

Family life in the Lord— twenty-five years on

The book Family Life in the Lord by Don and Ellen Styles (Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA) is the most thorough treatment the Brotherhood has produced on parenting and family life from a Biblical perspective. It has helped countless families, and is still extremely valuable today, despite the passing of the years. Rather than reprinting a review of the book or producing a new one, it seemed an interesting opportunity to invite Don and Ellen to provide a retrospective on their own work. They willingly agreed, sharing thoughts on the reception of the book, how it has withstood the passing years, and commenting on any changes of emphasis or additions they would make were they producing a new edition of the work for today.

THE FUNDAMENTAL principles we endeavoured to set forth in the book a quarter of a century ago have not changed. This is not surprising, as they were based on universal Divine guidance, given by the Creator of the race. His instructions were intended to be applicable across all cultures and good at any time in man's history.

Great Scripture principles don't change

We compiled the book from a series of articles that covered many of the aspects of parenting. There were contributions from a number of continents, and excerpts taken from relevant material from the writings of pioneer brethren and from various Christadelphian magazines. We also wrote many of the contributions ourselves. Many of the articles we included stressed that the overriding goal in raising children should be that they become a godly seed.

In looking back over the years, we can see with even greater clarity the importance of having this goal continually in mind. As our own children have matured, they've come fully to appreciate that such a parental attitude is the expression of true love for them. Maybe at the time they were growing up they would have preferred that we

had tried to win their friendship by indulging them and giving in to their various impulses and wants. But now they see clearly true parental love, and, as we have the pleasure of telling them, they are our best friends as well as companions in the way of life.

A number of articles also elaborated on the Divine advice to make the Scriptures, and the Lord's instructions, part of everyday conversation. In retrospect, we would include this same emphasis all over again. God was right, as we would expect! If in the course of everyday life we make known to our children "the praises of the LORD, and His strength, and His wonderful works that He hath done" (Ps. 78:4), the next generation does come to know Him. Although ecclesial association, Sunday School, youth activities and special events such as Bible schools all play their vital role, nothing equals in importance the impact of Scriptural conversations in the morning, at noontime, in the evening, while sitting in the house, travelling by the way, or when we're lying down or rising up.

Indoctrination and discipline

The Biblical approach is actually an instruction to indoctrinate our children in a certain way of thinking and acting. This is pointed out in *Family Life*, and is one of the areas that drew criticism. 'Indoctrination' has a bad connotation in some circles, where it would be claimed that service to God must come as a free choice from willing hearts. We noted that the best answer to such an idea is the way we guide and tutor our children in respect to their physical and emotional health. The world's emphasis in this regard has actually increased in recent decades, with, for example, greater awareness of correct diet, proper exercise and the effects of second-hand smoke and drug addiction.

If we're going to be concerned about the relatively short-term temporal welfare of our children, and provide all kinds of direction in this regard,

surely we would be utterly irresponsible to ignore their spiritual and eternal wellbeing. In the book the point was made that natural inclinations and the influence of the world will provide plenty of pressure to depart from God's standards. Any 'indoctrination' we do will only provide a partial offset to the way of the world and the natural inclinations of the flesh. So, without any apologies, we would retain the 'indoctrination' point. Call it 'basic training' if you wish—a military term, but most appropriate for a soldier in Christ.

If anything, we would support this point with more suggestions about how to make the way of the Lord pleasant rather than onerous. If we had it to do over again, we would no doubt elaborate more fully how this will take much time, energy and concern on the part of parents, but will likely yield the most satisfying rewards as we look back on our family life. Suggestions are: more family nights; board games; a consistent pattern of doing a reading with the children as many evenings as possible; and appropriate quizzes taken off the internet, which can be a source of great family fun and jollity. The point is, let Bible discussion roll easily into conversations, and keep the family (both biological and ecclesial) physically, emotionally and spiritually connected.

Upon review, the various comments on discipline hold up well. There are many points that can be drawn from the Scriptures on this topic without resorting to human thinking. In the Bible there's much balanced guidance in respect to consistent, loving parental behaviour, as we see our heavenly Father at work with His children. And, as the years pass, we can see ever more clearly the chastening He lovingly applies in our own lives and in those of others.

Adjustments we would make

Much of the material we included in the book was written in the context of increasing materialism and prosperity. Phrases such as, "the general high standard of living that characterize our times", were suitable in that context. But the Brotherhood has spread rapidly in the past twenty-five years to include many who live in poverty and for whom such a reference is not applicable. If we were to do a revised edition, we'd show sensitivity to the current situation and edit out or qualify several statements.

Another adjustment would be more fully to recognise the number of working mothers. In many developing areas, everybody in the family is pressured to provide whatever income they can

for the sake of survival. Even in many developed areas, two-income households have become more the norm than they were twenty-five years ago, and it's more true today that some mothers can earn more than fathers. Whilst we wouldn't change the basic advice that families function best when mother is home-based, we'd have more to say about optional situations, and include more suggestions about how to make them work within the framework of the great spiritual goals of raising children to the glory of God.

