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Dr. Phil's New Family Book -Sound Advice? Part 1

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Dr. Phillip C. McGraw, known to television viewers as Dr. Phil, was introduced to the public through his appearances on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." According to press reports, Oprah met Dr. Phil as he assisted in her defense against a lawsuit in Texas. Impressed with his motivational advice and work in "human functioning," she invited Dr. Phil to become a regular guest on her program, and the rest is history. His nationally syndicated daily television program, "Dr. Phil," was launched in September 2002, and it has gained the highest ratings of any new syndicated show since the launch of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" in 1986. Dr. Phil has also written five best selling books, ranging from *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out* to *The Ultimate Weigh Solution: The Seven Keys to Weight Loss Freedom*. Now, in *Family First*, he turns to offer advice to America's parents.

Behind all this is the fact that Dr. Phil, though well known in his television persona, is not so well known in terms of his past. According to press reports, his license to practice psychology was once suspended after it was revealed that he had had "an inappropriate dual relationship" with a woman who had been both patient and employee. In his acknowledgements, he expresses thanks to his wife Robin, who frequently appears on his television program, but he does not mention that this is his second marriage. Other concerns have been raised about some of the diagnoses he has offered via television. Yet, all this fades into the background for his millions of viewers, who are undoubtedly more impressed by the fact that he gained separate personal interviews with George and Laura Bush and John and Teresa Kerry, who agreed to tell Dr. Phil about their own parenting experiences.

I fully intended to hate this book. Turned off by the therapeutic culture and deeply resistant to the psychological worldview Dr. Phil dispenses each day as popular advice, I expected to find the book offensive and deeply troubling. In reality, I was unable to do so. Nor, I hasten to add, did I find the book illuminating or helpful. In the end, all I could muster was a deep ambivalence about the whole project. Indeed, there is nothing remarkable to be found in the book. What is most remarkable is what the book is lacking. But more about that later.

Family First features the happy, conversational, and soothing tone characteristic of Dr. Phil's television program. While his promotional materials promise that Dr. Phil always operates out of "his signature 'tell-it-like-it-is' style," the book is actually not very confrontational at all.

He begins by telling the story of a twelve-year-old boy who is happy at school and with his friends, but deeply troubled at home. He is a success in athletics, but a failure with his parents. His father is an alcoholic, emotionally unavailable to the boy, and the child feels himself "embedded in a family on the verge of imploding." As Dr. Phil tells his readers, he was that boy. Your family can do better than this, Dr. Phil promises.

"Your role as a parent is the highest, noblest calling you will ever have in your life," Dr. Phil encourages. "What's more, I believe that you can and will rise to that challenge if given the proper knowledge and tools for this important

task.” Dr. Phil intends to give that advice and impart that knowledge.

One thing’s for certain—Dr. Phil doesn’t lack for confidence. As he told Katie Couric of NBC’s Today Show, “I’ve said it’s hard to raise your children by the book until there was one, so I sat down and wrote one.”

Family First is filled with the kind of psychological bromides common to self-help literature. “All your children will ever be, they are now becoming,” Dr. Phil advises. He calls for parents to discover their own “personal truth.” Throughout the book, the tone is up-beat and pragmatic, offering pithy suggestions and step-by-step instructions.

Dr. Phil suggests “five factors for a phenomenal family,” instructing parents to create a nurturing and accepting family system, to promote rhythm and structure in family life, to practice meaningful traditions and rituals, to shift to active communication, and to learn how to excel in managing crises.

Looking to the past, Dr. Phil advises parents to come to terms with their own “family legacy.” As he explains, “I want to bring your upbringing to the center stage of your consciousness so that you can actively deal with it and not parent with blinders on. I don’t want you just to acknowledge that you parents probably shaped who you have become in general, and who you have become as a parent in particular, and leave it at that. I’m challenging you to identify with great detail exactly what values, beliefs, characteristics, traits and behaviors have been passed on to you as a function of your experiences with your own parents.” He takes parents through a “family legacy profile” that addresses a series of issues common to values clarification instruments. Then he turns to the issue of parenting style.

According to Dr. Phil, patterns of parental style fall into three major categories. Parents are either “authoritarian,” “equalitarian,” or “permissive.” The authoritarian parent “tells a child what to do and what not to do,” and also “controls most of the decision-making processes in his or her family.” Dr. Phil warns that this authoritarian style “tends to be confrontational at times,” but he acknowledges that the authoritarian parent leaves “absolutely no ambiguity in terms of what is expected.”

The equalitarian parent gives children a role in making choices. As Dr. Phil explains, the family “operates like a team, and decisions are made somewhat democratically up to a point.” This style is clearly Dr. Phil’s favorite, and he assures readers that the equalitarian style of parenting “is usually successful at negotiating compromises.” Discipline is viewed not as punishment, but “as an opportunity for a teachable moment.”

The permissive parent takes “a more general approach, intervening only when your kids get off track or into trouble.” Under this style of parenting, children are given a great deal of freedom and flexibility, even as parents act “compassionately, empathetically, and encouragingly.” These parents encourage their children to demonstrate freedom of expression, creativity, and opinion. Such parents have to work hard, Dr. Phil advises, because they must train their children to be able to handle such a high level of freedom and responsibility.

Of course, this review of parenting “styles” sets up Dr. Phil’s promotion of his “equalitarian” model—a style that places the child and the parent in a pattern of ongoing negotiation. The obvious question is this: Can Dr. Phil’s equalitarian approach be reconciled with the biblical modeling of parenting?

