

Focus on James Dobson – an Evaluation and Examination of Dr. James Dobson, His Writings, and his Ministry.

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Focus on Dr. James Dobson

It is 3 A.M., and your phone rings. After getting rid of some of the cobwebs, you answer it only to hear a complete stranger ask, "Should I kill myself or not?" What would you say to prevent his suicide?

You stop to make a call on a family only to find that you are entering right in the middle of a fight. When the husband grabs his wife by the hair with one hand, you wind up holding on to his other so that he doesn't hit her. What would you say to stop the fight?

These two events happened to me. I don't know if my advice worked with the suicidal caller, since I didn't get his name and never heard from him again. With the couple I was able to stop the fight that day, but after continuous other confrontations they eventually got a divorce.

Maybe you haven't been called upon to give advice in such awkward situations. Maybe you have some stories that easily top these two. The point is that we, pastors, are called upon to give counsel. Sometimes the problems are very serious, sometimes not. But regardless of the degree of difficulty, we pastors are expected to have answers.

From where do we get our answers? The first place we look is to the Word of God, but for most problems we need to do more than just quote a passage. We also need to know how to apply the advice that God gives when we counsel. To help us do this at times we turn to other sources. Which counseling sources do we use?

One source commonly used is Dr. James Dobson. I would guess that all of your libraries include at least one of his books. I would guess that you have at least heard of, if not listened to, his radio program called "Focus On The Family." Since he calls himself a Christian Counselor, we want to make sure that he is what he claims to be: Christian. To make sure that his answers are answers that we can use, this paper is going to "Focus On Dr. James Dobson." We will examine the man, his writings, and his ministry.

I. The Man

Dr. James C. Dobson Jr. was born an April 21, 1936 in Shreveport, Louisiana. His father served as a Nazarene pastor and evangelist. Since James Sr. took different pastorates and went on many revivals, the family made many moves. James Jr. started high school in Bethany, Oklahoma and finished at San Bonito, Texas. Pasadena College awarded him a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1958, and the University of Southern California gave him a Masters of Science degree in 1962 and a Ph. D. in Educational Psychology in 1967.

Dr. Dobson has taught students from 6th grade through post-graduate levels. Until 1983 he served for 14 years as an Associate Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at the USC School of Medicine, and for 17 years he was on the Attending Staff of Children's Hospital of Los Angeles in the Divisions of Child Development and Medical Genetics. In 1977 he began his ministry called "Focus On The Family." Now he devotes full time to that ministry and to the cause of the family. During the Carter Administration he served on the Task Force which summarized the White House Conference on the Family. President Reagan appointed him to the National Advisory Committee for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

His own family consists of his wife, Shirley, and their two children, Danae and Ryan. I don't have exact dates, but I believe that he has been married for about 24 years and that his children are approximately 15 and 20.

When asked what is the greatest influence on his life, he emphatically answers his father, Pastor James C. Dobson Sr. He claims that his father passed on to him the love of God and family. As a Nazarene pastor and evangelist James Sr. acknowledged agreement with the doctrines of holiness and sanctification as taught by John Wesley in the 18th century revival in England. The Church of the Nazarene was formed in the early 1900s by the merger of three holiness groups. It is pentecostal, but opposes the practice of speaking in tongues. The background is definitely Methodist. The following quote explaining Nazarene doctrine is taken from the 5th Edition of the "Handbook Of Denominations In The United States" on page 84:

The doctrine of the church is built around sanctification as a second definite work of grace subsequent to regeneration; all ministers and local church officials must have undergone this experience. Other doctrines include belief in the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures as containing all truth necessary to Christian faith and living; in the atonement of Christ for the whole human race; in the justification, regeneration, and adoption of all penitent believers in Christ; in the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. Members of this church believe in divine healing but never to the exclusion of medical agencies. The use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages is denounced. Two ordinances- baptism by sprinkling, pouring, or most often immersion and the Lord's Supper- are accepted as "instituted by Christ." Members are admitted on confession of Faith and on agreement "to observe the rules and regulations. . . of the Church." It is a middle-of-the-road church, neither extremely ritualistic on the one hand nor extremely informal on the other; one church historian calls it the right wing of the holiness movement.

