

Family roles from one Father

(Part 1)

The individual roles of father and mother within a family are very important. In a two-part article, Mark Giordano (Norfolk, Virginia, USA) explores key Scriptural passages which establish a framework for marriage and family life and which show us what sort of parents we should be. Although under threat from the norms of society, these Divine principles remind us why Christadelphians take marriage and the family unit as seriously as they do. This first article provides an introduction, and then a detailed examination of the role of fathers.

Introduction: “One God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:6)

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from Whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man” (Eph. 3:14-16, RSV).

THE MODEL for family roles begins with God. He is a father. He is a husband. He is the head of His family. As a father, He is immediately accessible in conversation—speaking always about His purpose, and listening when we need to talk. As a husband, He shows unwavering purpose, infinite patience, longsuffering in grief, deliverance in betrayal, absolute faithfulness. Although He has relentless reason for bitterness, despair, frustration, even anger, He never lets them overwhelm His determination for victory. He is full of love. As the head of His household, He directs His family toward righteousness. All His thoughts are toward His family. In the end, they will be composed of innumerable families from all parts of the earth, unified and blessed. Even the final description of God is that His Son and his Bride are still subject to Him and, as such, He remains a father.

Relating our own roles in marriage to God may seem at first to be abstract or somehow beyond reach, too conceptual to be practical. But if we

are to understand anything about our roles in our families, we are compelled to learn from their source. God not only created families for their roles, but He created them to emulate His own purpose as the perpetuator of righteous progeny.

If this seems too big to have any relevance to your day-by-day life, take heart in the considerations that follow. You will see that the principles that define a godly marriage centre on a faithful father. They are not abstract at all, but are very close at hand—close enough for “*you to be strengthened*” (Eph. 3:16, RSV). Whether you are in the role of a husband, a wife, a father, a mother or a grandparent, you can be strengthened in the consideration of God as a father. And you will see how godly roles produce happy families.

Fathers and children

“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:6).

Brothers, whether we are willing to admit it or not, our role as a father begins for most at a time when we are more centred on *ourselves* than we are perhaps even aware. We are young, fulfilled by the love of a woman; very busy with life. Our aspirations about a family may be idealistic, but they are still largely abstract through lack of experience. Then along comes a little one. Nine months of expectation is replaced by a palpably sudden change of life, full of joy and full of labour.

Our new role now requires that we learn to be a father as well as a husband. The load increases. Our responsibilities force us to spend most of our time under pressure to perform, bearing the “unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with” (Eccl. 1:13, RSV). Whether to cope, to relax, or simply to have fun, we pursue other more self-based interests. In youth, we begin marriage with little or no thought of bearing children, to say nothing of raising them. We have no understanding of being a father, other than a few spiritual ideals and the examples of our

parents. The man who follows Christ has ample instruction to learn the role. But without the effort to absorb and apply the mind of Christ daily, our role as a father and husband is susceptible to drastic failure sooner or later, a failure which can develop from a condition of selfishness.

That is why Malachi addressed the role of fathers as he did. He concluded his message by saying that Elijah would come and “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (RSV). His warning not only focuses on fathers who have failed their role through selfish pursuits, but also shows how sensitive God is to that particular failure. In the absence of their repentance, God appears to be ready to “smite the earth with a curse”. Smite the earth! Because of fathers and their children! Such a final exclamation of despair appears to be caused by individual selfishness of global proportion; fathers failing children and children in turn failing their fathers. You can hardly read that warning without feeling the desperation behind Elijah’s restorative work as it will be when he comes again.

It isn’t surprising to hear the Lord express such an extreme response to the breach of family roles in the light of His having framed even the gospel around His promise to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3). Although it would be another four hundred years before the fathers of Israel were to hear the pleading of God again, the work of John picks up precisely where Malachi left off, manifesting the spirit of Elijah in his message. Recognising its importance, Jesus predicts the same condition of selfishness, or worse, in the time of the end, saying, “Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things” (Mt. 17:11). That specific restoration involves a repentance that will start with “the hearts of fathers”.

