



LIVING ON THE EDGE

by Rachel D. Ramer

ISOLATED, AUTHORITARIAN FAMILIES

In response to antifamily trends in recent decades, there has been a resurgence within Christianity to restore family integrity and values. Christians may agree on the importance of these issues, but there are very different views of the role of family within Christianity and culture. Some Christian groups, who see culture as adversarial to Christianity, believe the role of family is to protect its members from culture. The principles of authority and isolation these groups often recommend are problematic and result in the family becoming a legalistic subculture within Christianity. Authoritarianism and isolationism provide a false sense of security from the moral and spiritual evils of the world, and merely result in a subculture that fails to interact with and transform culture in a redeeming way.

In an age of deteriorating families, deadbeat dads and disregard for traditional family boundaries and values, Christians have responded by “focusing on the family.” Many aberrant groups and cults, on the other hand, compel followers to forsake family, interrupting this natural and significant expression of God’s protection and love. There are also those who encourage forsaking nearly everything but family.

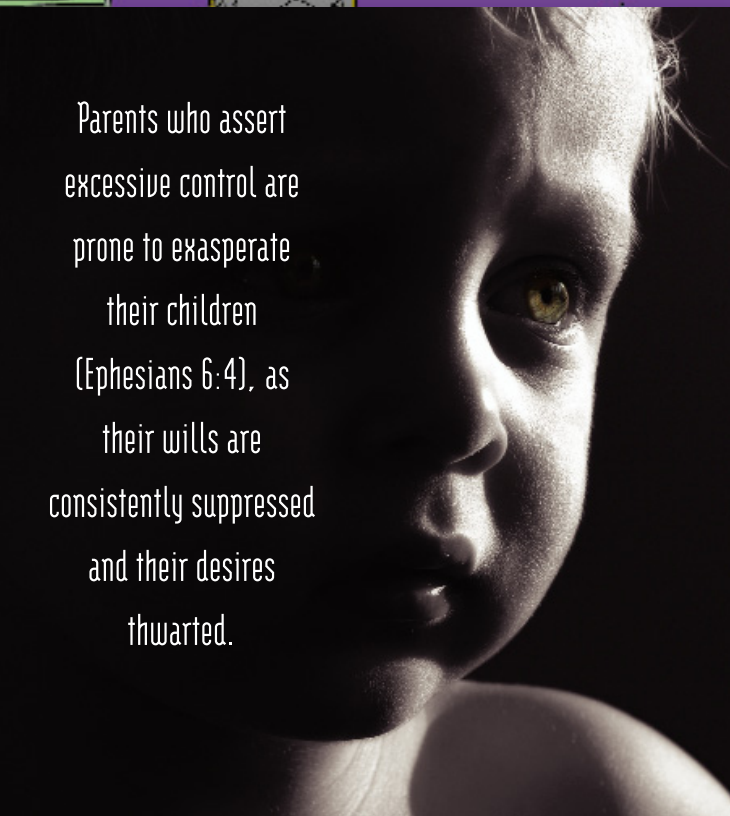
Some Christians see family as the focal point of Christianity, relying on the teachings of leaders such as R.J. Rushdoony. Considered the father of Christian Reconstructionism, Rushdoony has stated, “All the basic governmental powers in society, save one, the death penalty, have been given [by God] to the family, not to the state nor to the church.... A mark of anti-Christianity is the move to strip the family of these powers.”¹ In response to this idea, voices such as *Patriarch* magazine promote “home education, home business, home church, home birth, family ministry, family health, family worship, courtship and betrothal, family-based welfare.”² This view of the family may also include rejection of organized sports, church youth and singles’ groups and neighborhood playmates.

From within this structure, church leaders who let their wives work outside the home, use credit, limit family size, send their children to public schools and so on, are viewed in a negative light. Concerning such leaders, *Patriarch* asks, “Can I remain under the authority of someone who so denies the Bible by his life? Can my family continue to maintain fellowship in a church whose leaders so disregard the clear teachings of God’s Word?”³ *Patriarch* further suggests that youth groups and Sunday school programs demonstrate a “failure of the church to teach the principles of parental responsibility for child training and to reinforce it in the church’s programs,” and that the use of these programs in a church “may well be a reason to leave.”⁴

Authority or Authoritarianism?

