

but also faith, and the son, perhaps thirty years old, compliant and trusting in his God. It was a foreshadowing of him who said with conviction, "Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me" (Jno. 14:11), and who had earlier said, "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again" (10:17). Jesus honoured his father to an extent that no man before or after him has done in rendering such total obedience and trust.

#### **Learning about God from being parents**

We learn from being parents ourselves how much better our heavenly Father is than we are. We marvel at the patience and goodness of God to us, and how impatient and merciless we can be with our offspring. But perhaps the main lesson we learn is that our children need all the love we can give them, and our constant prayers. Their spiritual development needs the blessing of God. When problems arise we can ask God's help to overcome when we have done all that is appropriate for us to do. And the long-term issues that affect our children—coming into the Truth, the friends they make, the marriages they contract—should be matters of prayer from the time the pregnancy is confirmed. God has wider issues into which to dovetail the birth of our child.

If our children come into the Truth we experience the joy that John talks about in his lovely letter to the well-beloved Gaius: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 Jno. v. 4). As parents and children walk to the Kingdom together, and our relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ blossoms, we can

in some measure understand the feelings of God as His very own Son humbly accepted the great responsibility laid upon him. We can, in measure, appreciate the pathos, but also the triumph, of the Father-Son relationship in the Gethsemane prayer, "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, Thy will be done" (Mt. 26:42).

Patience and tolerance of the fact that our children's personalities and characters will have differences from our own are Divine qualities that we appreciate more and more as we grow up with our children. God is in no hurry. His timing is perfect. We want things to happen quickly and in the way that we think is best. Our Father's view almost certainly differs from our own. We have to wait for our children to reach the right time for them to be baptized, to come to it with their own conviction. Their choice of partner might be different from what we envisage. If we have made this a matter of prayer then we should be wholehearted in our acceptance of their chosen partner, and love them and their family as dearly as our own children.

We pray that the infinite mercy, patience and wisdom that God has shown to us will be shown to our children and grandchildren. With the passing of the years we are humbled by the goodness and love that He shows to us when we do not in the least deserve it: "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him, and His righteousness unto children's children; to such as keep His covenant, and to those that remember His commandments to do them" (Ps. 103:17,18).

## ***Biblical instruction concerning families***

*What do the Scriptures reveal about the purpose of families and the responsibilities of parenting? In this article David Burges (Leamington Spa, UK) takes us through the vital Biblical principles and teaching.*

**N**EARLY ALL OF US experience family life at some time in our lives, either as children or as parents, or both. The Bible demonstrates that from the beginning the family, comprising parents and offspring, has been the

basic biological unit designed by the all-wise Creator for mankind in general, and especially for the people He has chosen for Himself.

The first man Adam was provided with an ideal companion in the woman, and the two of them were blessed by God and instructed to be "fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28) by the bearing of children. Indeed, the woman was named Eve (Heb. *chavah*, 'causing to live') by her husband

as recognition that she was to be “the mother of all living” (3:20).

The man and the woman were directed to cleave together in marriage and in sexual union for their own mutual companionship and support, and in order to fulfil the purpose of childbearing. It is perhaps in this process of producing offspring that men and women have been permitted to come the nearest to sharing in the creative work of God, as conveyed in the word ‘procreation’. But the purpose of the family extends far beyond the mere production of children, to the caring, rearing and nurturing of them in the ways of God. The prophet Malachi, in condemning those in Israel who were unfaithful to their wives, expressed this truth about the union of marriage: “Has not the LORD made them one? . . . And why one? Because He was seeking godly offspring” (2:15, NIV). The ultimate aim of bringing up children is to ensure, not that they are educated to a standard that will give them high earnings potential, but that they will fear God and serve Him.

### The family as a structure

A dictionary definition of the family is “a primary social group consisting of parents and their offspring, the principal function of which is provision for its members”. It is recognised even by secular authorities that the nuclear family is the most stable unit for society, even while they pass laws that undermine it, such as those permitting easier divorce and legalising homosexual ‘partnerships’. It should be added that grandparents also have a significant part to play in supporting and strengthening the family structure,<sup>1</sup> and this is undoubtedly the Scriptural pattern. For example, in the case of Joseph we are told that even his great-grandchildren were brought up “upon [his] knees” (Gen. 50:23).

