

Policing Parents

Children's Moral Vigilance in Southern Baptist Instructional Literature, 1945–1963

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For many American evangelicals, the family represents an eternal institution founded by God at the very beginning of human history. That ideal can never change; and while it is clearly western, modern, and – most importantly, Christian – evangelicals portray it as the ideal for all families, in all places, at all times. But it was never fully secure. Even in places where Christianity has dominated the cultural landscape, as in the American South during the Cold War years of 1945–1963, each individual family had to be made Christian by the constant vigilance of its members, especially the children. The instructional literature produced by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest and fastest-growing religious organization in the post-war American South, consistently urged children to take an active role in making their families more Christian. Children were supposed to follow their Christian parents' guidance; but if parents failed to lead the family in a Christian manner, children

were pressed to correct their parents, thereby challenging normative parental authority to preserve the Christian family. Moreover, while mainstream children's literature "sang of intact families, affection between parents and children, and an accepted hierarchy of adult over child" (McLeod 1997, 125), Southern Baptist children's literature only occasionally followed suit; much more frequently, it highlighted American social problems that provided *justification* for Christian youth to dispute accepted social norms, including parental supremacy.

The instructional literature Southern Baptists produced for children and young people frankly admitted to many serious problems in the United States and pointed earnestly toward an ideal Christian society in the hope that children would help transform America into a truly Christian nation. Yet, while Southern Baptists wanted to use their juvenile literature to stimulate children's transformative potential, they also clearly identified "indecent"

literature as one of the most ominous threats to the Christian home – and the threat most actively targeting children and young people. Just as Southern Baptists fully believed that wholesome literature could be a force for good, so too they believed that its opposite could be a force for evil. Its impact could be, in the words of prominent Georgia pastor James Wesberry, “[t]ragic beyond words” (1956, 13). Southern Baptists closely reflected the wider American culture by placing their hopes for the future on their children, but feared that their children might not bear the burden well. As scholar Ronald Cohen explained, adults “poured their love, faith, and resources into the young” but “dreaded their corruptibility and fragility” (Cohen 254). Southern Baptists thus identified various aspects of youth culture – movies, radio programs, and the like – as dangerous, but saw comic books as particularly threatening to children’s moral health. Their concern over comics was so widely shared that it attracted the attention of a U. S. Senate Committee, chaired by a Southern Baptist, Estes Kefauver of Tennessee (see Nyberg 48). Furthermore, American comics were seen as so morally pernicious to young people that both Canada and Australia prohibited the importation

of the more graphic titles. Southern Baptists’ consistency here with moral conservatives internationally speaks to broadly shared apprehensions about children and morality in the post-war Anglophone world.

Southern Baptists were hardly alone in producing literature for children that reinforced a conservative national agenda and stressed a traditional view of the family. Girl Scout manuals and home economics textbooks sought to impress upon girls the virtues of the traditional family and girls’ likely roles as homemakers. These texts offered a future-oriented imperative; their dominant theme was preparing the girls for their futures as women, wives, and mothers (see Apple and Passet 140). Southern Baptist literature, on the other hand, had an immediate and transformative imperative: children *must* actively work *now* to make their homes reflect the eternal Christian ideal. Every family member had a role in making their home “the kind of home it should be” (McCall 11). Even when parents were exemplary moral leaders, children had a role. Yet, when parents failed in their duty to make the home sufficiently Christian, children were responsible for challenging their parents for the good of the family, and of society – despite their being minors not normally

considered developmentally capable of, and hence not legally or ethically responsible for, duties typically reserved for adult heads of households. Thus, Southern Baptist instructional material exhorted children to perform a carnivalesque inversion of adult authority that, however temporarily, transformed parents into moral dependents who relied on their children to teach them the righteous attitudes and behaviors befitting proper Southern Baptist adults. As this article will show, dovetailing the radically subversive messages in Southern Baptist children's literature with Southern Baptists' assessments of the dangers of so-called "indecent" literature reveals that religious instructional material can conceal transgressive ideas; consequently, these ideas can imbue children with power — in this case, a cognitive moral awareness that, however inchoate or limited, adults must recognize, value, and obey.