Excessive authority is the primary issue when addressing the harmful characteristics of some child training or education materials. Many authoritarians mimic Bill Gothard’s “chain of authority” or “chain of command” teachings.⁵ God certainly ordained an authority structure within the family, but demanding unquestioning obedience from children goes beyond what he instructed.

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a biblical viewpoint, human authority is to be respected; yet, when the religious rulers were wrong, Peter and John disobeyed them (Acts 4:15–21). The Jewish midwives in Egypt also disobeyed authority for ethical reasons (see Exodus 1:15–21).

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come, for the child, models of humility instead of models of sovereignty. Parental overidentification with God's authority confuses the child who eventually witnesses the parents' imperfect/sinful humanity. This absolutizing of authority fails to recognize nuances and variables in human communication and situations and ignores possible emotional control issues and sinfulness within parents.

Some authoritarians redefine child abuse as a lack of authority: "Real child abuse is allowing a child to be overtaken by the destructive forces of sin and rebellion."⁹ Not so! Real child abuse is the misuse or overuse of authority. This overuse of authority can also occur with older children, for example, when parents make decisions for them in areas such as vocation, as well as some cases of courtship/betrothal.

In his book, *Imperative People: Those Who Must Be in Control*, Christian psychotherapist Les Carter points out the result of excessive control: "Listen for the words *should, supposed to, got to, have to, ought to, must, can't*.... Technically speaking, nothing is wrong in stat-

ing what *should* be done. After all, in a world that shuns absolutes, it's refreshing to feel like you *do* stand for something."

He adds, however, that "you are in essence stating, 'I'll accept you only after you meet my conditions.' And since each of us responds negatively to this kind of emotional blackmail, we become angry and tense" (emphases in original).¹⁰ Children who emerge from such an environment may carry with them a distorted concept of God as an emotional blackmailer interested only in behavior. Parents who assert excessive control are prone to exasperate their children (Ephesians 6:4), as their wills are consistently suppressed and their desires thwarted.

In contrast to the concept of establishing unquestioning obedience, Christian counselor Jeff Van Vonderen states:

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concept, it is our job to help [children] develop a strong *no*. They are going to need a strong *no* when they are fourteen years old and someone wants to be sexually intimate with them, or shoves a bottle of alcohol in their hand. Our job is to recognize opportunities for them to exercise their *no*—not to strip them of their will in the name of maintaining authority as a parent.... In that light, actively look for opportunities to give them

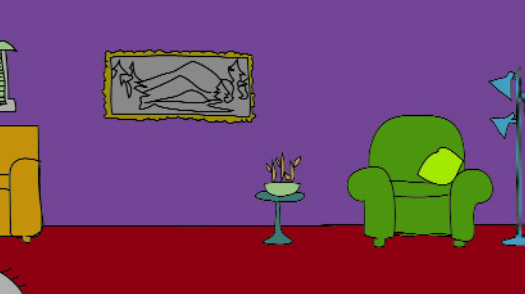
PHOTO BY T. ROLF

In their article, "Training Roseanna's Flesh," Michael and Debi Pearl, for example, argue that training a child properly is not a matter of focusing on any particular training issue itself, rather, "IT IS A MATTER OF ESTABLISHING AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHO IS IN CONTROL" (emphasis in original).⁶

They continue, "You must look for opportunities to demonstrate that you have the last word, that your authority is to be obeyed without question.... If, during the course of a day, no contest arises naturally, you should arrange one. Seek opportunity to thwart the child's will, to cause him to submit to your command."⁷

Kelly Crespin, of the Eclectic Homeschool Association gave the Pearls' book, *To Train Up a Child*, a less-than-glowing review: "They compare the training of a child to the training of a dog or mouse. I feel that many children who receive this type of 'training' grow up to fear their parents, or any adult figure."⁸

Authoritarianism goes beyond healthy, positive discipline and demands absolute submission. From



practice saying *no*, those times when a *no* would be an appropriate answer.”¹¹

Arguing for strong parental authority, author J. Richard Fugate states, “It should be no surprise that leaderless children respond to cults, such as the Moonies and the Jones groups....These counter-culture groups all have one thing in common—they **demand** followership. They each provide strong leadership, teach and enforce rules, and set a purpose for the life of the follower. Dare we as parents offer less?” (emphasis in original).¹² Susceptibility to cults, however, can result not only from children being “leaderless” but also from being *overled*. Jesus contrasted authoritarianism with humble leadership: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:25–26).

