

Launchbury has given us an incomplete, and therefore an unbalanced, picture of this central teaching of the Christian gospel. This is most unfortunate, for in the final analysis the book, in spite of its many valuable insights, ends up

exemplifying what happens when a single aspect of a Biblical truth is taken and magnified to the exclusion of others: the truth becomes blurred, and the beauty of the complete picture is all the harder to see.

## Principles, Preaching and Problems

# The single parent with children (4)

Peter and Norma Forbes

*In the [third article](#) the authors considered how we might extend the boundaries of our families to include the single-parent family, and the role of the arranging brethren. This concluding article considers the help that those with experience can give. It also reminds us that chastening events and situations in our lives are powerful for spiritual development, both for the helper and for the helped.*

**M**OST OF what we have written has concentrated on how we can help the single-parent family. However, there is another side to the picture. We know that Jesus was “made perfect” (Heb. 5:9) through the things he experienced, and consequently is able to be “a merciful and faithful high priest” (2:17). Our brethren and sisters who are going through tribulation are well equipped to help others in distress. When we know of someone suffering problems, let us encourage those whom we know to have expertise based upon experience, and a sound understanding of the Word of God, to offer their help to others. We tend to ostracise those whose life is not like ours. However, the widow, widower or single parent has a lot to offer those who are suffering similar stresses.

### Learning through experience

Having said all the above, the problem still exists, and the best that can be expected is that others may be willing to share the burden a little.

It was in such a situation, when he had a “thorn in the flesh” which he felt was a hindrance to the furtherance of the gospel, that the Apostle Paul was told, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my

strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). His response was, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me”.

Hebrews 12:5-11 puts it another way: “And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor

faint when thou art rebuked of Him: for whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the Father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby”.

The emphasis is on verse 11: “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby”.

The circumstances of our lives are organised by the Father that we might be “like Him” at the resurrection. However, this may be difficult for the single parent to appreciate, and, even if they

do, we must not neglect the fatherless and the widow in our ministrations, for we have great responsibilities. Nor should we think that the experience of chastening applies only to those who are in the single-parent-family situation. It may well be that the Father, in His wisdom, has placed us in a position where we can help in order that we might be chastened also. If we neglect the opportunity to succour those in need then we will not be “exercised” either.

### **Caring costs time**

The only way to rebuild a child’s self-confidence and to help them remove some of the mistrust they may have of adults is to be totally dependable. God’s will can only ever be achieved by consistency, all the time, over a long period of time. The same is true of the partner who is left to struggle on. Their life’s experience has taught them, very painfully, that others cannot be trusted.

It is no good thinking that being involved in helping a single-parent family is a short-term measure. Unless you are willing to make a long-term commitment there is no point starting. If you do want to help, work out strategies that include the children in your family activities. Maybe, if finances allow, take the children with you on holiday. This is sound advice whether you have children of your own at home or not. Invite the children round regularly. Involve them in household tasks. Treat them as part of your family rather than as visitors. And do not feel that you have to invite the parent every time you invite the children. The children need their own space away from the parent, as your children did. Including such a child in a local campaign, holiday or Bible school is an excellent idea. This bonding process is extended to discussing Scripture, how to plan Bible study, preparing for study weekends, and so on.

Never try to draw the child to tell you their feelings about their situation. As trust grows they will open up themselves at their own speed. However, on the other hand, do not be afraid to respond to issues raised by the children. But never be judgemental against anyone mentioned.

### **Physical contact**

We are reluctant to show emotion, especially in a physical way. When we are confronted with the single parent we may be less willing to show physical emotion. However, we all need physical contact. A hug to greet such an one does wonders for their self-esteem. (Likewise we probably do not

see the emotional need of the widow or widower. They need physical contact as well, much more than most of us will ever realise.) However, in these days of ‘political correctness’, and authorities demanding police checks and registration for those involved with young children and the elderly, such behaviour should always be circumspect and appropriate.

A loving hug or kiss, a particularly warm handshake whilst maintaining eye contact, speaks volumes. It says that we care and want to be near the one we are greeting. Lonely brethren and sisters really appreciate such acts. Children likewise need and respond to physical contact. Just because daughter is hugged by Mum, it does not mean that she does not need physical contact from others. In public, within ecclesial activities, such acts will not be misconstrued. When in private at the child’s home or your own it is advisable to show such emotion only when in the company of the child’s parent and or your own wife or husband, and to refrain if you are on your own with the child.

A single mother spoke of her daughter. A close family friend was sitting talking to the young girl and just gave her a hug. The child started to cry. “Nobody has ever done that to me”, she said. Doubtless she was hugged often by her mother. The hug from the family friend was a mark of acceptance, and clearly was much appreciated by the child. Or, to quote such an one: “When brethren are sufficiently motivated by the Word they care for the fatherless and widows . . . but ultimately it is God Who has made Himself our defender. In these evil days, when love is fading due to neglect of the Word, service is also fading”.

### **The helping hand**

At the time of marriage break-up, or the death of a partner, there is a great need for sound advice. There are at least three areas which need sound advice: legal, spiritual and financial. Brethren and sisters should use the expertise that they have to reduce the burden of the problems. It is not good enough to allow the advice of an unbeliever to be sought. Yes, professional advice may need to be sought, but it must be tempered by our understanding of the gospel. So, if you see a need, rise to it. And above all, do not make the person you are helping feel that they are being a nuisance. Those who have lost their partner do not want to be a burden on others. We should make it so clear by our behaviour that we want to help that there will be no feeling that impositions are being made.

If you have built up a rapport with a single parent and the children, you are in a good position to provide help of a really practical nature. When some lament that the single parent is not at Bible class you will be offering to baby-sit so that attendance is possible. You will offer to look after the children, maybe at your own home occasionally, in order that the single parent can have a little time to be with friends.

When a single parent risks opening up to you, especially after you have initiated the enquiry, you must listen and be prepared to follow through the issues raised. Usually you are dealing with a very vulnerable person.

If you are in a family you will realise that the single parent with children who is trying to encourage the children in regular Bible reading has a very difficult job. You will realise that it is extremely difficult to lead the readings day in, day out, without a partner to join in the discussion and to highlight lessons for the children. You will decide to invite the family round to do the readings on a regular basis. You may even invite them for a meal before the readings some evenings. You may try to work with the children on their own, helping to develop their minds that they might be skilful in the Word of righteousness.

The single parent may even have summoned up enough courage to invite you and your family for Sunday lunch, or round one evening to have fellowship. Accept such invitation with relish. Before you go, think about how you will help the spiritual tone of the session. Above all, treat

your host(ess) as you would like to be treated yourself. It has been known, in such situations, for visitors simply to share the meal and then go home. If you are going to benefit from the physical sustenance afforded by the single parent you must be willing to share some of the things you have to offer. Force yourself to talk to and maybe get involved in an activity with the children. Further, once in the home you are far better able to see if there are practical things that need attention. The single parent will rarely ask for specific help, since there is the ever-present desire of not wanting to burden others. And, sometimes, help that has been sought never materialises into action. Make sure you keep your promise, ideally within a couple of days of making the offer. Nothing undermines the morale of one in need of help more than promises that are not kept.

We are in every way destitute, as many are, single-parent with children or otherwise. When a brother or sister reaches out to us in a spiritually helpful and practical way it is like being approached by Christ himself. Through the manifestation of Godlike behaviour both the helper and the one helped are 'shown' the Father. Let us be our sister or brother's advocate; let us stand by and identify with them. There is no greater love than this. As the Apostle Paul exhorts us in Galatians 6:9,10: "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith".

(Concluded)