Although the Nazarene doctrines were undoubtedly ingrained in his youth, Dr. Dobson today makes no claim for membership in any one particular denomination. In reply to a question about his theology I received the following statement from a Correspondence Assistant to Dr. Dobson: "His theology has not been put into written form, but...He says he is a mainline evangelical with a very conservative interpretation of Scripture."

Dr. Dobson does subscribe to the Statement of Faith from "Focus On The Family." (This is included in the Addendum.) Except for two possible problems, this confession is pretty good. The Nazarene, Pentecostal, and Methodist error about achieving perfect sanctification is reflected when it says "We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life." The other problem arises in the following statement: "We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ." This leaves an opening for fellowship based solely on a faith in Christ which makes other doctrines unimportant.

In examining his writings and at times listening to his radio show, Dr. Dobson appears to differ with us to a lesser or greater degree on sanctification, fellowship, original sin, lust, conversion, and guilt. These differences will be examined in detail when we look at his writings and his ministry.

My final thoughts about the man, James Dobson, are for the most part favorable. I believe that he is a very dedicated Christian who is concerned about the future of the family. Of course he doesn't conform entirely with our doctrinal position, but as Jesus said to the disciples when they tried to stop one from driving out demons in His name because he wasn't one of them, "Don't stop him,...for whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:38-41) Dr. James Dobson is definitely for the cause of Christianity. We should voice our concerns about where we disagree, but we should also express our gratitude for his crusade for the Christian family.

II. His Writings

Dr. Dobson is a rather prolific writer. He has 9 books published and over ten million copies in circulation. The first that I heard of him was at the Seminary. His book "Dare To Discipline" was given very

favorable reviews by the Sem profs, and we were encouraged to read it. From my wife I discovered that in the middle 70s this book was required reading at New Ulm. Whether or not this book is still held in such high regards by our worker training schools, I'm not sure.

"Dare To Discipline" has sold over two million copies, so he has gained quite a reputation from it. Parents who read it usually like it, especially if they have started losing control of their children through use of Dr. Spock's permissive ideas on discipline. Children on the other hand don't care for some of his ideas about discipline. Dobson received a letter from one set of parents who said that their child tried to flush a copy of "Dare To Discipline" down the toilet after receiving a spanking.

He followed "Dare To Discipline" with another book for parents called "Hide or Seek," and later in a similar vein he wrote "The Strong-Willed Child." In searching these three books for doctrinal problems I found very little that was objectionable. He encourages prayer in public school. (Dare To Discipline- page 175) He advises that parents leave their toddlers in the nursery instead of teaching them to behave in church. ("The Strong-Willed Child"- page 67) His conception of original sin seems to be unclear to the extent that he indicates that God won't hold this natural condition against anyone. ("The Strong-Willed Child"- page 17) Note: His errors on original sin become much more apparent in some of his other writings.

Of course we might have some opinions about raising children that differ from his. He deals more with rewards for motivating children than I think is necessary. I also don't agree with his ideas that children should only be spanked for willful disobedience, and only till the age of 8 or 9. You might have these or other differences of opinion with what Dr. Dobson writes about child rearing, but generally speaking, he seems to promote the Biblical directives not to spare the rod and spoil the child, (Proverbs 13:24) and to bring up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

These three books deal little with doctrine, and usually talk only of Christianity in general. Thus we can recommend them to parents without being concerned about their being misled doctrinally. All we need to do is give them a word or two of warning. They might not agree with all of his advice, but they really won't find much, if any, theology to argue against.

Dr. Dobson also wrote a book for teens and their parents. "Preparing For Adolescence" strives to answer the difficult questions that most teens have. The main problem that I had with his advice to teens was the way that he downplays lust in the teen years. He claims that God won't hold the lust connected with masturbation against teens, (Page 87) and that the same is true about improper sexual thoughts. (Page 89) I don't see any age limit attached to Jesus words that "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." (Matthew 5:28) Also there is a synergistic reference to finding the Lord and asking Him to come into your life. (Pages 170-171) This would downplay the grace of God that Ephesians 2:8-9 stresses. Except for these two problems, I feel that this book would be excellent reading for Christian teens and parents.