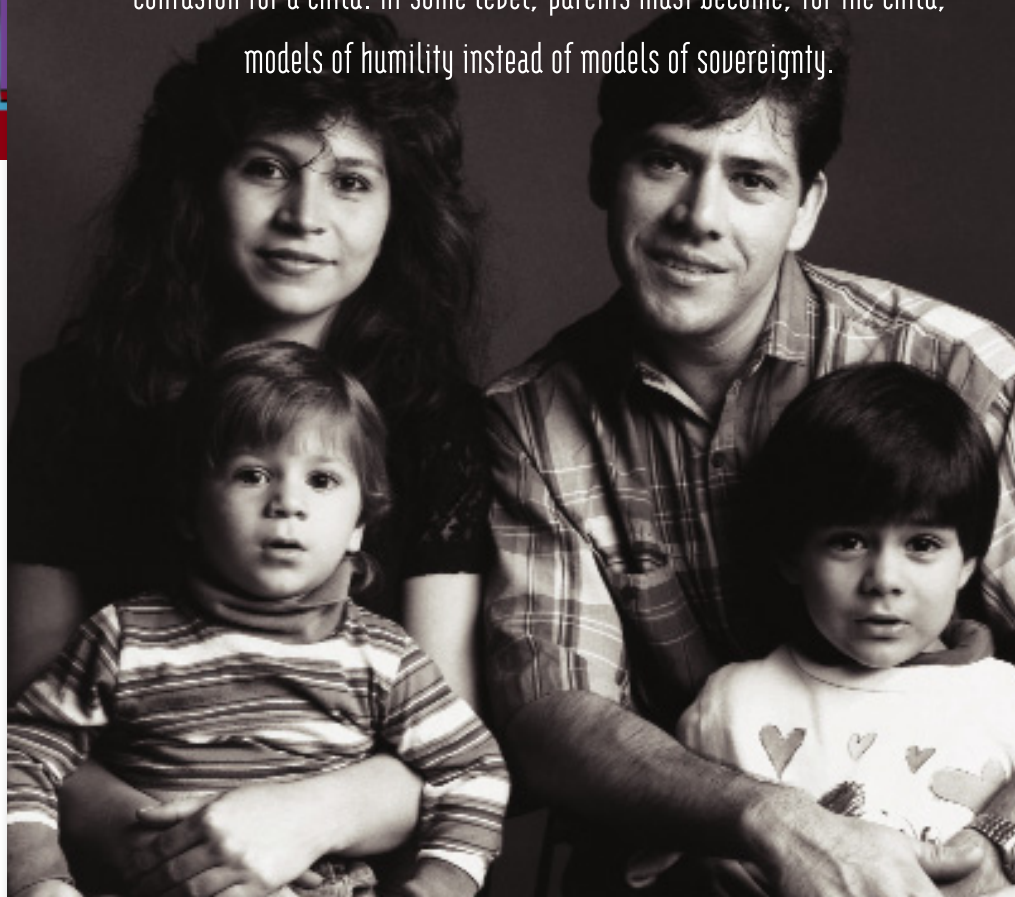
Humble leadership that is open to questioning and focused on relationship will provide emotional protection from cults—demanding leadership will not.

Head Over Heart

Authoritarians tend to view all “heart issues” as sins, such as greed, rebellion and lust. Blanket statements such as, “The loving parent will address the heart of the child through requiring confession”¹³ center on Scriptures such as, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9 KJV). The sin aspect of the heart is not the only aspect to which the Bible refers, however. Consider the use of the term “heart” in “did not our heart burn within us?” (Luke 24:32 KJV) and “let not your heart be troubled” (John 14:1 KJV).