Organizations and Texts

Southern Baptists presented their vision of the Christian family to children and young people in the Baptist Training Union and in the Convention's youth organizations. The Training Union focused on helping Southern Baptists put Christian teachings into

practice in everyday life and offered programs for Southern Baptists all ages. The bulk of evidence here comes from the programs for Juniors who typically ranged in age from eight to twelve, and the Intermediates, who ranged in age from thirteen to seventeen. Youth organizations included the Sunbeam Band for toddlers and preschoolers, the Girl's Auxiliary for girls up to age thirteen, and the Young Woman's Auxiliary for unmarried girls between ages fourteen and eighteen. The Royal Ambassadors' program divided boys into Juniors, aged roughly eight to thirteen, and Intermediates, for boys fourteen to eighteen. The Girl's Auxiliary boasted being the largest denominational organization for girls anywhere, while the Young Woman's Auxiliary had over 5,000 separate chapters; the Royal Ambassadors regularly enrolled over 130,000 boys.

The Baptist Training Union published a single monthly magazine, the *Baptist Training Union Magazine*, containing age-graded materials for all levels of the Training Union. Typically, only the method and style of presentation varied significantly; the themes and messages were similar across the age-grades. Each youth organization had a separate publication containing stories for the young members and

information advising adult leaders about how to present materials and guide discussions during meetings. Most Sunbeam Band members were too young to read, so its publication was intended for the leaders and included stories to be read to the children. Immediately after World War II, the Girl's Auxiliary and the Royal Ambassadors shared *World Comrades*, but in the early 1950s it was replaced by *Tell* for the girls and *Ambassador Life* for the boys. The Young Woman's Auxiliary had *The Window* throughout the Cold War era.

Southern Baptists reinforced what children read through regularly scheduled, adult-directed organizational meetings as well as regular Sunday services. Still, Southern Baptists clearly believed that the printed material was crucial. Albert McClellan, director of publications for the Convention explained:

The wonderful uniformity of Southern Baptist life exists, not by law but because of the spreading of information... No denomination anywhere has a greater array of modern, well written literature. (as quoted by Willis 6)

Numerous writers contributed to the publications under consideration here. They offered children and young people fictional stories, scripts, nonfiction

stories, and lessons. The authors typically assumed that their readers were authentically interested in being better Christians, that they were white (most African American Baptists were members of the National Baptist Convention, not the SBC, which used different publications for its youth organizations), and that they were benefiting from the post-War economic boom. Their messages were equally uniform and clear; they offered no ambiguity in their lessons, especially when it came to the importance of the Christian family.

The Southern Baptist Concept of the Family

The family lay at the heart of a stable, Christian society. Southern Baptists rejected any challenge to its ideal structure, or to the idea that that structure was eternally unchanging. As W. L. Howse of Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, wrote, "Home is the world's oldest institution," having been initiated by God himself in the Garden of Eden (Howse 6). Southern Baptists sought to instill this idea of an unchanging, ideal Christian family in their young charges. If young people wondered where to find information about the nature of the Christian home, Southern Baptists directed them to the Bible, the blueprint for a Christian life. As Helen Conger, the Sunday School

Board librarian, explained to members of the Girl's Auxiliary,

Jesus is the Master architect and he has the blueprint for building better homes. He will show us how, if we will only ask him. (22–23)

In an effort to make an abstract concept like the eternal Christian family real to young readers, writers evoked Jesus Christ as a domestic exemplar. To Juniors Royal Ambassadors' program, Mrs. John McCall, a former foreign missionary and mother of the Southern Baptist Seminary president Duke McCall, explained, "Jesus grew up in a home that was probably much like yours." She added, "As a Junior boy it is an exciting thought that you can grow like Jesus" (11). McCall, thus, presented Juniors with the idea that the family was essentially the same in the twentieth-century American South as it had been in the first-century Levant under the rule of the Roman Empire. Historians would disagree. Sociologists would disagree (see Smith 325–353).

So clear was the divine and eternal nature of the family that Joe W. Burton, editor of *Home Life*, dismissed scholars' efforts to study the historical emergence of the family. Burton believed that while academics "theorize about prehistoric relics and the society of the pre-literates," the

Christian accepts as his starting point the divine revelation, being assured that it gives an accurate record of human motives and necessities as well as the ideal aims in family relationships. (1964, 4)

The origins of the family were not lost in antiquity, Burton argued; they were found, instead, in the Bible. The first family existed in the Garden of Eden, and "scientists find no refutation of that revealed record" (*ibid.*).

If the family were divinely ordained, deviations from the divine family order would be ruinous. Kenneth Chafin, of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, tied such deviations to the two great evils of the era: Nazism and Communism. He wrote,

[n]o nation lasts long that fails to realize the importance of the home. Hitler tried to do away with the home. The "super race" which he tried to create now lives in a divided country supervised by other nations. Communism does not have a place for strong home ties. (15)

The Nazis had been defeated; the Communists were being held at bay. So, Chafin remained optimistic, confident in the permanence of the home and family. "We know that the home is here to stay," he asserted. "God made the family. It is not an invention

of man. Marriage and family come from God" (Chafin 15).