In Scripture, however, the concept of family passes beyond the simple biological unit to the extended family, and ultimately to a relationship with God. This is expressed by the repeated use of the terms ‘tribe’, ‘family’ and ‘house’ to describe related sections of the nation of Israel, and even the whole nation. Thus God declares through the prophet, “Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole *family* which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the *families* of the earth” (Amos 3:1,2). It is quite remarkable that there is probably no nation on earth, other than Israel, that takes its name from a single historical individual, who was actually

the progenitor of its people. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people are called ‘the *children* of Israel [that is, Jacob]’; and their alternative appellation of ‘Jew’ is similarly derived, from the name of Judah, Israel’s son. This demonstrates the striking fact that the people of God are a family in the widest sense.

Additionally, Scripture repeatedly uses the word ‘house’ to mean those living together as a household, as well as referring to a dwelling, as when Noah was instructed, “Come thou and all thy *house* into the ark” (Gen. 7:1). So the great promise made to David was expressed in the terms that God would make him “*an house*”, that is, a family of descendants to sit upon his throne (2 Sam. 7:11).

There is a fascinating link in Hebrew, not immediately obvious in English, between the words for ‘children’ and ‘house’. Thus *ben*, son, and *bath*, daughter, are both forms of the same noun, derived from the verb *banah*, to build.<sup>2</sup> So Psalm 127, possibly a meditation by David upon Solomon as the first fruit of God’s Messianic promise, begins with the recognition, “Except the LORD build [*banah*] the house, they labour in vain that build it”, and continues, “Lo, children [*banim*, plural of *ben*] are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is His reward” (vv. 1,3).

In these times, when the means are readily available for families to be planned, due recognition is not always given to the fact that children are indeed a gift from the Creator. Truly, as the psalm declares, “Happy [or blessed] is the man that hath his quiver full of them” (v. 5). And this theme of blessing is carried into the following psalm, with its delightful poetic picture of domestic bliss: “Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD” (128:3,4, NKJV).

For Israel, the covenant people were synonymous with the extended national family, the twelve tribes. For Gentiles, however, living under the new covenant in Jesus Christ and drawn from many nations, there is no longer necessarily a direct blood relationship. It is striking that throughout the Old Testament the importance of family relationships is emphasised by the inclusion in the record of extensive genealogies. The

1. See “[The role of grandparents](#)”, p. 247.

2. *Nelson’s Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament*, p. 42.

last two in Scripture are those of the Lord Jesus himself (Mt. 1; Lk. 3), after which they cease. The place of the wider family is now taken by the ecclesia, the new Israel, made up of individuals from all nations. Both at a local level and more broadly, the worldwide ecclesia of Christ is now the godly family. Nevertheless, the emphasis in the New Testament remains upon the natural family as the basis of those who are called to be the family of God.

### The role of parents

As noted above, the principal function of the family is provision for its members, primarily the care of parents for their children, although this role may be reversed in old age! We can distinguish three levels of care for the healthy development of children:

- **Physical:** Suitable food, clothing and shelter to enable their healthy physical growth. This is in truth no more than basic animal care.
- **Mental:** Education in the operation of the world to enable them ultimately to assume the responsibilities of adulthood, earn their own living and in due course themselves to marry and become parents if they wish.
- **Spiritual:** Most importantly, education in the ways of God our Maker, to understand the true meaning of life in honouring the Creator and seeking after the true, eternal life.

Regrettably, this third and most important function is largely ignored in today's secular, materialistic society, and even in Christadelphian households can be relegated beneath the others in priority.

The covenant of the Land of Promise, given by God to Israel (Deut. 6:1ff.), commences with the commandment to "love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might", and continues with the injunction to instruct the children in the laws of God: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (vv. 5-7).

This suggests a degree of attention to the Word of God that is rarely achieved today. Unfortunately one suspects that many Christadelphian families find it difficult even to fit the daily readings into their busy lives, even though time is very often found for children's TV programmes, soaps and so on.

It is noteworthy that the book of Proverbs is couched in the form of a father's guidance to his son: "My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother" (1:8). This can be read as a general exhortation to all children, but at another level as the instruction of *the* Father to His Son to adhere to the law of Israel, after the pattern of Deuteronomy 6:7.

The book contains a number of well-known injunctions to parents to exercise discipline in the bringing up of their children.<sup>3</sup> These are generally read as encouraging corporal punishment for misdemeanours, but the deeper meaning is assuredly that children are to be brought under the discipline of the law of God, symbolised by "the rod"; see, for example, 13:24; 22:15; 23:13,14; 29:17. Thus, "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (29:15). The wisdom of God is not actually to be found at the end of a stick but in the pages of the inspired Scriptures.