Authoritarians mistakenly believe that emotional issues are

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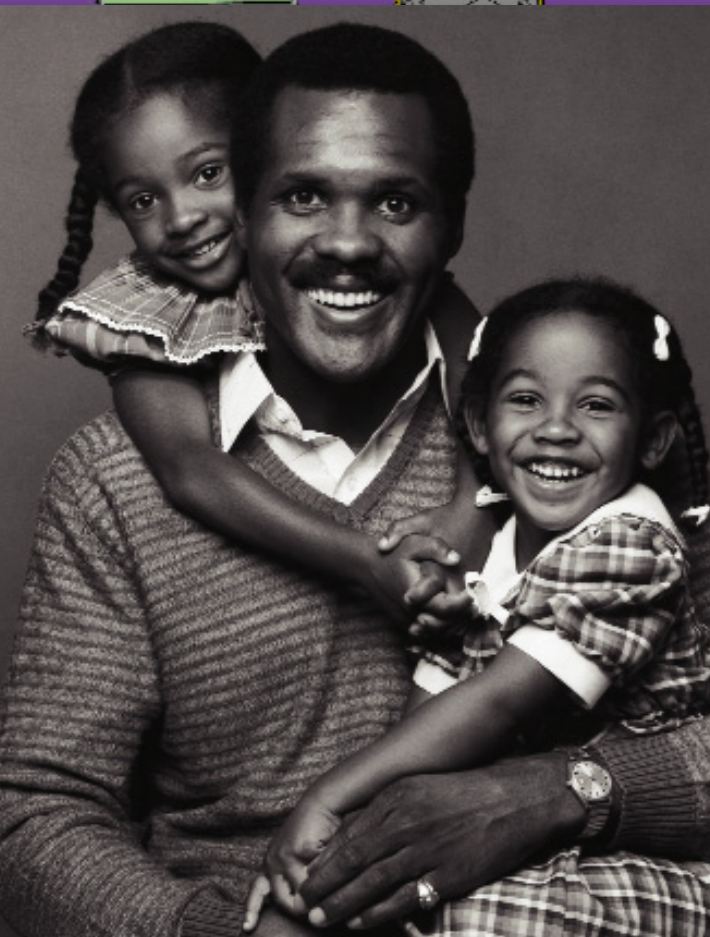
being adequately dealt with by addressing all heart issues as sin issues. Tedd Tripp, author of *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, argues that addressing the heart's sin issues should also include concern for the emotional health of the child. He suggests approaching a child's heart issues by asking, “Help me understand what you are feeling.”¹⁴

VanVonderen explains that in shame-based families, emotions and feelings are minimized: “Talking about feelings or needs leaves you feeling ashamed for being so ‘selfish’....The measuring stick becomes: how things look; what people think; religious behavior.... Children must learn to act like miniature adults in order to avoid shame...fault and blame are the order of the day.”¹⁵ The Pearls, for example, warn against expressing feelings, seeing them as selfishness: “For your children's own good, teach them to maintain control of their emotions. If you do not want

to produce a sissy who uses adversity as a chance to get attention, then don't program them that way.”¹⁶

VanVonderen notes that families who devalue emotions are “strong on ‘head skills’” and “weak on ‘heart skills.’”¹⁷ He is not criticizing thinking skills; rather, he is suggesting the need for balance. The perception that feelings need to be conquered, denied and shamed creates the kind of environment that one former Jehovah's Witness likened to the dissonance he felt within the Watchtower structure. The head knows all the “right” answers, as defined by the system, but the repressed, controlled emotions leave a person susceptible to harm and error.¹⁸

For many authoritarians, devaluing emotions also impacts the courtship/betrothal issue. John W. Thompson, for example, states, “Emotional romance, God says, is to be reserved for the betrothal stage of a relationship after a bind-



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ing commitment to marry has been made, preventing the broken heart syndrome."¹⁹ This approach, however, contributes to suppressed emotions, and, while it may prevent broken hearts before marriage, it does nothing to prevent broken hearts *after* marriage, and it may very well cause them.