For adults he wrote "Emotions- Can You Trust Them?" This book is the one from Dobson that I like the least. In the first part he talks about guilt and states that in his opinion one should only feel guilty if doing something wrong willfully. (Page 29) In this case ignorance would be bliss. Instead Scripture says without qualification that "The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) This includes even the sins we don't realize we are committing. In discussing anger (Page 90) he indicates that one can reach the level of sanctification where improper anger ceases to be a problem. Against this Scripture says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (I John 1:8) This applies to improper anger and all other vices. One interesting piece of exegesis is found on page 91. He writes, "Paul asked a vital question in Romans 7:24, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (This body of death made reference to the Roman practice of tying a dead corpse to a person in such a way that he could not extricate himself from it- until the putrefying flesh eventually caused his own death.)" Maybe you have heard of this idea before, but I haven't. I don't think that this is what Paul is referring to by the "body of death." This book isn't too bad, but I would put it at the end of the list of Dobson reading material, and I would hesitate to recommend it to members.

In the area of marital counseling he has written three books. "What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women" was his first book for couples. This very practical book could be recommended reading for

premarital counseling. Although it has been awhile since I read it, I recall no problems with doctrine, and I believe it touches upon religion the least of any of his books.

His second book for couples was "Straight Talk To Men And Their Wives." Dr. Dobson believes that the main problem with the family today lies with men. In this book he seeks to get men to accept their responsibility as the head of the family. He dedicated this book to his father to whom he says God spoke. (Page 18) One of the last chapters, "A Man And His God," is the most religious part of any of his books. Before recommending this book we should warn people of some of the ideas here presented. He proclaims that man has a free will. (Page 204) In a couple of places he talks of the need to accept Christ, and ends the chapter with a prayer calling for such acceptance (Pages 207-209). In giving his plan of salvation he says that he does so as a layman and not a theologian, although he does say that he knows a little Hebrew and a little Greek. (The Greek owns a gas station, and the Hebrew runs a delicatessen.)

His latest book on marital counseling is directed to couples in trouble. "Love Must Be Tough" presents a philosophy that we might not all agree with. Another reference to our having a free will is made, (Page 42) but other than that I didn't notice any problems with doctrine. The main points that he tries to relay to injured spouses are to stop clinging to their mates, become self-sufficient, and lay down some ultimatums. I think that his idea is much easier said than done, and even if it can be carried out I don't always think it is the best advice to give. You will have to judge for yourselves as to your use of this philosophy, and whether or not to recommend this book. I personally would hesitate to recommend it until I was very familiar with the problems that a couple was having.

"Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions" is written in a question and answer format. It highlights all his other books except "Love Must Be Tough." A variety of topics are covered. Just reading this book would give you a pretty good taste of what he has said elsewhere. The doctrinal problems which were previously discussed can again be found. Concerning pride and self esteem, I feel that he somewhat downplays our being lost and condemned in sin. (Pages 310-312) He again indicates that improper involuntary actions aren't a sin. (Pages 317, 472-473) He talks vaguely about his having a conversion experience. (Page 485) And his confusion about original sin is restated. (Page 503). One especially good quote from this book is, "Under no circumstance, however, will the Bible be found to err. It was inspired by the Creator of the universe, and He does not make mistakes!" (Page 319) I found this book to be well done, and with a few reservations I would recommend it.

In concluding this section on Dr. Dobson's writings I would say that to a large degree he is worth reading, and worth recommending to others. Most of his books cause little to no problems with doctrine. He explains why this is the case, especially with his early works. This explanation is found on page 502 of "Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions." It says,

You don't quote much from the Bible in your counseling materials. Is there a reason why you don't cite the Scriptures more frequently? (Dobson's answer) Most of my books and tapes were prepared while I have been on the staff of Children's Hospital of Los Angeles and the University of Southern California School of Medicine. This required me to obtain approval from a critical publications committee which reviews everything written by the professional staff. In order to obtain their sanction, I was obligated to take a very casual approach to the Christian application in my books. I now believe the Lord actually motivated this "soft sell" style, because my writings have found a measure of acceptance among those who would not read a more traditional Christian book. Whether right or wrong, however, I've had little choice in the matter. Let me say for the record that all of my views are consistent with my understanding of the Scriptures, and whether or not references are provided, the Bible is my standard.

