

## *Trials and tribulations*

*Life in the Truth inevitably brings problems, not least in bringing up children. Trevor Maher (Stirling, UK) considers sympathetically the difficulties and heartaches that many parents experience, including the failure of children to accept the Truth, and shows that, even in the worst of difficulties, there is comfort to be gained from the Scriptures.*

*“Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is His reward” (Ps. 127:3).*

**C**HILDREN CAUSE their parents to experience just about every emotion known to adults: joy at their happiness, pride at their achievements, anger at their disobedience, sorrow at their failures. There is fear at their recklessness and then great grief should we lose them, their young lives cut short. Yet above all they teach their parents and learn for themselves the real meaning and value of love.

For brethren and sisters, their greatest hope and expectation is that their children will embrace the gospel of hope and be baptized into the saving name of Christ. Godly parents who have considered the responsibility of being parents will have thought about the words of the wise man recorded in Scripture: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). They will endeavour to follow this precept through home life and in their instruction in Scripture and association with ecclesial activities.

Yet for all their best efforts, when their children grow into adults they may determine to follow a life away from the things of the Truth. “Where did I go wrong?”, “What could we have done differently?”, are the sort of questions parents vex themselves with, whereas in reality it may not necessarily be their fault at all. (It is accepted that all parents could have done some things better, or not overlooked them, and we are all experts with hindsight! Just as there is no such thing as the perfect child, so there is no such thing as the perfect parent outside the example of Christ and our heavenly Father). Every stage in the life of your child brings different tensions, problems and anxieties. Even when they are married and have children of their own they are still your children. The parental bond lasts throughout life.

### **Parents and their problems**

Parents are expected to cope with all the various ‘ages’ of childhood, from the baby stage and a routine of feeding, changing, bathing and sleeping that both parties participate in, to teenage years where your child may never want to go to bed, will eat only junk food, communicates in a series of grunts and dresses in a manner that

creates parental despair. It needs resilience, tact, patience, deep pockets, and above all a willingness to change or modify your own lifestyle if necessary, without compromising principles or standards.

Life, though, is not made easy for a parent just because they subscribe to and try to put into practice the teachings of Scripture. Children may still turn out to be rebellious, challenging authority, tearaways causing heartache. Then they amaze us by accepting the Truth. Others who are easier to bring up and fit in with the family and ecclesial way of life can just drift away, never making that commitment to Christ. Such are the perplexities of being a parent.

The Scriptures provide us with examples of righteous parents who had wicked children and of wicked parents who had children who grew up to live righteous lives. In other words, children when they become adults have free will to live their lives as they desire. The writer is not professionally qualified to speak about genetics and the genes we inherit, but it is accepted that many of our characteristics are handed down from our forefathers. Just as our physical appearance is inherited from previous generations, so attributes of character can also be inherited. Whilst there is little, if anything, that we can do about the physical form, the purpose of parents in introducing Scripture into the life of a child is that their characters might be shaped in accordance with the mind and purpose of God. Newborn babes in this world still have to grow up and learn how to be born again, for this is no new phenomenon, as the example of Nicodemus shows (Jno. 3:1-21; cf. 1 Pet. 1:22-25).

Life for parents in Western societies has in some respects become harder in recent decades, with the decline of the extended family. Because the movement away from home areas for higher education and employment is more prevalent

now, families are more scattered and remote from one another. This means that parents have less access to the practical and emotional support that once would have come from grandparents, siblings, cousins or other relatives living close by. This situation may be aggravated if there are two working parents or only a single parent.

In Third World countries such as Africa the extended family is still very strong, but, where most of the family are not in the faith, this in itself brings problems and conflict. Brethren and sisters want to follow the Scriptural teaching and practices, but their extended family will still be rooted in the culture and traditions of the tribe or nation. Treating the ecclesia as our extended family has always been an essential element in family life for those whom God has called in the past, and in this twenty-first-century world it still is.

#### **Comfort in our tribulations**

Being called by God to be one of Christ's disciples is not a guarantee of a stress-free life or a life without sadness, trials and tribulations. It does not exempt us from sickness and disease, accidents and the wayward behaviour of our children, brethren and sisters, or members of the society in which we live. Brethren and sisters die as victims of violent crimes, lose their lives in aircraft disasters, and families die in traffic accidents. In our community babies are stillborn or born with terminal illness, and young children contract diseases which claim their lives. Young wives and mothers are suddenly struck down, and children maturing into adults fall foul of the law through wrong actions and end up in prison.

