

If we were rewriting *Family Life in the Lord* we would cover these points very clearly rather than just making a passing reference to them.

In sum

In reviewing the book, we feel it is still a very useful and relevant addition to the literature of our community. As we have noted, however,

there are some modifications and additions we would make, to the end that our children might be a godly seed. And we would write with even greater conviction that “our children can be our joy and crown of rejoicing, if they, with ourselves, are found faithful in that day when the Lord calls us before him and takes to himself the multitude of his beloved”.

What do we want for our children?

Key to any strategy of parenting, whether consciously or unconsciously formed, is to have a vision; to have goals, aspirations and expectations. These underlying motives that we each have—each one’s individual answer to that question, ‘What do I want, most of all, for my children?’—will have an enormous impact on the way we bring them up. In concluding this Special Issue, Eric Marshall (Kings Lynn, UK) brings out these aspects, showing how important it is to be clear about our priorities and to get them right.

NO DOUBT we would say that we want the best for our children. But what is the best? Parents are keen that their children are healthy, and if not then much effort and expense can be put into seeking cures for illnesses and providing support to cope with disabilities. In the competitive and extrovert world we live in it is easy to be pressured into ensuring that our children are successful. By the standards of contemporary society this usually means that they achieve educational success, find ‘good’ (equals well-paid?) jobs, even fame and social standing. But is this really the best for them?

Perhaps we can get some helpful direction from the Creation record. When man was created, the proposition was, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (Gen. 1:26). This generation of mankind was to reflect their Creator, being patterned upon the Elohim.

This was surely more than physical resemblance, including also a moral dimension. Indeed, in the Garden it is this moral dimension that was tested as part of Adam’s character development.

Would he obey God and practise His way or not? The role of the believer as a parent must be similar, and our aspiration for our children ought to focus on their character development and destiny. But this is inevitably worked out in children who inherit some, at least, of our own characteristics, both the good and the bad, and have us as role models from the day of their birth; some would even argue from conception! (In fact this role also falls to believers who never have children, for they too can encourage children in the right ways by their interest and example.)

Such a focus may well help us to avoid pressuring our children to become what they have no potential to be. It will also provide the incentive for us to encourage good habits and behaviour when the contemporary society they inevitably must meet encourages them to be otherwise.

Children an heritage of the Lord

It is perhaps easy, in a world where contraception is readily available, and smaller families the order of the day, to think that we choose when to have children. The believer’s view is that of the psalmist: “Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is His reward” (Ps. 127:3). So having children is not a manifestation of a father’s virility, the mother’s fertility, or some ‘social statement’. With the blessing of children will come the hard work, the trials and the challenges, as well as the joys of parenthood.

Whilst there is an element of truth in the thought sometimes expressed that only those who have had children know the difficulties of the role, it is possible for those outside the relationship to be both helpful and objective. One only has to look at the examples of parents and children in Scripture to see how easy it is for parents to have

a distorted view of their children, their merits and demerits; Isaac and Esau and David and Absalom are but two of many examples.

Why is it that God has designated marriage as the best relationship wherein children can be born? It is firstly to keep the race going, but secondly, and more importantly, to develop families of faithful, God-fearing people. It is worth stressing this point from a number of passages.

- Israel were meant to follow this ideal, so Malachi challenged them when they practised divorce: "And did not He make one? [that is, one man and one woman, as in Genesis 2:24] . . . And wherefore one? That He might seek a godly seed" (Mal. 2:15).
- Abraham, the father of the faithful, is commended by God, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him" (Gen. 18:19).
- The office of a bishop, that is, an elder, was required to be fulfilled by "one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)" (1 Tim. 3:4,5).

So as parents we are expected to provide a framework of discipline and good example. In the process, however, we learn about our relationship with God as our Father, and come to understand His compassion and longsuffering as we struggle to bring up our children in the way they should go.

Expectations of our children

If we do not teach our children what God's Word says then few others will, so it must be a prime responsibility. Is this a matter of teaching a catechism of beliefs? This writer thinks not. Better it is, surely, to encourage regular thoughtful reading of God's Word from an early age. If nothing else, they will be good readers, and thus benefit; but, more importantly, they will be familiarised with the Bible layout, stories, teachings and thus the Divine view on life. Encouraging thoughtful reading allows children to develop their own habit of Bible reading and study.

The practice of daily Bible reading is a very good way to show our commitment to our profession that the Bible is the Word of God the Creator, given for our learning and salvation. It is also a way of showing our priority in life for God's

ways against the competing worldly attractions of television, video, music, newspapers, magazines, homework, hobbies, etc. If our children see that we are prepared to sacrifice our other interests and activities to the Word, and also support our brethren and sisters in our ecclesia, they will be encouraged to follow suit. God's instruction to Israel is relevant: "And ye shall teach them [God's words] your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 11:19; cf. Ps. 78:4-8).

Sunday School and youth group activities have their place, but should not be expected to replace what should be regular instruction and conversation in the home. Youth group will provide an opportunity to form friendships and receive encouragement in godly ways. It may be necessary for parents to give time to help run such activities, or at least to get their children to them regularly.

What should our expectations be about our children's attendance at meetings?

Ideally children should attend all meetings with parents, because this is what the family does as part of the faithful service and worship with other brethren and sisters. However, there are some practical issues to consider. It may not be appropriate for very young children to attend unless there is a suitable room for parent and child to use if the child is restless and likely to disturb the meeting unduly. If such is available, then a sound system will allow those there to hear the proceedings, provided that the children are encouraged to occupy themselves quietly. This is a challenge to us in an age when expectation of disciplined behaviour from children is becoming less common.