As he gains more and more of a reputation he might get more specific in his religious concepts. But so far, except for the chapter in "Straight Talk To Men And Their Wives," and various isolated and often rather vague references, he writes in a way that is quite inoffensive to denominational differences. Maybe not all of our members should read all of his books, but I think we pastors could benefit by doing so.

One final note, that I don't know is even worth mentioning, deals with his use of various translations. His quotes come from a variety of translations, which in itself isn't bad, but I was a little disturbed by his switching from one version to another at times even on the same page. I would prefer that he be a little more consistent.

III. His Ministry

Dr. Dobson feels that God has called him to minister to the family. To do so, he began a ministry in 1977 called "Focus On The Family." This ministry, which is dedicated to the preservation of the home, has doubled in size every year since it started. Today it employs 350 people at its headquarters in Arcadia and Monrovia, California. The employees spend a good part of their time handling the over 25,000 letters received weekly. Dr. Dobson receives no salary from the organization, but lives off the sales of his books.

The heart of his ministry is the radio show "Focus On The Family." This show is heard on approximately 700 stations. (Included in the Addendum is a list of these stations as of the beginning of April 1985.[Editors note: This section has been omitted from the online essay]) New stations are added almost daily. There is a Monday through Friday program, and also a weekly show on Saturdays. A variety of topics are covered from a Christian perspective. The subjects are presented in a general way, and denominational differences in doctrine are usually, if not always, avoided.

As with any show presented six times a week, some topics will interest you, and some won't. My personal opinion fluctuates. I don't listen everyday, but when I do a couple of things bug me. The only fellowship principle displayed is a claim of faith in Christ. Dr. Dobson seems to be perfectly happy with the work done by anyone who says he is a Christian, and he doesn't care about the doctrinal differences that might be promoted. He claims to believe in a literal interpretation of Scripture, but sanctions the work of guests who don't agree with this position. He should more forcibly stand up for all of Scriptures truths as Romans 16:17, II Thessalonians 3:15, and other passages advise.

At times this show takes on a "PTL" or "700 Club" flavor, as guests give their personal testimony of God's miracle in their life. I can only take so much of this, and I think the show serves a better purpose when it informs the audience about issues of interest to Christians.

"Focus On The Family" has developed a large radio audience, and many of these listeners do what Dr. Dobson requests. He has rallied his audience to fight against some anti-family and anti-life forces. The most recent effort was in support of the Baby Doe regulations which would make it illegal to withhold food, water, and treatment to handicapped children. More than 150,000 letters were sent supporting this issue. As long as this political force is used properly, there is no problem, but the danger does exist to get too political and to support efforts which we wouldn't agree with.

I would recommend this show to members in the same way that I recommend Dr. Dobson's books. Most shows are informative and worth listening to, but some can display a watered down approach to Scripture. Also on occasion a rather radical idea is endorsed. I recall the authority who wants children to stay home until at least the age of 7. This in my opinion can be a socially dangerous idea for some children. I would encourage all not to blindly follow the ideas heard on "Focus On The Family," but to listen to it selectively.

One final note on the radio show is a purely personal criticism, and it might be petty, but the announcer, Gil Moegerle, adds little to the broadcast. He comes off as the straight man to Dr. Dobson, and hardly ever does more than spout forth superlatives to his comments and ask for money at the end of the show. As a regular diet he can get to be too much.

Besides the radio show Dr. Dobson's ministry extends to films, rallies, lectures, booklets, letters, and a magazine. Ten million people have seen the seven films in the series called "Focus On The Family." Unfortunately, I'm not one of the ten million. From what I have heard these are suppose to be well done. He is presently working on a second series that should be done before too long.