Southern Baptists knew that their vision of an ideal family contrasted sharply with the experience of millions of children in the wake of World War II. Even in the United States, the war disrupted the lives of too many children. Thus, the reestablishment of a wholesome home life represented a paramount post-war objective. That effort, however, was also a fight against macro-level social changes – families moved more often, which strained or broke extended family support networks; more mothers sought paid employment outside the home; the state took over much of the family's former role in childhood education; and corporations increasingly reduced the family's role in the broader economy – that proved too powerful to stop. Indeed, while Cold War era scholarship often tied a dramatic shift in Western family structure to an emerging industrialization, historian Daniel Scott Smith has argued that

the era of most rapid change in the history of the Western household, at least since the Middle Ages, lies in the immediate past, (343)

most dramatically in the years following World War II. Cold War era Southern Baptists, then, espoused the eternal nature of the ideal family while

they were witnessing the most dramatic changes family life had undergone in centuries.

Southern society was also changing. Historians have identified shifts in race relations as one of the seismic changes in post-war Southern society. Southern Baptists produced numerous stories encouraging children to be "Christian" in black-white interactions, and they believed that personal relationships were important to improved interracial harmony. They assumed, however, that race relations occurred outside family boundaries (see Willis 99–119).

However much the family and Southern society were changing, Southern Baptists identified declining religious instruction and family worship as core threats to the Christian family and, thus, to a Christian society. Secretary of the Home Mission Board, J. B. Lawrence, believed that some twenty-seven million young Americans were growing without any religious training, "growing up to join the already large army of adult pagans" (Willis 94). Professor of Missions H. Cornell Goerner agreed. After citing similar statistics, he told Royal Ambassadors,

[o]ther things besides these statistical facts make us wonder sometimes whether our nation is more Christian or pagan. The daily papers,

the movies, and the radio are often far more pagan in content than they are Christian. (Goerner 1948, 14)

The Christian home had to be defended to save America from such a threat.

Threats to the Christian Family: “Indecent Literature”

Southern Baptists believed that so-called “indecent literature” contributed to the problems facing the American family. The rising divorce rate and the crisis of broken homes, or “Brok N. Homes” in George Euting’s story for Southern Baptist boys, “Wanted – Public Enemies,” ranked among the most important of those problems. Euting, a leader in the field of missionary education for men, claimed that the real-world counterpart of his allegorical public enemy “Brok N. Homes” was responsible for a real-world crime wave, especially among juvenile delinquents. Euting argued that broken homes started with three things: the failure to have family worship, radio shows featuring broken marriages, and books depicting “indecent living” (Euting 8–9).

While Euting indicted a broad spectrum of books, John Ryberg, the Royal Ambassador Secretary for South

Carolina, focused on comics. He warned Juniors in the program about the hellish temptation comic books presented. “Satan will tempt us to do wrong every day we live,” he wrote. Among the lies Satan would feed the boys: “Go ahead and read the comic books. You don’t need to read your Bible tonight. It isn’t interesting anyway” (Ryberg 19). Since children could control what they read, advising them to avoid the most pernicious youth-directed literature of the post-war era was imperative. Temptation was everywhere, including – most dangerously – right at home.

Southern Baptists shared in the national comic-book scare, and they turned to experts who supported their views. Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist at the New York Department of Hospitals, argued that comic books had a corrosive effect on young minds. In his report for the Georgia Literature Commission, prominent pastor James P. Wesberry cited Wertham’s contention that many of the 90,000,000 comic books read each month were saturated with sex and crime. Wesberry also observed that Australia had banned 64 different American magazines “on the grounds that they are immoral and have a bad effect on immature minds” (12). Canada banned 100 titles. Finally, Wesberry offered

multiple anecdotes revealing the “sordid” behavior that comic-book squalor precipitated among the young: a seven-year-old who brought to school a calendar featuring a photograph of a nude woman, an eleven-year-old who ripped a photograph of a nude woman from a magazine at a drug-store, and an eight-year-old who stole for the money he used to obtain magazines (see Wesberry 9–12). As was quite typical of Southern Baptists and the experts they cited, Wesberry easily mingled comics and pornography, making little distinction between the two and never offering a clear definition of either. However expansive his definition, Wesberry declared the traffic in “indecent literature” to be the sworn enemy of Christian citizenship. He lamented,

[t]he moral foundations of our nation are not only threatened, but defied by pornography freely circulated and hotly defended. (13)

Comic books and pornography – however defined – undermined the Southern Baptists’ vision of a Christian childhood. Their fears were echoed in Canada where, according to scholar Mona Gleason, moral conservatives argued that crime and horror comics, especially those containing sexually suggestive imagery, “ran counter to the idealized attitudes about the

innocence and wholesomeness of childhood” (141). Gleason argued that moral leaders in Canada – and the same could be said about Southern Baptists – focused primarily on the impact such literature might have on young readers, especially boys, while overlooking what the misogynistic portrayals of women indicated about the society that produced them. Gleason dryly noted,

[t]he portrayal of female sexuality out of control seemed to epitomize the danger these comics held for male moral strength. (140–141)

“Indecent literature” brought Satan’s attack on the family straight into the home. Writing for *Christianity Today*, Patirim A. Sorokin, professor of sociology at Harvard University, estimated that some fifty million pieces of “obscene” literature were being mailed directly to the nation’s teenagers every year. Like Wertham, he believed such literature contributed directly to the growth of juvenile delinquency. For Sorokin, pornography was only the most obvious culprit. He explained:

The viruses of obsessive sexuality, violence, and crime are by no means confined within the explicitly pornographic garbage. They infest and infect not only the young but the adult generation of

our population. In disguised form they are virulent in all compartments of our culture, system of values, and social life. They are in the supposedly decent literature and fine arts, in our free press, movies, radio, and television, in our alluring advertising. (3)

Infamy penetrated the home from every direction, sometimes masked as higher culture.

Southern Baptists simply accepted the relationship between so-called “indecent literature” and delinquency. They cited Wertham without acknowledging his critics or questioning his findings. Wertham confirmed what Southern Baptists intuitively believed *and* seemed to provide scientific evidence for their beliefs. Wertham, of course, had critics. Scholar John A. Lent determined that

the anti-comic book campaign was most closely linked to the unsupported fear that the United States was producing a generation of juvenile delinquents – blamed on the disruption of the family during World War II and on the portrayal of violent images in the mass media, especially comics. (12)

Lent cited multiple studies from the era that found no conclusive tie between comics and delinquency. Southern Baptists, however, never mentioned those studies as they expounded upon the dire consequences of children

reading the “wrong” literature, and they clearly tied it to a perceived wave of delinquency.

Children in the Creation of the Christian Family

If “indecent literature”, let alone pornography, were getting into the home, then parents were not adequately supervising their children’s reading, despite Wesberry’s warning that “all parents need to be concerned with what their children are reading” (Wesberry 13). Calvin T. Ryan, Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, Kearney, offered a critique that went far beyond horror comics. Ryan, host of the evangelical “Sunday School on the Radio,” observed:

Our youth get excellent training in worshipping false gods ... Children learn the worship of wealth and power while still in the tender care of their parents. They read modern fiction and find that adulterous living and guzzling liquor is what everybody’s doing. (43)

All was not lost. Southern Baptists believed that children could – and should – take the lead in purifying their families’ reading materials. Writing in *Ambassador Life*, Kyle M. Yates, a professor at Gold Gate Seminary, declared that all “degrading literature” had to be shunned in the effort to build

a Christian home. He asked the Royal Ambassadors to inspect their homes and determine what kind of books and magazines were scattered around the house and, more specifically, in their own rooms (see Yates 18). Southern Baptist Mrs. Tom Hunter recommended that members of the Young Woman's Auxiliary carefully audit the various books and magazines at home and encouraged teenage girls to ensure that the Bible ranked supreme there. "God's word should have first place in Christian homes," she stated (Hunter 19). Here, Yates and Hunter pronounced that youths were responsible for what they read as well as for what *other* people in their homes read. If children were to scrutinize all the literature in their houses, they undoubtedly would encounter their parents' reading materials; they were thus prompted to pass moral judgment on their parents' reading habits.

