog,’ we certainly have no qualms about warning our children to stay off of his property. So why should we feel the slightest apprehension about telling them that God says, ‘But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death’ (Rev. 21:8)?”^{xciv}

Let us imagine how this situation would typically manifest. Child A has a toy that belongs to her. She is the rightful owner of the toy and she loves playing with it. Child B wants Child A’s toy, so he goes up to her and grabs it out of her hands. Child A gets angry and begins to cry. At this point, the Parent enters the room.

According to Baucham, this is how the Parent should handle the situation: The Parent does not ask Child A or Child B what happened. Rather, the Parent lectures both Child A and Child B about how they’re sinful and deserving of hell and thus desperately need Jesus. They are informed that if they do not both repent of their sins, they will spend eternity burning in the fires of damnation.

Let us now consider what the end result of such a method will be: Child A had a right to be upset and was justified in being angry. The toy was her property. She had a right to it. However, when she spoke up about something of hers being stolen, and when she tried to speak up for her own rights, the result was the Parent shutting her down and simply telling her she is a sinner and thus she needs to repent as much as Child B. The message, then, that Child A receives is this: because you are a dirty sinner, you have no right to your self, you have no right to speak up when you are violated, and because you are a dirty sinner you deserve whatever happens to you.

In other words, Baucham’s technique is *grooming Child A to be the perfect abuse victim*.

What about Child B? Child B was in the wrong. Child B did something *specific* that *explicitly* violated a moral standard. He took something that was not his. However, when the Parent intervened, the Parent blamed both Child A and Child B equally — and simply chalked up Child B’s wrongdoing to a general sin nature and not actually the *action* that Child B took. The message, then, that Child B receives is this: because you are a dirty sinner, it’s not so much what you *actually* do that’s wrong but rather just your general nature; you’re inherently broken. Child B will therefore separate right and wrong from his or her actions and become detached from their consequences. His self will become fragmented, or “split,”^{xcv} and he will place distance between his ego and his actions, which can lead to future violent and antisocial behavior.^{xcvi}

In other words, Baucham’s technique is *grooming Child B to be a sociopath*.

By encouraging child training that rests upon the foundational principle of erasing children’s selves, Baucham has created a system that communicates disastrous and damaging messages to children. It thus not only increases the likelihood of parents abusing children, it also grooms those same children to either be abuse victims or abusers.

The third and final reason why Baucham’s theology of children promotes abuse is seen in his lesson about the “so-called shy kid.” When a child is too shy to meet a stranger, or recoils in fear at someone they don’t want to greet, Baucham insists that it is a manifestation of the child’s evil and therefore the child must be punished. The problem here is that Baucham’s message yet again erases the child’s self. His message truncates every unique child into one platonic form of child-ness, rather than respecting every child’s different personality as being made in the image of God. The fact is, children respond different ways to stimuli and some children are highly sensitive to stimuli. Forcing them to engage when they are overwhelmed does not help them become mature; rather, it makes them willing to let others violate their boundaries and their selves. As one mother of a highly sensitive child has noted, “Where does it say in Scripture that a six year old child should be eager to shake hands with any strange man who walks up to her?”^{xcvii}

When put that way, you realize how easily this message could lead to a young child being abused by an adult in power. In fact, Baucham's story about the pastor's young daughter who was afraid of the deacon takes on a grotesque shape in this light. What if that young girl had been abused by the deacon? And that is why it takes *thirteen* spanking sessions to break her resistance, when that resistance should have been lauded? Sadly, we will never know. We will never know because the pastor broke her will like she was nothing more than an animal to be trained — just as Baucham had instructed.

Conclusion

This paper examined how Baucham frequently employs the image of the child as viper. This image underlies both Baucham's iconography and theology of children. Namely, he views children as radically depraved and animal-like and therefore justifies an authoritarian and punitive system of child training. As he believes children are inherently broken, he takes issues with other disciplinarian systems that focus solely on behavioral modification. In Baucham's mind, such systems are doomed to fail because they neglect the enforcement of certain thought patterns — or “thought reform.” Thought reform necessitates the gradual breaking not only of a child's will but also a child's mind, erasing that child's self so that it responds immediately and naturally to the demands of adults.

The problem with this theology of children, however, is that it directly contradicts the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth in the Christian Gospels. In the Gospels, Jesus thinks about, values, and gives a preferential treatment to children in a way that is radically different (and revolutionary in its historical context) from Baucham. Jesus lifts up the child as the model for entering the Kingdom of God. Jesus embraces the child, rebukes the adults who try to keep the child from his embrace, and grants the child a preeminent role in the eternity to come. Jesus takes a sledgehammer to the power differentials of the day and declares that whoever welcomes the child — whoever welcomes the powerless, rights-less infant — welcomes the incarnate God. It is in relation to the religious authorities like Baucham, the adults who tend to the world power structures, that Jesus invokes the image of a viper.

We also saw that Baucham's theology of children creates problems beyond fidelity to the biblical message. We saw that his iconography of the child as viper and his theology of children as inherently broken directly contributes to increased risks of child abuse. By amplifying the antagonism and distrust between child and parent, Baucham's teachings encourage parents to see the worst in their children — which makes parents more likely to hurt their children. It also grooms those children to either be future abuse victims or future abusers.

In conclusion, it is incumbent on Christian homeschooling communities and leaders everywhere to call out Baucham's theology of children for what it is: unbiblical, contemptuous, and abusive.

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