

“Binding his donkey to the vine,
And his donkey’s colt to the choice vine,
He washed his garments in wine,
And his clothes in the blood of grapes”
(Gen. 49:11, NKJV).

Riding a white donkey was a privilege for persons of high rank (Judg. 5:10) and also a claim to rulership (Zech. 9:9). Taking the normal vine to represent the nation of Israel, the choice vine

would represent spiritual Israel.⁴ So binding the donkey (AV “foal” = a young ass) to the vine is a symbolic way of saying that Shiloh (v. 10, the Peace-bringer) would become the ruler of Israel both natural and spiritual.

([To be concluded](#))

4. Others have seen the two vines as Gentiles and Jews.

Principles, preaching, problems

The single parent with children (2)

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In the first article the authors considered the feelings of the single parent confronted with a sudden change in family life, loneliness at ecclesial meetings, problems faced by the children, Scriptural teachings on relationships, and practical implications in regard to role models. This article considers how help might be given in a practical and sensitive way.

THERE ARE A number of very practical and helpful ways in which married couples or ‘aunts’ and ‘uncles’ within the ecclesia can help to bear the burdens that come with changed family circumstances.

Practical things to do

Consider this. Many single parents will be the only one who attends their child’s school events. Offer to go along and share the joy of the moment. Such moments can be highlights in a child’s life. If you doubt the value of this, imagine yourself as the child with one parent while others have caring mothers and fathers and perhaps other family members present.

One could phone the children for no particular reason, just to have a chat. Or share and teach one of your hobbies or skills, or have the child meet you to help you visit or help another. Of course, once we appreciate that we are able to help we will realise that the examples given above are just that—examples. Think of a family situation and it will be possible to provide help in that

situation. What is required is a little imagination. Further examples will be given in [Part 4](#).

For the parent

It is natural and right for the parent to be concerned for the spiritual growth and wellbeing of the children. However, the parent is as vulnerable as the children. The parent is no longer in the husband/wife relationship that is to pattern the relationship between Christ and the ecclesia. We have seen that Scripture is clear as to how the wife should respond to her husband. She is to manifest the true spirit of the ‘bride of Christ’, as presented to us in Sarah, who “obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement” (1 Pet. 3:6). Likewise we know how the husband should respond to his wife: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25).

In the family environment the wife without a husband does not have a tangible model of Christ to ‘submit’ to in the home. Nor can she manifest this submission to other brethren, because they are not her ‘lord’. The absence of the wife removes a husband’s tangible model of the ‘bride of Christ’ in the home, and minimises his opportunity to “love . . . as Christ”. Nor is it possible to replace this loss with another person who is not his wife.

At a secular level

It is impossible to separate 'secular' and 'religious' life. All our life should be lived "as unto the Lord". However, there are things families do that are not 'going to the meeting' or 'doing the readings'. These activities are numerous and cannot be catalogued. They form an integral part of family life and serve to cement the relationships of the family.

The father might wash the car, mow the lawn or paint the house, for example; these activities can provide for 'bonding' between father and son. Even if the son prefers to be on his bicycle, skateboard or roller blades, or kicking a ball about, as is often the case, conversations take place, and the son learns by example certain skills and how to be a father.

The father/daughter relationship grows in doing activities together. They may be the same or similar activities to those the father and son engage in. They may be different. However, in these circumstances the daughter can find a male confidant to whom she may reveal things she would not tell her mother. She will develop an understanding of the male (Christlike) thought patterns which she will be able to identify in her peers. This will help her in finding a partner in due course.

When teenage sons are being brought up by a single mother, further problems arise. Sons often drift away from their mother physically and emotionally. If the father is no longer present, the son, having distanced himself from his mother, is left adrift without a confidant.

What do the children think?

The single parent may feel that things are not right with the children. The mother may appreciate, for instance, that she is unable to be the 'father' in conducting Bible instruction, either in daily reading or in problem solving. The father, on the other hand, may feel inadequate when dealing with his daughter's concerns about her femininity.

There is no doubt that all children living in single-parent families miss the absent parent. This is independent of the behaviour of the departed parent prior to the break-up of a marriage. This is so even if family violence is the reason for the break-up of the family. However, it is important to find out how, exactly, the children view the situation. This does not undermine or overturn anything that has been said already. Finding out what the children think provides the information that is necessary to address the problems in

ways relevant to the children. Spiritual education is essential. Social contact, likewise, forms an essential part of development. However, just as one would take account of a child's preferences if both parents were around, one must do the same in the absence of one of them.

