

A Different Perspective on *In Loco Parentis*

by Ken Trotter and Joshua Gibbs, Trinitas Christian School

Trey arrived at school in the morning looking a bit hurried and disheveled in his burgundy shirt, khaki shorts, and loosely tied tennis shoes. It was his fourth week in ninth grade at Trinitas, his new school, and the socks he chose to complete his uniform did not match the guidelines. While this was a slight infraction, it was a matter requiring attention. Following our daily morning assembly, I asked Trey for a moment of his time before going to class.

KT: Hi, Trey. How are you doing?

Trey: Pretty well, Mr. Trotter.

KT: Is everything going okay?

Trey: Pretty good, sir. It's lot of work, but I like it.

KT: That's good. Trey, I wanted to speak with you because I noticed the socks you're wearing don't meet the uniform guidelines. I wasn't sure if you understood the policy: is it clear?

Trey: Yes, sir. I know these aren't the right kind of socks. This morning as I was getting dressed for school I went to the dryer and saw that my uniform was still pretty damp. I had another shirt and pants, but grabbed the only pair of socks I had in my drawer. I'm sorry.

KT: Nothing to be sorry for; I understand. I just wanted to make sure you understood the dress code policy and let you know that we expect you to abide by it.

Trey: Yes, sir. I understand the policy.

KT: Very good. I'll give you a note to give your parents so they know that we spoke and what we talked about. You have them sign it and bring it to me in the morning.

Trey: Yes, sir. Thanks Mr. Trotter.

Trey received the note for his parents, and the rest of the day was uneventful. The next morning Trey arrived just before our morning assembly began and my eyes immediately went to his socks. To my surprise, Trey was wearing the same socks from the previous day. He gave me a warm, "good morning" as he passed by and I responded in kind, and then asked him to stop by my office before his first class.

KT: I couldn't help but notice that you're wearing the same socks you wore yesterday.

Trey: Yes, sir.

I smiled.

KT: Still having problems with

the dryer?

Trey: No, sir.

KT: Did you have your parents sign the note I gave you yesterday?

Trey: No, sir.

KT: Trey, what do we call this?

Trey: Disobedience.

Of course Trey was correct. He had not complied with instructions to wear the proper socks, and failed to return the note as requested. But disobedience didn't quite sum up the situation.

KT: I think you can be more specific than disobedience.

Trey: Rebellion?

Quite honestly, I was surprised that he arrived at this answer so quickly.

KT: That's the word that crossed my mind. Trey, yesterday you made it clear to me that you understood the uniform policy and I accepted your excuse because I know sometimes things happen that interfere with our desire to do right. But what I see here is you trying to get around a school rule simply because you don't like it.

Trey: Yes, sir.

We discussed rebellion and together painted a picture of what a rebel looks like, drawing on the Scriptures and personal

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A Different Perspective . . .

experiences. As we concluded, Trey seemed to understand that the socks were not the issue. We had uncovered a heart in need of care. I gave him a pair of the proper style socks to wear for the day, a second parent note for his parents, and sent him on his way.

The following day both notes were returned signed by Trey's father. I called his dad to see if he had any questions about the matter and to clear up any concerns. The call went well. We discussed Trey's transition to Trinitas, classes, friends, teachers, school rules, and, of course, the rebellion issue. Trey's father described their home to me helping me better understand his family. Following the conversation, I spoke with Trey's teachers and explored ways in which we could enhance our discipleship of this young man.

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Trinitas Christian School, according to our mission statement, aims to "... assist Christian families in the education of their children ...". Since the founding of the school, we've been careful to place great emphasis on that word assist. The fully realized *paideia* of God's family is not limited to academic education, nor does it preclude moral instruction, although it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that academics are the responsibility of the teacher and ethics the responsibility of the mother and father. To segregate the two is to unwittingly teach students that knowledge exists in a vacuum, that learning is neutral until ethics moves it, that two and two can make four without arousing the interest of a righteous God. Assisting Christian families in the education

of their children is not a simple divvying up of moral and academic responsibilities. You teach them algebra and we'll teach them not to steal. No deal. Assisting Christian families in educating their children is complicated, difficult, and involves the tedious process of cultivating a God-honoring social

grades, homework, profanity in classic texts, insults traded between students during class or whether to take Good Friday off. Even classical Christian apologists are often too embarrassed by the Bible to treat it as though the stories of Moses, riddles of Solomon, or theology of James had

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environment wherein parents can expect help in furthering the maturation of their children. This involves something far greater and far more nuanced than merely teaching history and science from a robust Christian worldview.