What influences in the world have led the fathers of one generation after another, from the fathers of Legalism to the fathers of Humanism, to fail their children in the things of God? If it is as important to God as it sounds in Malachi’s conclusion, then our role as fathers should be a first priority as it relates to the godliness of our children. As fathers now familiar with the lessons of the past, we should already be committed to the message Elijah will make to the fathers in Israel before the coming of the Lord. For us the question would be, What had the priests of Israel missed when the message was originally made to them? And what, then, is the essential principle for us? The answer lies a little earlier in the message.

Part 1: One Father— The role of fathers

“Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers?” (Mal. 2:10).

AT FIRST glance, reference to this passage may seem more expositional and less relevant to the role of fathers than it later appears. As you read you will see how the specific principle underlying his questions can yield unending practical understanding for fathers in applying their role. Speaking to morally oblivious fathers in Israel, Malachi asks, “Have we not all one father?”. Why would he address the attraction they had to strange women with a question like that? How does his question isolate the one critical principle he needs to affect their behaviour?

The answer must be relevant and practicable or it won’t work. He is setting up an answer that is foundational to every point he is making about marriage in chapter 2. His argument is pivotal to the success of marriage (in the context of marital failure) because it addresses the father’s role from God’s perspective. That role affects both the wife and the child in the appeal. The context of his question focuses on faithfulness, pride, lust, anger, violence and lost love.

The unity principle

The priests (v. 7) had abandoned the wives of their youth. They had “married the daughter of a strange god” (v. 11). They had broken the covenant. They were angry and covert. Their hearts were not set toward developing godliness in their children. They didn’t know their role as fathers was integral to that purpose. They had missed the one principle that would have given them the strength to resist their temptations. They had not understood their role.

Malachi’s appeal to the priests of Israel centres on the role of God as a father—not only as a father, but as *one* father. That is the key to the role. But understanding God as a father is only the first part of the point. The greater principle is that a godly father is *unified*, in every sense. His eye is single. He is not double-minded, or double-tongued. He is consistent with his faith. His personal direction and his purpose is the same as Christ’s. He is one with his wife and one with his children. He is one with Christ and one with

Christ's body. Fathers can understand their role best in the context of God's unity.

In the first sense of this principle, the prophet alludes to what Jesus calls the greatest commandment: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. 6:4,5; cf. Mt. 22:37,38). "One LORD" in the Law became "one father" in Malachi's appeal. Deuteronomy continues by saying that we should bind His commandments on our heart, and teach them diligently to our children; we talk about them in our homes, in our journeying, when we rest from the toil of a day, when we rise to try again. They are to be before our eyes, and to mark our houses and our doors.

Connecting the Law and the principle, the idea of being *one father* is integral with the father's role as an instructor of righteousness to his children. So, in practical terms, the first responsibility of a father is to be close to God's Word. Nothing can come out of a father that did not first go in from God's Word. Malachi gives the same message about the role of a father in asking directly and pointedly, "Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does He desire? Godly offspring" (Mal. 2:15, RSV). Therefore the principle of *one father* is critical to the development of godliness in children.

The practical application of the principle of *one father* follows. How will children know that God is *one Father* if their own father is duplicitous? How can they be confident that God will keep His promise if their experience is that their father broke his promise? How will they know that their heavenly Father is a God of steadfast love and kindness if all they remember about their natural father is an angry, judgemental man? Some children manage to sort all this out by their own application to spiritual things. Yet the sad reality in broken homes is that most children don't. The point is that the role of fathers is basically and powerfully influential in the family. Furthermore, any other selfishly driven arrangement, besides one based on the ideal of a father unified with God and his family, distorts and nullifies the purpose of a father's role, which is to represent the spiritual model of God's faithfulness so that children develop godliness.

The effect of our choices on the 'one father' principle

The following five examples illustrate how our choices affect this principle:

- 1 Young people, if you live together without being married and you happen to bear a child, what assurance does the child have that the father will stay with the family? No promise has been made. No public declaration of commitment was documented. There will be little guarantee that the relationship into which the child is born will be sustained over time, and the principle of *one father* is all but lost.
- 2 Young man, are you thinking of how your actions affect the faith potential in a child should your physical relationship with a girl result in one? Will you be able to live according to God's model as *one father* if you never marry the girl? Or if you are forced to marry one you don't love? Or if you have to marry her and she has no interest in spiritual things? Will you have the strength to be *one father*, like God? You could conceivably be one father in these cases, but it would be a great burden to your faith.
- 3 For anyone tempted by same-sex attraction, if there is ever a child in the relationship, either adopted or transferred from a former marriage, what will exemplify a *one father* principle in a home where there are two fathers, or two mothers and no father?
- 4 For a man who abandons the wife of his youth and marries another, and there are children on one or both sides, to what extent will they understand by experience about *one Father* in heaven, if their personal experience offers them two fathers on earth, a biological one and a replacement? These are not insurmountable situations that are impossible to reconcile (with God all things are possible), but they are far from the ideal in God's mind when He set up the spiritual-physical arrangement of families. "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mt. 19:6).
- 5 For a father who is tempted to abandon his family for 'self-fulfilment', what will your children understand about a God of love, mercy and truth, if the *one father* they do have is no true father; that is, if he is hard-hearted, or hypocritical, or a covert liar, or abusive, or, even worse, here today and gone completely tomorrow?

Regardless of the scenario, the principle of *one father*, in the role of spiritual head of his household, in which children are raised as godly, will be realised in a marriage as was conceived by God, where there is *one father* who bears children by his wife, raises them in the Lord, and stays

openly faithful to his spouse. This is the first and most important principle for the father's role in marriage. This is why the principle follows a covenant of "life and peace" (Mal. 2:5).

A word for those who have no children in the home: you still have the opportunity to be fruitful and bear godly seed. You can sow the seed of the gospel and become spiritual parents. It's not the same, but you can turn your affections toward another kind of 'little one', who may have no other family to love, or no one else to look after them but what they find in the household of God. Whatever they may have lost in the absence of one father in faith, they may in part find in a brother or sister who shows them the faithfulness of God in care.

A lesson for sisters

Before leaving this principle, there is also a lesson for sisters in the context of faithfulness. Most of the blame for unfaithfulness in marriage in the Scriptures falls on men. From the wayward sons of God in Noah's time to the men of Sodom and Benjamin, from David and Solomon to the priests of Ezra's time, many men have, like dumb oxen, forsaken their roles as *one father*, following selfish passions into spiritual ruin. But in these last days we live in times where the neutralisation of

genders, combined with rampant philosophies of individual freedom (especially for women) and the perceived right of happiness at the expense of others, places the same temptations on women that in the past were mainly experienced by men.

Many of us live in societies today where it is just as easy for a woman to support herself as it is for a man; where she can spend most of her day in the service of, or commanding over, men. Like her husband, she can have an overwhelming exposure to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. This can lead her heart away from the husband of her youth, despising his aging or his weaknesses, and causing her to put him away (emotionally or legally), perhaps even leading *him* to commit adultery—a warning against which Jesus generally applied to men.

If she sees herself in a role where she is competing with her husband for money, or freedom, or status, she may also compete with him in sin. Therefore the same principles that apply to husbands and fathers in the Lord also apply to wives and mothers. The wife's responsibility for raising godly seed is the same, and is just as vital to their faith, as her husband's. That brings us to *her* roles as bride and mother, which are dealt with in Part 2 of this article ([see p. 259](#)).

The uncertainties of parenting

One of the things you quickly learn as a new parent is that you don't have all the answers. Far from it! Here, Simon and Lorna Dean (Bishops Stortford, UK) explore some of the uncertainties, anxieties and heart-searching that accompany parenthood. What lessons can we learn—and what comfort can we gain—when we look at the experiences of Bible characters? They didn't necessarily have all the answers, and neither could they control the free will of their fellows. But they found assurance and a place to bring their concerns in their relationship with God.

ONESIMUS MAY BE the closest thing we have in Scripture to a runaway teenager. In his letter to Philemon, Paul is clearly handling a painful situation, messy with emotional conflict. Paul appeals to the compassion of the wronged master, calling the fugitive "my son

... begotten while in my chains" (v. 10),* no doubt hoping Philemon will see the escaped slave in the same light. The very need for the request suggests that Philemon feels less than inclined to take Onesimus back. Paul can only guess at how the event will be of benefit: "For *perhaps* he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever" (v. 15). What parent has not struggled to make sense of a crisis with a child where, at best, the hope is that 'perhaps' the event will turn out for the good?

Uncertainty in daily affairs

The message of our salvation in Christ gives us assurance and certainty in a world spinning out of control. There can, however, be uncertainty when

* Quotations from the NKJV.