But that is not the sum total of life, the continuous experience for any one person. Such things are interspersed with times of happiness, feelings of contentment, the warmth and joy of family life and fellowship with brethren and sisters. Jesus said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (Jno. 16:33). We live in a world of sin and death, and it is inevitable that sooner or later we will experience the consequences of this, especially as parents. One of Job's friends expressed this thought in the words, "yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). In the opening chapter of Job we see a man constantly endeavouring to offset the effects of his children's behaviour in his own relationship with and worship of God (1:1-5).

Parents being concerned about children is not new, it stretches back to Eden. The faith we have in Christ Jesus is not to be viewed as a barrier that will prevent all the awkward situations of life affecting us. If we think of it in this way, we will struggle and almost certainly lose faith when the trying times come. Rather our faith is the means by which we cope with and overcome the trying times.

The Apostle Paul expressed it in this way: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Cor. 1:3,4). In this passage, "comfort" is the Greek word *paraklēsīs* ("comforteth" is the equivalent verb), and means 'a calling alongside'. We are not alone when struggling with bringing up children; our Saviour and our heavenly Father know our needs and will heed our prayers. In 7:6 Paul says God comforted him by sending Titus, an obvious answer to his prayer. He will do the same kind of things for us, if we trust Him and have faith in Him.

#### **Difficult children**

Firstly, let us understand that, although many parents think they are the only ones whose children are playing up and making life difficult, almost all parents will have gone through the same experiences or similar ones. Indeed, the children may be following their own parents in this respect, which is where grandparents come in very handy. They recognise the traits and know the cure, having been down the road before! Even if the children's natural grandparents are not living locally, there may well be other 'grandparents' in the ecclesia who will be willing to lend an ear or help out.

Parents can sometimes come down sharply on their children because they see in them their own weaknesses and traits. There are numerous reasons why children are especially difficult and/or disruptive in the home environment, have problems at school, or 'go off the rails' in teenage years, far too many to be covered comprehensively in a short section in this article. Such problems, though, should not be dismissed as 'just normal growing up tendencies—all kids go through it—they'll grow out of it', and therefore ignored. A difficult child can make life difficult for many people, not just the parents and immediate family. Each child is an individual and needs to be treated as such. All families have to have

general rules/standards that all must endeavour to adhere to.

Consideration, though, also needs to be given to each child to see if there are specific matters that can be addressed and the situation of their behaviour improved. Problems that can be experienced, such as refusing to eat the food served at meal times, wanting only 'junk or fast food', arguing over everything they are asked to do, bullying their siblings, loud and prolonged tantrums whenever they cannot get their own way regardless of where they are, constantly in trouble at school, playing truant from school, always telling lies, being awkward about going to Sunday School, youth group and the meetings generally, may have underlying causes and not be just the result of a wilful disobedient spirit that needs strong disciplining to bring it into line.

Just one personal experience here. A son received mixed reports from teachers at his secondary school. One said he was inattentive, talkative and with a tendency to be disruptive. Another said he was no trouble. On raising the first teacher's comments we were told by the second that he had been like that but she realised he was uncomfortable being squashed into a small desk, because of his size, so she had a table put at the back of the class and put the three largest lads at it. As a result everything was fine and they contributed to the class activities well. The problem was not with the boy's attitude but with poor facilities and a lack of communication between teachers.

In the box opposite there is a list of various courses of action that parents can consider when they are trying to resolve behaviour patterns with difficult children. One is only too aware that this is a rather inadequate response to such a broad-ranging topic, but it is hoped that it may stimulate discussion among those who have such difficulties, and lead to a helpful course of action.