The power of example

One thing we would stress more is the power of example. The point is perfectly clear in Scripture, and is the reason for the Lord's inclusion of so many character studies. The subject is included in the book, but not developed as fully as it should have been. As disciples of Christ we're going to set some good examples, whilst as human beings we're inevitably going to set some bad ones.

The problem is that the bad examples are likely to have more impact than the good. We aren't supposed to be bragging all the time about the good we do. Thus our children may not be aware of the temptations we resist, the generosity of our giving, the kindness we exhibit, the forgiveness we practise, although as they grow older these attributes will become more apparent. Furthermore, as they are inherently prone to sin, they will grasp at excuses to sin and will readily use parents' misbehaviour as a rationalisation for their own. Thus, compromised behaviour on the part of parents can easily become a major pattern in the child's life. Recognising this situation, the parents must be extremely conscious of how the child is reading their behaviour.

An obvious example is apparent disregard of authority in respect to traffic laws. The child can enlarge this to a general disregard for the rules of society and thereby get himself/herself into much trouble as an adult. We must underscore the restraints this may require parents to exercise, even in matters that may be allowable in their own circumstances.

At one point, we noted that any lowering of standards by one generation will be picked up and doubled by the next. We intended this as hyperbole, but now are inclined to think it might have been more accurate than we'd have liked. The use of alcoholic drinks and attendance at movies are a couple of specifics where we have personally seen more than a doubling of lowered standards from one generation to the next. While we may feel

some specific strictures or rules and regulations are against the spirit of Christ's direction to serve in spirit and truth, if we had it to do over again we'd put much greater emphasis on the impact of declining standards of behaviour and the related need for parents to restrict personal liberties for the sake of setting a godly example.

Another area that deserves more discussion than we provided is the use of self-help books and other outside counsellors in respect to child-rearing. Whilst wheat must be sifted from chaff, in many cases child development is common to the race. Those who have broad experience in this regard can provide very useful insights. A young couple may be shocked at the behaviour of their first two-year-old, feeling that they must have failed the challenge of parenting already by this early date! Yet a little wider reading or experience may reveal that such behaviour is quite typical and nothing to worry about.

Furthermore, abnormal behaviour may be a medical problem that can be addressed by some of the remarkable drugs now available. Simply because humanistic philosophies may creep into some factors of child psychology, this does not prevent our getting some very useful ideas from others. Guidance on how to pick and choose from what's available in the world would be a useful area of discussion in respect to family life.

Additions we would make

The Divine principles are the same, human nature has not changed—but technology has. Like most people of our age, we've been simply amazed at the facility children readily develop with electronic devices, and with the internet. This marvellous development, along with increasing wireless access to it, has opened up a whole new opportunity for good and for sin.

Many of us use the internet several times a day for information and communication. Speaking personally, it saves us many hours of laborious work every month and provides opportunity for service in Christ that would otherwise be impracticable. Yes, we have pornographic items pass through our junk mail, but we delete them as a nuisance without a second thought. But that's not necessarily what some of our children are doing. Consider the following, taken from the *New York Times* of 19 December 2005:

"[The 13-year-old was] at his computer station . . . Weeks before, he had hooked up a Web camera to his computer, hoping to use it to meet other teenagers online. Instead, he

heard only from men who chatted with him by instant message as they watched his image on the Internet . . . One member of his audience sent a proposal: he would pay him \$50 to sit bare-chested in front of his Webcam for three minutes. The man explained that he could receive the money instantly and helped him open an account on PayPal.com, an online payment system . . . So began the secret life of a teenager who was lured into selling images of his body on the Internet over the course of five years . . . for an audience of more than 1,500 people who paid him, over the years, hundreds of thousands of dollars".

If we had written *Family Life in the Lord* today, first of all we would have exposed the problem, and then researched some preventive measures parents can take. From our own limited experience with our four children trying to monitor our fourteen grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren, we already have some idea of the safeguards offered by internet providers.

Moreover, we would suggest that bedroom doors should never be closed. Keep an eye on your children, especially if they have a computer in their room. Further, some parents locate all computers in areas where they can be seen in the normal course of moving about the house. And there are ways one can determine what sites have been visited on a given computer. This may require the parent to be more technically inclined than he/she would like, but it's the world in which we live, and it is getting more technically sophisticated all the time.

The particular story related above concerns another area we would include if we had it to do over again: the problem of homosexuality. In the past twenty-five years, the gay community has made tremendous strides in legitimising their lifestyle. We see it in the established church, in laws of the state, in advertising, television programming, in some places openly on the street. We need to keep the Lord's view crystal clear before our children: the practice of homosexuality is grievous sin before God. Yes, people may be born with a predisposition in this regard. But we're all born with predispositions to certain sins. We may struggle all our lives with an addictive personality, or covetousness, or arrogance, or anger, or cruelty, etc. Whatever our weakness, the Lord will help us overcome it. Yet the fact that we sin in an area of habitual weakness doesn't change the fact that iniquity is iniquity—and the practice of homosexuality is sin.

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