### The position of children

At the same time, the Law stressed that children should be under the authority of their parents, an idea at odds with today's liberal society and its concept of 'children's rights'. It is significant that the only one of the Ten Commandments directly related to families is the fifth, that children should honour their father and mother in order to prosper in the Land, a charge confirmed by the Apostle Paul and described by him as "the first commandment with promise" (Eph. 6:1,2) and as "well pleasing unto the Lord" (Col. 3:20). It is a matter of common observation that, in an age when the Word of God is so ignored, obedience by children to their parents is sorely lacking, a situation foreseen by Paul as a sign of the last days (2 Tim. 3:2).

We might suppose that this law is only concerned with family discipline, with young children obeying their parents in the home. Yet it is clear from the words of the Master that respect for parents is a lifelong obligation. Jesus was scathing in his condemnation of the Pharisees for their tradition of "Corban", in which they avoided the duty to care for aged parents, imposed by God's commandment, by supposedly devoting all of their possessions to the service of the temple (Mk. 7:9-13). Here is an implication that the bonds of family, so important for the bringing up of children, continue in an unbroken sequence

3. See "Discipline", p. 207.

from generation to generation; parents caring for children, mature children caring for parents and grandparents in their old age.

### The example of Jesus

It is important that we should consider the teaching and example of our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, with regard to the family, both as a child himself and then during his ministry.

#### 1. Jesus as a child

From the little we are told of the Lord's childhood, it is clear that he fully conformed to the ideal presented in Deuteronomy and Proverbs, as discussed above. Luke informs us that he "grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom" (2:40), and that he "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (v. 52). There is no suggestion that his wisdom was at this stage a Divinely imparted gift; rather we may deduce that it came from diligent study of his Father's Word, as when at the age of twelve he spent three days hearing and questioning the doctors of the Law in Jerusalem (v. 46).

It is somewhat awe-inspiring, and perhaps unfair, to compare this degree of immersion in God's Word with the attitude of the average twelve-year-old child of Christadelphian parents today. Yet one wonders if such devotion today would be discouraged by parents as excessive or unbalanced. However, when the Lord finally came to his baptism and the beginning of his ministry to Israel, his heavenly Father was able to make the breathtaking affirmation, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17). Jesus had absorbed his Father's words to the extent that he was the Word made flesh.

Furthermore, his devotion to his earthly parents, in accordance with the Law, in fact continued to the very last moments of his mortal life, as from the cross he committed his mother to the care of John (Jno. 19:26,27). Here in every way was the perfect example of a godly son.

#### 2. Jesus and children

In order to fulfil the work ordained by his Father, the Lord Jesus had to renounce the blessing of marriage, in effect making himself a eunuch "for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Mt. 19:12). He was thus unable to have children, as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah: "By oppression and judgment, he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendents?" (53:8, NIV).<sup>4</sup> Yet the Son of God was in no way aloof from children, but rather encouraged them to come to him: "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. And he laid his hands on them" (Mt. 19:14,15). Indeed, they seem to have been attracted to him, for on more than one occasion they seem to have been at hand for the Master to use in teaching his disciples the lesson of humility (*cf.* Mt. 18:1-6; Mk. 9:33-37).

In every way our Lord endorsed and supported the concept of the family as laid down by the Law of God, and so left us with a flawless exposition of the purpose of family life, to "seek a godly seed".

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4. Nevertheless the saints who are 'in Christ' themselves comprise his descendents, for "when Thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed" (Isa. 53:10), and "A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation" (Ps. 22:30).

## Fractured families in Genesis

*The book of Genesis—the so-called 'seedbed' of the Bible—has many examples of family life, perhaps the most of any Biblical book. Mark Vincent (Stirling, UK) examines some of the lessons that arise from these sometimes disturbing cameos.*

**T**HE FIRST Biblical example of family life is not at all optimistic. In fact, it could scarcely be more pessimistic, culminating as it does in the murder of one brother by another. The estrangement of Cain that ensues does nothing

to make things any easier for the grieving parents, effectively bereaved of both of their sons in one day. Although God 'puts' or 'appoints' (the meaning of Seth, see margin) another son instead of Abel (Gen. 4:25), the scars of their horrific family tragedy would never have departed from Adam and Eve.

Why does it have to begin this way? Why does the Biblical picture of family life have to start like *this*? And what does it mean for Eve to