In the teenage years, some may feel that insisting on our children attending, say, the memorial meeting is not appropriate, being not yet baptized. My own experience as a teenager was of being left at home, to complete an Isolation League Sunday School lesson, homework from school, and cook the vegetables in time for Sunday lunch! Where an ecclesia can operate a senior study class, teenagers may be happy to attend, and should be encouraged. It seems to this writer that dependent children should be expected to attend the preaching activities of the ecclesia. It should also be a priority of the ecclesia to make sure that the lecture or other activity content is relevant and accessible to young people who do attend.

The ultimate aim of parents is to encourage children to develop godly characters and therefore to choose the way of salvation.

Giving children opportunity to develop

Fifty years ago most families were not particularly well off, and the material opportunities for children were more limited. In contrast, however, the opportunities to get work and become self-supporting, albeit at a basic level, were probably better. Parents were challenged then by their role, but the modern situation could be seen as more challenging.

The perceived need to do well academically can create pressures both on children, who might be pushed unreasonably, and on parents, who might feel the need to seek housing in a desirable locality with access to a 'good' school, and therefore seek promotion and salary increases to fund this. Jesus' warning that the cares of this life may lead to fruitless discipleship needs to be heeded.

There may be a manifestation of wanting to give our children 'what I never had'. Such an approach can also lead to letting children have whatever they desire without considering the question, 'But is it good for them—morally and spiritually?'. As Jesus says, fathers will give good gifts to their children as our heavenly Father does for us. These good gifts will be those that benefit rather than harm (Mt. 7:11). Giving opportunity for children to develop healthy interests will be our desire, and as far as possible, where we have more than one child, to be even-handed and appropriate in our provisions.

Another temptation for parents is living out our aspirations through our children. As a result we may use them to allow us to indulge an interest, or, worse, use them to bring us fame and wealth; as those in the world who push their children to be actors, pop stars or tennis players might sometimes do. Perhaps a more subtle problem for us is pressuring our children to be baptized. Much as we desire their salvation, it is necessary to remember that *they* have to make this decision. They will have to live with the consequences of the commitment to discipleship in daily life and ultimately as accountable to God. Mere membership of the body of believers is not discipleship, and is not a guarantee of salvation.

Jesus' challenge to his contemporaries was that those who claimed to be the seed of Abraham should display Abraham's faith and behaviour; so too for his disciples he issues the challenge, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny

himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). We may have to endure the disappointment that other faithful parents have had (for example, Isaac and Rebekah), some of whose children have not chosen the way of salvation, despite their best efforts.

Responding to their successes and failures

When our children do well we are pleased; when they do not we are disappointed. If we have made a lot of effort to help them we could feel frustrated at their lack of success. Because our children are important to us we can sometimes have a distorted view of their actual abilities. Those who have worked in education will have met the parent who is convinced that their quite ordinary child is a genius! Such will boast about their child's achievement *ad nauseam*, often belittling very commendable achievements by others. The sad outcome is that such children either have an inflated view of their importance or are desperately unhappy with the pressure on them to achieve beyond their potential.

It is, of course, possible to be overly frustrated with a child who does not perform as we would like, and to be constantly critical of whatever they do. Such will be discouraged, and develop a low estimate of what they could do if encouraged sympathetically. Jesus' example shows us that patience with, and encouragement of, the struggling is important. We should practise the words quoted in the Gospels about our Lord: "A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory" (Mt. 12:20).

Since our community is a family, for "[we] are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26), then those who do not have children can be a positive influence on our children. This will involve both taking interest in them and what they are doing, and also giving sound advice. Occasionally there may be a need to advise parents about some aspect of their children's behaviour. It is a human reaction to criticism, even well meant, to dismiss it because 'You do not have children so you do not know'. Although there is an element of truth in this response, we should not forget that godly advice based on the Word of God is true, whoever gives it.

Protecting but giving responsibility

God's care as a father in providing for and protecting His children is touchingly portrayed in Hosea 11:1-3: "When Israel was a child, then I

loved him, and called My son out of Egypt . . . I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them". For us there will always, as parents, be a tension between protecting them and giving them responsibility. Many of the other articles have dealt with the threats and opportunities that accompany parenting.

What is the guidance for us? Surely it is the Word of God and the example of the faithful. These, supported by prayer and our own example of consistent faithfulness, will help us to protect our children from serious dangers but allow them opportunity to develop robust godly characters. Whatever else happens is under the control of our heavenly Father, "Who will not suffer [us] to be tempted above that [we] are able" (1 Cor. 10:13). It seems likely to this writer that, like our contemporaries, we are at risk of being over-protective and doing for our children what they should do for themselves.

Letting go

There comes the time in the natural development of a child when it becomes an adult, not simply in physical development, but also in maturity of outlook and behaviour. This is the time for them to make their own way in the world. For many this is when they leave secondary education. In recent years many have proceeded to university;

indeed, in the UK the government encourages this. For others it will be going to work. Both may require leaving home, which can be traumatic for both young adults and parents.

Some may not really be ready for this; some will be keen to get away from what they see as parental restrictions. Each child needs supportive care appropriate to their circumstances. Leaving home does not mean severing contact. This will not be so often face-to-face, but modern technology provides scope for regular, and, if need be, frequent, contact.

Encouraging our children to attend an ecclesia local to them will help provide a godly influence and a source of help and friendship with both young and old. This is a privilege that comes from the wise arrangements of Jesus and his apostles that brethren and sisters should meet together as a family. As such, this should not be just once a week. Many of us can testify to the love, fellowship and generous care of brethren and sisters on other days as well as Sunday when we first left home. There is scope, too, for young adults themselves to be helpful to both those who need it and those who support them.

Letting go is often a difficulty more for mothers, but what joy when we see our children as responsible adults, of whom we, by God's grace, can say, 'It is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased'!