If this kind of strong relationship between students, teachers, and parents is going to exist, it must be underwritten by something even stronger than mere partnership, and so Scripture is the safe place wherein all moral and intellectual concerns are meted out. II Timothy 3:16–17 declares the sufficiency of Scripture. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

In this passage we find precise teaching on how Scripture forms not only the constitution under which every Christian community lives, but a framework for every Christian relationship. Too often, Paul's teaching here is treated as a guide only for pastoral counseling and parental admonition, but not a fit arbiter on matters concerning

anything to do with something as banal as, say, the school dress code. In doing so, we give ourselves over to the self-satisfaction of repeating mantras about worldview and invectives against Bob Jones while our students and parents grow weary, are allowed to despise school, and place their hope in the day they are liberated from the shackles of nominal worldvism. However, the Scriptures cannot be gerrymandered into places where it is convenient for us to have them. If the Bible has nothing to do with what is required of your third graders during lunch, there will be problems.

To succeed in its mission to faithfully assist Christian families, Trinitas must fashion a way of living that builds on the framework provided for Timothy. We must model a Christocentric lifestyle to fathers and mothers that recognizes their position of authority while enriching their understanding of familial roles and responsibilities. Scripture must be the root of all school policies and procedures, whether those policies concern the curriculum, statement of faith, or proper conduct at

A Different Perspective . . .

the drinking fountain. Right conduct in accordance with the teachings of Christ must be lived out by teachers and modeled in the cafeteria, practiced on the athletic fields, spoken in parent-teacher conferences, and discovered in science labs. The music of God's Word must resonate in the hallways and classrooms; He is the cellist, Scripture is the bow, our bodies are the strings, our lives are the symphony. The staff of the school is not only involved in offering education to students, but actively seeks out books and lectures not only on the subjects they teach, but on the very nature of education and discipleship which can then be shared and discussed with parents. The staff must seek out training to recognize when students miss the mark and how to tender thoughtful admonition, reproof that addresses the heart of the issue and leads students to an acknowledgment of their wrongdoing. With this understanding, students can be led to make proper and meaningful atonement for any offense and then be kindly placed back on the path of righteousness.

Garbed in his graduation gown, Trey stood smiling beside his mother and sisters. It was a joyous picture. His father walked up beside me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Thank you for a great four years," he said. "Quite honestly, I don't know who has learned the most from Trinitas—Trey or his mother and I."

parenting problems with a family, we must recognize that we might not have the authority, power, or jurisdiction to fix the problem. We might find ourselves pointing parents back to their church for instruction and then hoping that they receive good counsel. Sometimes this will not happen. This can be terribly discouraging, but we need to keep teaching people to go to their ministers for instruction, because, believe me, as a headmaster, I do not have the time to be a pastor to all of the school families. I have another job because we are a school.

Second, make sure that open and honest communication flows in a consistent, regular manner from teacher to parents. Schools cannot act *in loco parentis* if teachers and parents do not know each other. This communication might look different in different circumstances, but I would encourage schools to make sure that this communication has both objective and subjective elements. This means that some of the communication needs to be in things like letter grades and numbers. This communication tells parents with a level of objectivity how their child is doing. This alone, however, does not tell the whole story about the student, so teachers need to make sure that they also communicate the growth or struggles that they are seeing in the life of the student in the classroom, in the hallways, and on the playground. This communication is critical.

Finally, I would highly recommend that teachers provide as much communication as possible to parents in a personal manner. Some do this by having a parent-teacher conference. I like having more regular phone communication. During these

Abdication for Dummies . . .

interactions, teachers need to be the eyes and ears of the parents, helping parents see their child in all of his or her glory and with all his or her warts. Teachers also need to listen. Parents can help teachers see struggles that children are having and understand why these struggles might be occurring. All too often, odd behavior in a student makes so much more sense after a brief call to the parents. Once, I had a student who—without warning—started skipping homework, falling asleep in class, and being generally cranky. A frustrated teacher brought this concern to me and wanted to start disciplining the student. I recommended that we call the parents. When the teacher called, she found that the family's church was having a weeklong series of special services. These services lasted from 6 to 10 or 11 p.m. The child's normal bed time was 8 p.m. Adjustments were made, but they were made because a line of communication was opened.

Parenting is hard work. Abdication, at least initially, seems much, much easier. In the long run, however, the abdicator has a dreadful price to pay. The faithful parent who daily heads out to the garden to pull weeds, train vines, and sometimes shovel manure which will make the ground fruitful later, will see the harvest of thirty, sixty, and one hundred fold. The Bible points this parent toward this final, wonderful blessing in Psalm 128:3 and 4:

"Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD."