

Underwear, Discernment, and Truly Bright Young Things

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No one should be surprised that Victoria's Secret is now targeting "tweens" with their new Bright Young Things line. In our market culture, it no longer *feels* all that wrong for our preteens to don underwear (yes, I use that antiquated term intentionally) that draws attention to their private parts (that ancient phrase is intentional, too) with exaggerated cuts and printed suggestions. Columbus, Ohio, takes a step closer to Bangkok, Thailand. We're just more understated about it all.



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Addressing this phenomenon, *BusinessWeek* [quotes](#) ^[2] Jennifer Foyle, senior VP of global merchandising for the American Eagle Aerie intimates brand. "We really use the word 'pretty' more than 'sexy'—that's really not the Aerie girl." With the public outcry against sex trafficking of young girls, at least a vestige of conscience steers us away from calling little girls "sexy." But it's a thin veneer when the market simply prepares them for what's coming.

This dulling of our sensibilities is driven by a host of factors, not least of which is economic. Such marketing to younger demographics to secure customer loyalty in their later years has been called "gateway marketing." If you can get them hooked on your brand at 12, you have a source to tap for the next decade.

I've realized as the father of three daughters that the gateway marketing actually occurs much earlier. It's not sexual in nature, so it's easy to miss. But the basic principle of marketing to create desire and promise fulfillment is behind everything from Dream Lights to Club Tabby. Our children, boys and girls, have their affections trained from an early age to respond to the regular cycle of new product lines. So long before our girls come to the age when crude underwear could possibly appeal to them, their impulses have been trained to respond to the latest marketing promise.

Coming of Age

But I refuse to fear my daughters' coming of age. Not because the dark appeals to them will get any lighter, but because I am confident God can make them truly bright young things. I can pray for and work toward what Paul does for his spiritual children in Philippi: "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ" (1:9).

Christian parents pray desperately for both their daughters and also their sons to have this discernment to approve what is excellent in God's eyes. Paul knew only God could ultimately provide this discernment, and that is why he prayed. But he also knew it was something he had to teach, and that is why he wrote the rest of the letter.

Paul taught what he prayed for. He instructed them how to discern what was pleasing to God in their conduct (1:27), in their relationships (2:3-4), in their attitudes (2:14-15), in the things they listen to (3:2), in their sense of self (3:4-8), in the people they want to be like (3:17-21), in what they worry about (4:4-7), in what they think about (4:8-10), and in what they find contentment in (4:11-13).

Pray and Teach

Paul demonstrates that it is necessary for parents to put legs to their prayers by actively teaching discernment to their children. This training, of course, can only attain its ultimate purpose when a heart really wants righteousness, a product of saving faith alone. But regardless of a child's spiritual condition, parents must lay a framework for discerning truth from error.

In the market of desire, this is a dynamic task. Parents need to both protect their children from exposure to those things that stir their desires as well as train them to stand against them when they come. We are doing primarily the former in their early years. As they grow, we can do more of the latter. I can think of a few ways these two principles may be applied, none of which I received as some midnight revelation from God:

Avoid exposure to things that stir desire. Negatively, it's best to avoid commercials altogether. I have found my children are far more content when not barraged with why they shouldn't be. We must also think carefully about the value systems being presented in the shows they watch. What promises of joy or fulfillment are implied in that narrative worldview? Sitting kids indiscriminately in front of a TV or computer might be the best way to undermine discernment. Also consider avoiding certain stores or departments that more nakedly appeal to kids' impulses. Positively, we want them to experience the truer forms of satisfaction that marketing cannot deliver: the sense of accomplishment from hard work, the reward of serving others, and the joy of engaging relationally. These are better pointers to the satisfaction of knowing God.

Expose them enough to train them to examine things biblically. As our children grow, we want to expose them to enough of the virus that their bodies might develop resistance. The key here is that parents accompany them in these exposures. Simply loosening up standards as they get older is not teaching discernment. Instead, they'll need to be instructed in real time through well-placed questions and careful consideration of Scripture within the complex situations of life. Wise parents will manage the complexity of those situations as much as possible for the sake of the child not being thrown into the deep end too quickly. This takes time, effort, and no small amount of courage in the face of resistance. But most of all, it requires parents themselves to be pursuing the ability to discern what is pleasing to God through the knowledge of his Word.

We want our children to have a cynical eye to the messages they're hearing about what is valuable. Marketing only works if a person is inclined to believe it. If our daughters, and our sons, are inclined to believe it generally, then we should not be surprised that they'd fall for it in the specific things we find most crude.

Again, only genuine love for God will spare them from the love of the world (1 John 2:15-17). But parents are called both to shield them from and also train them to resist the world's strongest beckonings. And God often uses this labor to make children into truly bright young things that "shine as lights in the world" (Phil 2:15).

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