

## Home Educators and the Church:



# Allies or Antagonists?

By **CALVIN HABIG**

**T**HE phone rang. On the other end was a distressed mother. As Christians, she and her husband had been very interested in the education of their children. They had been active in the parent-teacher organization of their school. But after Scripture study and much prayer, they had

decided to remove their children from public school and educate them at home. They expected opposition from the public school, nosy neighbors, and perhaps even from relatives. But what devastated them now was, that because of their decision to home school, they had been asked to leave their local church.<sup>1</sup>

A letter in a national home schooling magazine gives another perspective:

Recently my husband and I decided that we wanted to home school our children. We made this decision in spite of, not because of, the other home schoolers in our church. The fact is they do not appear very friendly except among themselves. Many people in our church have been wounded by their perceived attitudes, which seem to be judgmental and a bit self-righteous. In short, the home schoolers I know are very careful to dress right and not listen to the wrong music or watch the wrong TV shows, but they seem very short on love for those who are different from them.<sup>2</sup>

A national survey of home educators in 1990, by the National Center for Home Education, estimated that there were around 500,000 home schooled children in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Home schooling is "a learning alternative where children are taught in the home environment by their parents . . . in order to achieve the known benefits of one-on-one teaching."<sup>4</sup> It is legal, in one form or another, in all fifty states. The majority of home schoolers across America are patriotic, Bible-believing Christians who are respectful of biblical and civil authority.

The majority home school for reasons arising out of their study of Scripture and the biblical principles of child-raising. Parents and children alike grow spiritually through the home school experience. They are an asset in the church simply because of their love of the Word and their knowledge of it.

Unfortunately, for many of them, a prime source of opposition to home schooling comes from their own church. At church they have been exhorted about the importance of

parental involvement. But now that they have made a decision, usually involving sacrifice, to become intimately involved in the education and spiritual discipling of their children, they are often seen as "trouble-makers," or "radicals" who are subverting the unity of the local church. Must it be like this?

### Why Home school?

Why do parents choose to home school? There are many reasons, but three stand out:

**Spiritual responsibility.** The great majority of parents choose to begin home schooling because of religious conviction.

The Bible gives fundamental responsibility for raising children to parents. Nowhere are we given permission to turn this responsibility over to others, especially to non-Christians. As one home schooler has noted, "The only time that God's people were educated by the state was when they were occupied by a heathen nation which left them no alternatives."<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, there is no biblical text that says, "Thou shalt educate thy children at home." Such a verse was probably unnecessary. Until the past 100-150 years education at home or in the church/synagogue was almost

of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4; Deuteronomy 6:3-9; Proverbs 22:6).

3. Parents have a prime responsibility to shield their children from danger—such as negative peer pressure, ungodly teaching, unfit role models, etc. (Colossians 2:8; 1 Corinthians 15:33).

**Educational advantages.** A second reason why home schooling is growing is because of the general failure of many public schools today. In the National Center for Home Education study cited above, the results of standardized achievement tests were studied. The tests graded achievement in the areas of reading, listening, language, math, and science. Their study found that

home-educated students scored, on the average, at or above the 80th percentile on all eight of the preceding categories. The national average in conventional schools is the 50th percentile. Consistent with data in several other studies and reports, these findings show that the achievement scores are high in all grade levels (K-12) and in all subject areas.<sup>6</sup>

**Sociological.** A third reason why home schooling is growing is the recognition of the limitations of secular institutions. John Naisbitt, in his classic, *Megatrends*, documents the trend away from institutional dependence. Over the past half-century, many have tended to turn complete control for their medical care, their job security, and the education of their children over to specialized institutions. Each of these has dramatically failed to provide what was expected.

In response many Americans have sought to become more self-sufficient in each of these areas.<sup>7</sup>

Home schooling fosters a sense of family unity and closeness. The time spent together working on a common goal, as well as the growing unity of family purpose and direction has strengthened the bonds of family unity in the great majority of home school homes.