Culture Confusion

Authoritarianism and isolationism are often married. Christian isolationism endorses a *godly* subculture, encouraging separation even from other Christians who do not conform to the ideals of that subculture. Isolationist Steve Schlissel states, "The naiveté of modern Christians concerning the religious character of the so-called Culture

War is astonishing. Culture, Henry Van Til taught us, is simply religion externalized and made explicit.... We have been raised to believe that culture is religiously neutral rather than religiously determined."²⁰ Religion certainly does influence culture, but this all-or-nothing view sees nearly every expression of culture as a religious statement, either heathen or nonheathen.

There are, however, other approaches to understanding how Christians relate, or don't relate, to the culture in which they find themselves. Professor and author Michael Horton draws from H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* to explain five different approaches: First, *Christ against culture* holds that "the world is evil, but the realm of the Spirit is good; earthly things are inherently sinful, while heavenly things are inherently virtuous."²¹

Second, *Christ of culture* views Christianity as an extension of culture. Niebuhr states, "The movement that identifies obedience to Jesus Christ with the practices of prohibition, and with the maintenance of early American social organization, is a type of cultural Christianity.... Christ is identified with what men conceive to be their finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophy."²²

Third, *Christ above culture* "suggests neither antagonism nor assimilation."²³ This is an attempt at neutrality toward culture and is directly opposite Schlissel's view.

Fourth, *Christ and culture in paradox* sees the kingdom of God and the kingdom of humankind as "different spheres with different purposes.... Culture can never be an avenue of finding God.... But neither can culture be an object of disgust, since culture never promises to save or redeem."²⁴ In this view, while not all pleasurable aspects of life are spiritual in the salvific or godly sense, God is still present in them.

Fifth, *Christ the transformer of culture* is distinct from the *Christ against culture* and the *Christ of culture* views by holding that, "The problem is not the world, but the willful opposition of the world to God and His Christ. This frees the believer to participate in the world as a full-fledged citizen and to view it not as inherently wicked [or as an expression of false religions], but as a theater in which both God's glory and human sin are displayed."²⁵

Isolationists embrace the *Christ against culture* and also the *Christ of culture* views, and create their own culture, often based on ancient cultural practices found in the Bible. Horton explains that "there is great danger in mixing a 'Christ against culture' and a 'Christ of culture' paradigm...this mixture leads us to simply replace one culture with another and confuse the latter with God's will and kingdom."²⁶

Christ against culture and *Christ of culture* are two sides of the same coin. A true transformer of culture does not seek to create a separate culture; rather, he seeks to transform the existing culture.

Biblical Support for Isolation?

A look at Old Testament theocracy shows how covenants between a ruler and his people found in ancient Near Eastern *culture* were used as a pattern for God's covenant with Israel. Theologians

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separatist lifestyle (such as that of his contemporaries, the Essenes); rather, he took positive illustrations from, and participated in, his culture. His prayer to the Father for believers was “not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15).

Fee and Stuart argue that “there is no such thing as a divinely ordained culture; cultures are in fact different, not only from the first to the twentieth cen-

today, however, would also mean we should not wear clothes made of two fabrics, since the same passage also instructs, “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Leviticus 19:19).

Schissel also points to ancient practices of piercing slaves for subordination purposes (Exodus 21:6; Deuteronomy 15:17) to argue that body piercing should not be practiced today.³² Mosaic laws concerning the treatment of slaves, however, fail as bases for transcultural principles about body piercing. Fee and Stuart address the pierced-slave passage (Deuteronomy 15:12–17), calling it a casuistic law. “Such casuistic or case-by-case laws,” they say, “constitute a large portion of the more than six hundred commandments found in the Old Testament pentateuchal law.... Because such laws apply specifically to Israel’s civil, religious, and ethical life, they are by their very nature limited in their

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart state, “God constructed the Old Testament law on the analogy of these ancient covenants.”²⁷ Even the God-given Mosaic laws were not entirely divorced from the culture in which they were given.

