

The single parent with children (1)

Peter and Norma Forbes

Life presents many perplexing problems for the disciple of Christ. The situation of the lone parent with children is one which proves very testing for the person in that situation, and for their ecclesia. This series of four articles looks at the perspectives of those involved, the Scriptural advice available to help, and the ways in which sympathetic godly support can be provided by those whose duty it is to help.

THIS SUBJECT is a major problem in society, and one which is increasing within the Brotherhood today. It is difficult for many of us to appreciate the magnitude of the problems that those in this situation face. There are many reasons why this is so. Whatever our home situation, we all try to put on a 'brave face' at the

meeting. "How are you?" usually elicits the response, "Fine". Some of those in the lonely position of being on their own tend to think others do not share their problems.

To be fair, many of us neither share nor understand the problems. Such brethren and sisters do not want to be a burden to others. Some have experienced the insensitivity of others, who do not understand, trying to 'help', and have retreated into their shells to avoid the pain such insensitive 'help' causes. Others, though being aware of those in similar circumstances, can easily feel isolated. They may feel that they are struggling through life on their own. We must be aware of their needs in order that we can attempt to share their fears and anxieties.

The problem

A family consists of father, mother and children. When one parent is no longer present, through either death or separation, the family is incomplete. Scripture instructs both father and mother as to how they should work in the home, but the single mother or father has problems and pressures that are unique to their situation.

The feelings of the single parent

Before examining Scripturally how we should respond to those in the terrible position of being on their own, however arrived at, we must develop an understanding of how such a brother or sister might feel. Imagine that your marriage is over. Consider how, if you have children, you would cope. Spend some time just reflecting on the day-to-day things that require both husband and wife. Reflect on the way you work together to deal with matters in the home and family. Think about the fellowship of sharing your joys and trials of the day. Now think about living a life of emptiness, without the companionship and mutual support of your partner.

The picture is complicated and made even more tragic because the brother or sister in this position does not want to be a burden to others. Anxieties will not be shared. Urgent practical problems will not be addressed. The life of the single parent can be overwhelming. The constant stress and tiredness means that dealing with the children on a day-to-day basis is demanding. Discipline is difficult to administer and maintain. At the same time, the single parent feels that the children are all that is left. There is a great desire that the children will grow up to accept the gospel. However, the single parent does not feel up to the task. How would you attempt to live the Christ/bride pattern without your marriage partner?

The single parent whose marriage has failed has passed through what has probably been years of unhappiness and stress in a failing marriage. Probably the ecclesia was unaware of the problem, or ignored it if it was noticed. The marriage fails; divorce and possibly recrimination follow. If, on the other hand, a partner has fallen asleep, other stresses arise. The shock of a sudden death or the release from a long time caring for a loved one takes its toll. The people left trying to rebuild their lives will feel totally drained. Decision-making, even at the simplest level, will be extremely difficult. Decisions made will at times seem totally irrational. From the comfort of a happy marriage

we must be careful not to judge decisions made by those in this terrible position. This stressed lifestyle will lead, almost inevitably, to loss of appetite, a loss of sleep, and a deterioration of both spiritual and physical wellbeing.

The brother or sister left trying to rebuild a life for themselves and the children probably suffers many sleepless nights, or nights interrupted by nightmares on a regular basis. In this position the brother or sister has learnt to deaden their senses and emotion in order to cope with their situation. However, from time to time they will lose control. We might notice the sister or, yes, the brother, in tears at the memorial meeting. Attendance at the meeting may become erratic.

Rising to the challenge

We doubtless have great difficulty deciding how to respond in such situations. The easiest response is to ignore the problem. However, this is probably the second least helpful thing to do. The most unhelpful thing to do is to assume that the brother or sister will 'pull themselves together' in time if we stress the importance of regular attendance at the meeting. Never judge the individual. You doubtless do not know what problems they are going through. They know that they should be at the meeting. They do not need you to tell them that. Your job is to encourage them when they are there and to pray for them "without ceasing".

When they are there, encourage them with, "I am so pleased to see you", and spend time with them. When they are absent, call them during the week; "I was sorry to miss you on Sunday/Wednesday, come round for coffee" is far more helpful than condemnation based on ignorance. Tell them that they are in your prayers. One sister in this situation once added, "Please sit with us at the meeting, especially the memorial service". We should be sensitive to the loneliness of others. Just because we are 'complete' with our families we should not assume that everyone else is happy and comfortable in the meeting.

