

Case Study

PARENTING FOR HONESTY

Paul Vander Klay

When people I have known learn a little bit about my roots, I get an interesting reaction. Often they speak about my parents' ministry and lifestyle with words such as "sacrifice" and "courage." I guess those words do apply, but they are not my own first thoughts. It is true that by growing up in the inner city I did miss out on some of the things that some of my suburban or rural peers took for granted, things like fields to run in, brooks to discover toads and salamanders, and forests to build houses and forts in. We did, however, get some of those experiences on our vacations. It was also at times difficult or scary in the city. The city has its share of violence and crime, which you take into account when you plan your daily affairs. Most of it you can avoid, but often you have to deal with things which are at best a nuisance and at worst a hazard. These things do exist in the urban environment.

If you want to assess the benefits or hazards of growing up in the inner city, you need to look at the environment from many perspectives and with various goals in mind. Roger Greenway has commented that the city contains both the best and the worst of human civilization. Crime is in the city,

but there is also community. We need to assess the urban environment not only in terms of comfort and material security, but also in terms of character development and potential for Christian piety through diversity and suffering. To do this, we need to take a step back and look at our own impressions of the city as developed from a consumerist, hedonist perspective and evaluate them.

It is my opinion that the two primary impulses of middle class American culture are the desire for first, security, and second,

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comfort and pleasure. These are obviously not unique to our culture, nor are they consistently followed throughout it. I believe that their order may even be changing slightly to bring comfort and pleasure more on a par with, or perhaps even beyond, security. Factors such as racism and religion are fed by and feed into these two over-arching concerns to intensify the struggle to satisfy their demands. All of this came together in the post World War II white flight to the suburbs. Since that time, the cities have developed the reputation of being unsafe and lawless, making the safe, responsible, and "godly" thing to do to flee and avoid them. After all, what is to be protected at all costs is the physical security of our families and our possessions.

I am personally beginning to lose the mindset that we need to move

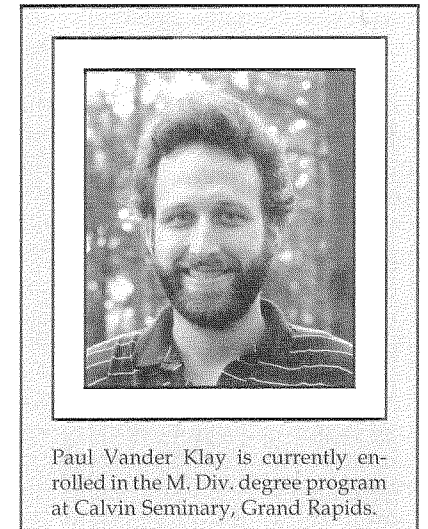
to the urban areas to help the poor folks who cannot fend for themselves, partially because of its sinister way of equating black, poor, and helpless. What I am more willing to advocate is that people move to the inner city in the hopes of saving their children's character and perhaps saving their souls. What lessons our souls learn from their physical environment is the factor that is left out of the equation for American success and security.

What are the assumptions silently taught to children who grow up in an environment which stresses security and prosperity based on exclusion and distance? What do we teach our children when the only experience they have of the city or even of other folks in different social or racial groups is the simple command "roll up your windows and lock your doors"? We are raising a self-centered and paranoid church which on the one hand stresses "the church of all colors and lands," but on the other hand keeps its distance. If that church moves too close, we may have to smell different smells and even change a few of our long-standing customs or songs. Children are not stupid; they learn whom they ought to fear and whom they can trust by watching their parents. They learn who are the "good" guys and who are the "bad" guys.

Urban living is not an antidote to raising fearful and self-centered children. Within the inner city they too can learn to exclude and to fear. However, exclusion in the city cannot go unnoticed. The great shame of the suburbs is that they do not even know who they are or

what they are doing. Within the city, racism and conspicuous consumption are obvious. Perhaps that is the key to some of our problems. Certain environments allow lies to continue, while others force us to face them.

Perhaps that is the best reason to raise children in the inner city. There is no more pitiful creature than the one who lives a lie but never realizes it. In the city a lie is shown to be a lie by a thousand examples. The statement, "The next door neighbor boy can't come in the house because he might see our VCR and take it," declares to the child, "We really can't trust neighborhood children," and "Our VCR is more important to us than identifying with the community." For those who are self-conscious about who they are and what their actions say, the inner city can be a fertile place to raise children who are aware of the principalities and powers that move unseen in our society and dictate to us the terms by which we greet people.



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