He receives about 1000 requests a year to speak, but accepts only two a year, so that he can devote more time to his family and the radio ministry. He does hold a few rallies every year, and recently held one in

Cincinnati that was attended by 16,300 people. He called this program "Turn Your Heart Toward Home" and claimed that it was very successful.

"Focus On The Family" makes booklets by Dr. Dobson and others available for thirty-five cents. These cover many different subjects and his booklets are usually excerpts from one or more of his books. Of those I have examined the one to avoid is "The Plan Of Salvation." This is a reprint of the chapter "A Man And His God" from the book, "Straight Talk To Men And Their Wives." I have already referred to the problems contained in it. If you have his books, you have what is contained in these booklets, so don't waste your money.

A monthly magazine given the unique title "Focus On The Family" has a circulation of over 600,000 copies and is available free upon request. Each edition contains a couple of emotional articles written by various authors. Going back to September 84, Dr. Dobson only wrote one of these articles, and that dealt with his book, "Love Must Be Tough." Also each edition contains a page with his answers to certain questions. These are taken from the book, "Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions." This magazine serves best to inform you about what will be on the radio show for the coming month. It costs nothing, and as far as I can tell, it isn't offensive in any way, so I suggest that you request it if you haven't done so already. (A sheet in the Addendum gives you the order form.[Editor's note: This form is not included in the online essay])

When you request to be put on the pastors' mailing list, you receive a monthly letter from Dr. Dobson. These letters inform about the work being done, and often zero in on a particular need asking for help. This help is in the form of a request for prayers, letters, or money. Of course money is required to keep "Focus On The Family" going, but usually your contribution gets you a Dobson book or some other author's work that fits into the category of "Resources For The Home." I don't find their request for money pushy, or even all that frequent in these letters.

One other aspect to the "Focus On The Family" ministry is television. Apparently a syndicated series and occasional specials are produced. I have never seen anything done by Dr. Dobson on television, so I can't comment on this part of his ministry.

We have now concluded our "Focus On Dr. James Dobson." With all my reading of and listening to his advice, I should be an expert in the area of counseling. Unfortunately it isn't turning out that way. I still don't always know what to say, and when I do talk, people in counseling don't always want to listen. Don't expect to solve all marital or family problems because you use Dr. Dobson's material. He tells of his own failures to reach people with counseling. But I do believe that a knowledge of his expertise is valuable for us as we seek to do our job to preserve the Christian family. He is one source that I would urge all of us to be familiar with. He just might help us to keep families together in dedication and service to each other, and especially to the Lord.

Resources

Books by Dr. James Dobson-

1. "Dare to Discipline," Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois, 1970.
2. "Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions," Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois, 1987:
3. "Emotions: Can You Trust Them," Regal Books, Ventura, California, 1980.
4. "Hide or Seek, Self-Esteem for the Child," Fleming H. Revell Company, Old Tappan, New Jersey, 1979.
5. "Love Must Be Tough," Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1983.
6. "Preparing for Adolescence," Vision House Publishers, Santa Ana, California, 1978.
7. "Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives," Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1980.
8. "The Strong-Willed Child," Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois, 1978.
9. "What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women," Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois, 1975.

Reference Book-

Mead, Frank S. "Handbook of Denominations in the United States," Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 1970. (Fifth Edition)

Cassettes-

"30 Critical Problems Facing Today's Family," Word Books, Waco, Texas.

Newspaper-

"Chronicles," WTSJ Radio, Cincinnati, Ohio, May 2, 1985.

Magazine-

"Focus On The Family," Focus On The Family, Arcadia, California, September 1984 through April 1985 editions.

Focus on the Family Statement of Faith

- * We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.
- * We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- * We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.
- * We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful men, regeneration of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.
- * We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.
- * We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.
- * We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- * That the aforesaid doctrinal statement is the basic spiritual foundation for this corporation, and the same shall not be amended, or deleted, except by vote or written consent of all the Board of Directors of Focus on the Family.