Clearing homes of evil influence was no easy task, and Southern Baptists reminded their children to be constantly vigilant. Vigilant Christian youth not only kept their own homes clear of "indecent literature"; they would also help lead other children away from such temptations. An allegorical play, *Beware of the Pirates*, to be performed by boys in the Royal Ambassador program, pitted a Christian

boy against four pirates vying for the soul of an unenlisted boy. The fourth pirate, "Unclean Literature," claimed to have millions of impure books rolling off the presses. The pirate declared,

[w]e hope to enlist thousands of people in telling unclean stories, for, then we can sell more trashy books and magazines than ever before. If we can get people thinking unclean thoughts, we know that we can claim them for wrong deeds. (Green 20)

Good, of course, was stronger than evil in virtually every Southern Baptist story for children. Thus, just as the pirates were about to claim the life of the unenlisted boy, a Royal Ambassador with sword and shield leaped to his rescue and declared to the pirates: "My sword – the Word of God – is strong enough to defeat all of you" (ibid.). He whisked away the boy, presumably to pursue a Christian life.

Family Altar: The Cornerstone of the Christian Family

The cornerstone of the Christian family, and thus a Christian life, was the family altar, a period of family-based worship at home, typically including prayer and reading from the scripture; it was a symbolic and temporal space rather than a physical space. In the post-war era, Southern Baptists sought

to get 100,000 more families to incorporate family altar in their homes (see Burton 19). Just as children could purify the family's reading, they also could be catalysts for starting and preserving family worship (see Stevens 8). While Southern Baptists believed that parents bore the most responsibility for assuring that their families reflected the Christian ideal, they realized that parents sometimes failed. When parents failed, children had to assume responsibility for ensuring the Christian nature of the family by establishing the family altar (see von Hagen 18).

Southern Baptist leaders did not simply tell children it was their responsibility to establish the family altar; they also offered engaging success stories. The Junior Training Union Assembly Program for May of 1959 included one such story. June Wiltshire of Tennessee planned a role-playing program in which two Juniors – a boy of 16 and a girl of 14 – approached their parents as the parents were about to leave for the movies. The children opened their parents' eyes to the family's skewed priorities, and the father announced, "We've failed to live up to a vow we made years ago to let Christ be the center of our home. It's not too late though" (Wiltshire 37). The mother agreed that it was not too late,

and the parents, predictably, skipped the movie and immediately established family altar. Southern Baptist children, wondering if they had the power to impact their parents' behavior, might have been energized by the alacrity of these fictional parents to see the error of their ways. Still, such affirmation might not have been enough if children were unsure about what to do at family altar, so leaders provided the necessary guidance. Writing a lesson for the Sunbeam Band, Jane Carroll McRea, a missionary serving in Egypt, presented the children with a program in which they acted out a family altar during a meeting (see McRea 29). Southern Baptists thus offered their young people explicit examples of parental moral lapses, inspiration to reform negligent parents, and the knowledge and tools that would empower youth to act.

By proposing that children should and could police family reading materials or advocate family altar at home and lead parents to more Christian lives, Southern Baptist leaders, necessarily, admitted that some parents were mismanaging their families' religious development. Moreover, they urged children to criticize and correct their parents' moral behavior. One member of the Royal Ambassadors, J. D. Rush, scrutinized parental moral

failure in his project for promotion to a higher rank in the organization. Rush declared that if parents dropped off their children at Sunday School and then went home, or went fishing, they should not be surprised when those children grew up to shun church (see Rush 8). *Ambassador Life* published Rush's assessment under the title "Making Good in Family Life". Since Rush wrote the essay as part of his work to obtain promotion in the Royal Ambassadors' program, his piece was approvingly judged by adults in his local chapter even before the editors at *Ambassador Life* selected it to be published. Hence, the leaders of Rush's local chapter, the magazine's editors – and, quite likely, Rush's parents as well – approved of a teenager critically assessing the way some parents, though no specifically named parents, raised their children.

While Southern Baptists impressed upon children the need to establish family altar in their homes, they also showcased Christian homes – homes that regularly held family altar – as happy. In her skit "A Great Adventure", Hilda Hall presented the story of a Christian family at play and at prayer, in which daughter Joyce announced her gratitude for being raised in a Christian family and her wish for all women to be taught pure, noble

things. The skit ended with the mother calling the family together for prayer, at which point Hall instructed local leaders of Young Woman's Auxiliary to engage the girls in a discussion of family altar's value (see Hall 15–16). Parents who guided their families' faith appropriately, as did Joyce's parents in "A Great Adventure", were exhibited as exemplary Christian parents whose moral guidance children should follow, not confront.