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the only available option. But the Scriptures are replete with admonitions and instructions about parents' responsibility to be proactive in the training and education of their children. Such Scriptures teach:

1. Children are a stewardship we are given by God (Psalm 127:3-5).

2. Parents have the prime responsibility in seeing that their children are educated and raised in the ways

## Difficulties in a Church

Home schooled children and their parents can be a tremendous asset to the life of a church. Unfortunately, often the result is antagonism. Why is this?

Home schooling is directly threatening to some in a church. In many communities, the public schools are the center of public life. Sports, concerts, social events often all center around the public schools. Especially in towns with only one school district or high school, to propose an alternative to that system can seem threatening.

As a movement, our churches are generally middle-class, rural or suburban, and often very knowledge oriented. This means that we tend to attract many public schoolteachers, administrators, and staff persons. And that is a strength—if our schools are to be influenced, part of the influence must come from Christian educators who see their school as their mission field.

But for some (not all) public school educators, home schooling is a threat. Desire for job security, educational training, and often simply a sense of tradition tempt many to be suspicious (at best) of home schooling.

In those cases where a church has a Christian school, home schoolers may be seen as a threat, because it is feared home schoolers will undermine the pool of potential students for the church's already financially strapped school.

Beyond the perception of being threatened, conflict can arise when the time demands of home schooling cause parents to cut back on church involvement. Home teaching is a full-time occupation and many times means that home schooling moms must cut back on their level of activity.

Rather than indicating a lack of spiritual commitment or a betrayal of loyalty to the church, it represents a healthy prioritizing of responsibilities. But this can be very irritating to

those in the church who do not understand the full demands being placed on home schooling parents.

Last, home schoolers are an independent lot! By the very choices they have made, they have shown themselves to be future-oriented and not afraid to go against the flow. Home schooling is not the norm and probably never will be. That these parents have done so usually shows a willingness to decide and act independently of the approval of others. They have leadership-oriented traits that we need in our churches. An independent spirit can be either negative or positive, depending on whether it is submitted to the authority of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit, and the church leadership. Positive or nega-

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tive, it can create conflicts within a church.

Whatever decisions are made about education, the church must be the place where love, sensitivity, and understanding are found. These must be found on the part of the home schoolers. Not every Christian family will choose to home school. Home schoolers must continually check their own motives and attitudes. They must not flaunt an air of superiority, or condemnation toward those who make other decisions. They must be willing to listen and to tell (over and over again) why they are home schooling. They must always make sure that they are following whatever state regulations are in place so that they do not bring the name of Christ into disrepute by being sloppy in their record keeping or educational standards.

Correspondingly, the church must also reflect an attitude of sensitivity to home schooling families. We must not condemn educational choices

(proven to be at least equal in educational value) simply because they are different. The bonds of Christ must be greater than the bonds of community sameness or tradition. We must examine our motives: do we oppose home schooling on principle or because our local church is substantially supported by the tithes of Christians working in the public schools?

In the spring of 1989 I had coffee with two different men in the same week. The first was a member of our church asking my advice on running for our local school board. A former educator himself, he was concerned as a Christian how he could influence the education his children were receiving. The second man was a local minister who was on the board to begin an interdenominational Christian school in our town. He was concerned with the humanistic and anti-Christian tone found in many classrooms.

To both of these men I shared our family's decision to begin home schooling the next fall. Three men: all made different decisions, but all made the same decision. As men and as Christians, they had decided that they had to be more closely involved in the educational life of their children.

Upon that, and upon our need to show love as fellow believers, let us all agree! ♦

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This is a representative composite of numerous phone calls I have received.

\*Anonymous, "A Concern," *The Teaching Home* 10 (Feb/Mar 1992): 44.

\*Home School Legal Defense Association, "Initial Results From Nationwide Survey Give High Marks to Homeschooling" *Home School Court Report*. (Christmas, 1990): p. 5.

\*Inge Cannon, Symposium for Home School Support Group Leaders, Denver, Colorado, September 17, 1993.

\*Christopher J. Klicka, *The Right Choice: The Incredible Failure of Public Education and the Rising Hope of Home Education* (Gresham, OR: Noble Publishing Associates, 1992): p. 101.

\*HSLDA, *loc cit*.

\*John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1984): p. 145.