Seeking help

So we come to the problem. How does one 'replace' the father or mother in the family? What can one do to 'complete' that family unit so that the role models and environment are recreated? First let it be said that it is impossible to recreate the family that has been destroyed. Even if the parent who is left is able to remarry, it will not be the same family that existed before. Such issues are outside the scope of this article, as we are primarily concerned with learning how we can succour those who are struggling as single parents.

What is the family?

Psalm 68:4-6 says: "Sing unto God, sing praises to His name: extol Him That rideth upon the heavens by His name JAH, and rejoice before Him. A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in His holy habitation. God setteth the solitary in families: He bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land". This psalm is telling us that Yahweh is "father of the fatherless". That is, in some way our God becomes 'father'. Not that He is not the Father of all His children; it is that in a particular way, in addition to what we all experience, He provides for the specific needs of the 'fatherless'. This provision is, in fact, the ecclesia of the living God, which becomes the family.

God has already provided the necessary support framework in the ecclesia. It may be, though, that the ecclesia does not fulfil its role. This is not to suggest that the ecclesial framework is simply a substitute for, and replacement of, the father or mother. It clearly cannot be that, because it cannot match all the aspects of the father/mother/son/daughter relationships. However, we all should look first to our brethren and sisters, not to secular, worldly, organisations, to make up that which is lacking in our situation.

At one level we are all 'fatherless and widows'. All of us are 'adopted' sons of God. Once we appreciate this, by associating ourselves with the plight of those in need, we are able to understand better our Father's relationship to us and consequently our dependence on Him.

The role of the ‘widow’

The sister who has been left to bring up children single-handedly may not be a true widow, but the advice of Scripture to widows is still relevant. Scripture teaching about widows highlights that sisters in such a position have a positive contribution to make in both the home and ecclesial life:

“... the elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity. Honour widows that are widows indeed. But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God. Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day. But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth. And these things give in charge, that they may be blameless” (1 Tim. 5:2-7).

Thus it can be seen that Scripture expects that the ‘widow’ is able to teach the children at home. Thus, however inadequate a sister might feel, the Father says that it is possible. Therefore it must be the case that a sister has the capability, in principle, of performing the task, even though she may doubt her capability and worry about the effects of the absence of her husband.

The self-esteem of the single parent is badly damaged by the trauma of a marriage break-up. Consequently there will be serious misgivings about doing anything. This is irrespective of actual capabilities. It is important that other brethren and sisters encourage those in this position to take an active role in ecclesial life. Perhaps we might work to develop this by actively seeking advice from such brethren and sisters. The fact that their marriage has failed is no indication that they have nothing to teach us. It might be that from their own personal experience they have a great deal to teach.

Meeting some needs of the parent

As already stated, the ‘extended family’ the ecclesia provides is the route through which the required support should come. In an ideal world the help should just ‘come’ rather than it having to be sought. However, this side of the Kingdom we will not live in an ‘ideal world’. There are a

number of reasons why brethren and sisters may not respond to need:

- the need may not be noticed by others; in fact it may be concealed by the one in need
- it may not be convenient to meet the need for various reasons
- a brother or sister may not know how to offer assistance, fearing rejection by the one in need.

Single parents require support in their role. Support that is normally provided by a partner is totally absent in the single-parent family. Indeed, if the children have any contact with the absent parent, when the marriage has failed, the principles striven after by the one who has custody of the children may actually be undermined by the absent partner. It is not at all unknown for parents, either unwittingly or consciously, to use children as ‘pawns’, or for one parent to try to use the children in this way even if the other parent is behaving perfectly properly.

‘Uncles’ and ‘aunts’—husband and wife teams—in the ecclesia could provide support for a single mother both in their approach to the children and in advice and support for the mother. This requires that the ‘uncle’ fully appreciates and agrees with the approach that the mother takes, and that the children appreciate that the ‘uncle’ is someone to respect. Respect comes from regular long-term contact with the family of the ‘uncle’. It should not be thought that help can be given simply when it is convenient to the giver. Those who take on this role must develop an interest in all aspects of the lives of those they are trying to help. The respect and benefits will come in the long term rather than the short term.

If a brother takes on the great responsibility of being an ‘uncle’, in this close sense, to the children of a single-parent family, it is essential that his wife is also very involved in the support. His marriage must not be threatened by the work he is doing. This danger is minimised if the husband and wife work together to help. The ‘aunt’ has her role to play also. She is able to reinforce and support the position of the single parent, especially if the single parent is the mother. She is also able to help a single father deal with the ‘feminine’ aspects of bringing up daughters.

(To be continued)