Not all children, however, so willingly obeyed and embraced good Christian parents. Southern Baptists believed that such children could be *persuaded* to understand the value of family altar – hence the story of Lynn, written for Intermediates in the Training Union. Lynn wished to skip family altar and play with his friends, but his parents insisted that he read to the family from the Bible instead. When Lynn read the passage, "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord", he realized that he must play his part in making the family Christian (Johnson 35). Thus, Southern Baptists offered models of both appropriate parental moral guidance and parental failure in an effort to enable children to discern the differences and act accordingly.

When the opportunity arose, Southern Baptist leaders offered direct evidence that children valued family

altar. Lloyd Cloud, Jr., a Junior in the Training Union program at First Baptist Church of Hodginville, Texas, submitted an article to the *Baptist Training Union Magazine*. He wrote,

I am glad we have a family altar in our home. We are one family that believes that “the family that prays together, stays together.” (Cloud 35)

Cloud expanded on the personal comfort he gained when his father – who would read from both the Bible and the Southern Baptist publication *Home Life* – prayed for God to protect the family. While the editors of *Training Union Magazine* would have approved only those submissions supporting the magazine’s clear position on the importance of family altar, Cloud’s words indicate that Southern Baptist children appreciated the close-knit family life that their faith perpetuated.

The SBC never offered a systematic analysis of how often children prodded their parents to establish family altar. Still, the leadership believed it was fairly common. Roger Heidelberg made a typical assessment in his *Home Life* report on the Baptist Brotherhood, an organization for men, claiming that Royal Ambassadors often spurred their fathers to establish a time for family worship, which was something he believed the men *ought* to have

been doing (see Heidelberg 45). Southern Baptist children’s literature thus charged Royal Ambassadors and other young people to direct their parents’ domestic moral behavior when they judged their parents’ religious leadership to be deficient.

Conclusions

Southern Baptist publications for children and young people presented a vision of an eternal Christian family imperiled by the evils of the world and undermined by glorified alternative lifestyles. Many forces threatened the family, but comics, pornography, and so-called “indecent literature” – all potentially inside the very homes they might destroy – threatened to corrupt children, perpetuate family disorder, and facilitate the nation’s demise. Yet, American homes and families could be transformed into the Christian ideal, even if children had to take the lead in that transformation. If the metamorphosis of the American home were successful, then the whole society – and, eventually, the whole world – might be transformed.

National and world needs were acute. H. Cornell Goerner clearly indicated that, however desperate the need for Christian homes was in America, the need in other countries

was far worse. The “conditions of family life in non-Christian lands are often sad indeed,” he observed (1949, 16). Joe Burton agreed, telling boys in the Royal Ambassadors’ program that home life in lands around the world was “drab,” affected by the multiple evil effects of war, poverty, paganism, and Communism (Burton 1952, 16–17).

Southern Baptist publications regularly pitched ways for children to impact their larger communities and even distant lands. One simple act might be to send Bibles to young brides in other countries, promoting God’s Book as the literary centerpiece of Christian families around the world. Southern Baptists also encouraged pen pal exchanges with children around the world; although the leadership could not control the subjects children would write about, adults no doubt hoped religious topics would dominate the exchanges. Families might also invite into their homes foreign students studying in the United States to see, firsthand, “the warmth and wholesomeness of a real Christian Home” (Willis 69). Children like Nancy Lou Story of Houston, Texas, wholeheartedly embraced the evangelical message. “Although I am just a junior girl, in a city of over one million people,” she declared, “if my life is wholly dedicated unto God, I can

surely have a part in making my community Christian” (Story 6). She knew that her faith could transform her world.

Such children’s faith had to be nurtured in Christian homes. To promote Christian homes, Southern Baptist instructional literature for children directly and consistently addressed the corrupting influences of immoral juvenile material, warning youth and parents alike to be on constant guard concerning the reading materials in their homes. While Anne Scott MacLeod argued that children’s literature, and the salutary neglect it offered, demonstrated

that American society operated according to a single moral code; that adults were reliable sources of wisdom, justice, and caring; that childhood and children were sheltered under the protection of responsible adults in a responsible society, (33–34)

our examination of Southern Baptist children’s literature demonstrates instead a fear that adults were the moral delinquents – not the children. Thus when parents neglected their moral duties, Southern Baptists insisted that children intervene in domestic spiritual leadership by judging their parents’ moral character and inculcating necessary corrective action to make the home more Christian. Endowed

with the cognitive ability to discern moral perniciousness – despite a proliferation of questionable published material and an immature understanding of Southern Baptist and biblical tenets – children were deemed responsible for the family’s morality in the domestic realm that both reflected and stood in for the larger world and its concomitant spiritual inadequacies, including those of adults in power everywhere.

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