Horton argues that, “Scripture admonishes us, [with Christ’s words ‘my kingdom is from another place’] to avoid either the tendency to confuse the kingdom of God with an earthly nation (Israel, America, etc.) or, on the other hand, to view citizenship in one kingdom as completely antithetical to citizenship and participation in the other.”²⁸

There certainly are cultures that adopt God’s laws more closely than others, such as those that abolish slavery or ban the exploitation of children; nevertheless, like the once-godly Pharisee sect, there are dangers from within once we’ve “arrived.” Jesus neither endorsed, nor participated in, a

century, but in every conceivable way in the twentieth century itself.”²⁹ They caution against applying a biblical passage to a present-day situation when particulars in the passage are not comparable to the present-day situation. Even if a biblical *principle* is evident, they counsel, “the ‘principle’ does not now become timeless to be applied at random on whim to any and every kind of situation. We would argue that it must be applied to *genuinely comparable situations*” (emphasis in original).³⁰

Isolationists’ belief that God has a particular culture in mind for his people influences how they interpret the Bible. Schlissel, for example, addresses the cultural craze over body piercing. He uses Leviticus 19:28 (KJV)—“Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you”—to conclude that (male) body piercing is scripturally wrong.³¹ To apply this verse to

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—John Fischer “Fearless Faith”

applicability and therefore unlikely to apply to the Christian.”³³

Today, bondage is not in the piercing of a body part but in making such cultural issues absolutes. Paul warned regarding such bondage to the Mosaic Law, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Finally, we might ask what was Jesus’ view concerning the role of the family. Consider his radical



“anti-family” statements, such as: “I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother.... Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:35, 37). Jesus also said, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50). Now, we understand that Jesus was using hyperbole to make his point and not discounting the value of family, but we can gather from these statements that he did not view the biological family as the center of Christianity, but rather *himself* and his kingdom.

What About Homeschoolers?

Is homeschooling a form of isolationism? It is true that considerable questionable material is directed to homeschoolers, and isolationists often homeschool; yet, this does not make all homeschoolers isolationists. It would be inaccurate to view all homeschoolers, or even all Christian homeschoolers, as being on the same side of this issue. A growing segment of home educators question isolationist tendencies. Probably the most prominent evangelical homeschool curriculum company that rejects isolationism is Sonlight Curriculum Ltd. Sonlight’s general manager Wayne Griess states that their philosophy is “to educate, not indoctrinate. We wish to grow learners aware of the world around

them.”³⁴ Sonlight owner John Holzmann plainly states that parents may *not* want to purchase Sonlight materials if “they want to shield their children as much as possible from contact with the world and the world system.”³⁵ Home education is a viable philosophy in its own right and is not necessarily an expression of isolationism.

Concern for Evangelism

The issues of authoritarianism and isolationism carry grave implications concerning evangelism. First, to what do they convert people? The yoke of Christ is easy and his burden is light (Matthew 11:28–30). Authoritarianism and isolationism combine to create an environment that is heavy and burdensome.

Second, isolationism is not the agent for evangelism it may claim to be but is busy converting people from one culture to another. Lacking interaction with current culture, isolationism creates a closed system, where, as author John Fischer points out, “a separatist Christian monologue has replaced meaningful dialogue with the world around us.”³⁶

In contrast, viewing culture as a theater where God’s glory interacts with humanity, both sinful and needy, and where Jesus stepped into a broken world to eat, drink and *abide* with us, is biblical (Luke 7:34; John 1:14).

Fischer sums up an alternative to isolationism: “I would suggest that we as Christians need to learn to *embrace* the danger of living in a dangerous world and trust not a safe sub-culture to protect us, but a praying Savior.”³⁷ □

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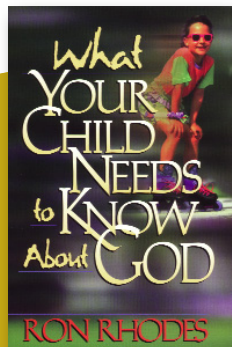
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