### **Better late than never**

If our children do not seek baptism between the usual ages of seventeen and twenty-five years, we should not assume they will never make that step. It must, of course, always be something that they themselves desire because they fully appreciate and understand "the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ". Baptism should never be undertaken because parents 'think its about time' or because the child wants to please the parents. The author knows of many instances where the children of

## **Overcoming difficulties**

- Pray with your children
- Read the Word of God with them
- Praise them when they do something well
- Be patient with them
- Hug them and let them know that you love them
- Participate in their activities
- Listen when they speak to you
- Try not to overreact to any given situation
- Be consistent with rules and discipline

### **Problems at school**

- Keep in touch with the school, attend parent's evenings
- Don't demand too much of your child, wanting them to achieve more than you did
- Make sure your child is getting enough sleep
- Check your child's hearing and vision regularly

### **Problems at mealtimes**

- Always give thanks for the meal
- Eat meals together as a family as much as you can
- Get the children to participate sometimes in food preparation
- Explain the benefit of healthy foods

### **Problems in relationships**

- Remind your child of the difference between real life and TV/stories in comics and books
- Make sure your child gets sufficient exercise/interesting activities
- Involve your child in as many activities as possible within the ecclesia/community
- Show them courtesy and respect; teach them to respond in a similar way

### **General thoughts**

- Teach your children about values; the difference between needs and wants
- Spend time rather than money on your child

Christadelphian parents have accepted the Truth many years later, some in their late twenties, others in their forties and married with children, some retired and in their late seventies.

Our responsibility is to sow the seed in our children's minds while we have opportunity. It is God Who calls, God Who gives the increase. Jesus said to the Jews of his day, "No man can come to me, except the Father Which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jno. 6:44). The example of the thief on the cross illustrates that God does give opportunity, even very late in life, for repentance and salvation (Lk. 23:39-43). In one ecclesia alone the author is aware of at least four examples where members have come to the Truth much later in life, and this is repeated in ecclesias around the world. Two examples come to mind:

- 1 The daughter of a brother and sister went through Sunday School and youth group, drifted away, married and had children. Moving to a new area because of her husband's employment, she saw the local ecclesial hall and decided to take her children to the Sunday School. Hearing about Bible-reading seminars, she enrolled and found all the truths she learnt as a child flooding back. She was subsequently baptized.
- 2 A young girl attended Sunday School for five years and also went to activities arranged for youth. In late teenage years she drifted away, married and left the area. She attended the local church with her husband for more than forty years. He died, and some months later the Christadelphians had a special effort in her area. She received a leaflet and realised that it stated what she had known to be the truth yet had suppressed it in her mind. Subsequently she made contact, and a few months later was baptized. By now she was in her eighties.

Brethren and sisters will be able to add numerous other similar stories. We must accept, though, that our children may decide to pursue a way of life alien to that which we have chosen. We teach and show by example, but it is their choice ultimately. We do not love our children less because they choose not to be baptized. Our

love will lead us to make it a matter of constant heartfelt prayer to our heavenly Father that their blindness might be turned to sight: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16).

Scripture also reinforces the lesson concerning children choosing different ways of life from that of their brothers and sisters when they become adults, even though they have all had the same upbringing and religious instruction. We see the difference between Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Absalom and Solomon. When we come to the New Testament, think for a few moments about the twelve disciples. Chosen by Christ, living together as a family for three years, hearing and seeing all that Christ taught and did, they were his family, as he said himself (Mt. 12:46-50). Yet Judas was a thief and betrayed his Lord: "Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spake of Judas Iscariot" (Jno. 6:70,71). Would Jesus have treated Judas differently from his other disciples during those three years? Was Judas not exposed to the same environment as the other eleven? Yet he chose to behave differently from the others.

#### **A godly seed**

The wisdom of God in providing the family unit for the raising of children is self-evident when one views the current situation in the world. Surrounded by broken homes, single-parent families (often by choice rather than circumstances), gay adoption and the erosion of moral standards (reflected in the high number of schoolgirl pregnancies), we can see what a haven a truly Christian home with God-fearing parents is. The desire of God is to have a godly seed that fills the earth with His glory, and it is the privilege of brethren and sisters blessed with children to strive to put this into practice in a small way in the upbringing of their children. The ecclesial family allows all, including the single, married couples without children, and the elderly, to participate in this rewarding responsibility. The love that God has shown us, His children, can in turn be reflected in our love for the children He has blessed us with.

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" is a statement of general tendencies and not of an inexorable law. Human beings are neither machines nor plants. They have a power of choice; they can respond to good influences or they can be rebellious.