Individuals in this position often doubt whether they are actually in fellowship with God. They need tremendous support and encouragement. If we have decided that they are in fellowship with God we have a great responsibility to ensure that they do not become 'lost sheep'. We must not dissociate ourselves from such individuals. It is most hurtful to be ostracised. Whilst we might feel uncomfortable, not knowing what to say, this is not a reason to ignore our brother or sister.

The meeting—lonely company

We all know that we should not “[forsake] the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb. 10:25). Sadly, at times we behave as if we think that spiritual health is measured by attendance at the breaking of bread. With respect to the single parent it is easy to assume that attendance at the meeting is a good thing. Indeed it is. However, there are issues that those of us in ‘complete’ families should be aware of.

There are factors at work that are difficult to understand if we are not in the same position as the single parent. For the ‘complete’ family the meeting is the place to which we go as a family. Our family meets with other families. Arrangements are made for families to do things together. We spend time with a brother and sister while our children spend time with their children.

Being at the meeting, for the single parent, either with or without the children, can be incredibly lonely. For the single parent, the stress caused by the loneliness may, from time to time, overcome the desire to meet to remember our Lord. This does not mean that the single parent does not see the need to meet. Rather, from time to time, they may feel unable to cope with the stress that they know will follow attending the meeting. As a self-preservation measure they may stay at home. Criticism, verbal or demonstrated by our actions, against such brethren and sisters is counterproductive. Being aware of their struggles will help us to address their feelings more accurately. We will return to this matter later.

Spare a thought for the children

The child will wonder what has gone wrong. They may assume that they are, in some way, to blame for the marriage breakdown. They may lose confidence in adults. They may have a very poor self-image. Their education will almost certainly suffer. Bed-wetting and other problems might well develop, even in older children. Boys, especially in the 9–14 age bracket, are particularly vulnerable. What children need is companionship. They must feel wanted.

However, because of the problems already mentioned about the gnawing tiredness of the single parent, the child will be living in an environment which is not conducive to healthy growth, either mentally or physically. Responses to requests may be met with anger. Children may well retire into their own shell, while the single parent reproaches him- or herself for the short temper, further minimising their own self-esteem.

Parent and child may feel a terrible emptiness and loneliness. This could be heightened, not diminished, at ecclesial meetings. The single parent and children will see families happily together at the meeting. Knowing what happens in the homes of others, they will realise what they are missing. When you go home to Sunday lunch with your family, they will, most often, go home alone.

When a parent is lost through death, the child receives immediate and positive support in a way that the child from a broken marriage does not. Loss of a parent through divorce is rarely, if at all, addressed.

What is missing?

The husband and wife team is ordained by the Father: “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Gen. 2:18). Or, to take the words of Jesus: “For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh” (Mt. 19:5, quoting Gen. 2:24). The single-parent family cannot reflect this pattern. (The implications of this are discussed later.)

Scriptural teaching on relationships

Scripture has much to say on the way that we should relate to each other. A large amount of this teaching relates to how individuals in families should behave:

For wives

“Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives” (1 Pet. 3:1);

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord” (Col. 3:18);

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” (Eph. 5:22).

For husbands

“So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself” (Eph. 5:28);

“And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (6:4);

“Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged” (Col. 3:21).

For children

“For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death” (Mt. 15:4);

“Thou knowest the commandments . . . Honour thy father and mother” (Mk. 10:19); “Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) . . .” (Eph. 6:2).

Thus it can be seen that, if the pattern of Christ and the ecclesia cannot be seen in the home, the children have no continuous God-given example on which to mould their lives.

Practical implications

In the single-parent ‘family’ the Christ/ecclesia pattern cannot be fully manifest. Thus a God-ordained teaching tool for the spiritual development of the mind of Christ in each of the members cannot be utilised. This is true however spiritually-minded the family is. Elements of the family are missing; therefore those relationships that depend on absent family members simply cannot be developed. It is important to see this point before considering the ‘practical’ aspects of life that are missing. Living the gospel as part of the bride of Christ is very practical and provides a day-to-day role model that the children will discern simply by being in that environment. They will learn by example.

Role models

Life is such that the children will see their parents as role models. This is a God-ordained environment.

It might be thought that sons will look to their father and daughters to their mother for their example. However, this is too simplistic an approach. In fact sons and daughters will look to both father and mother and draw patterns that they will imitate in their own lives. The absence of the father will leave a void for both son and daughter, though the needs of the son and daughter will be different.

The father provides a male model that sons can look up to and emulate. The way in which the husband cares for the wife, and his disciplining of the children, provide the son with a pattern of how he should respond to women in general, and his own wife at a later date. The mother’s response to the father will provide the son with an example of how women should respond to

men, thus helping him to evaluate the qualities he should look for in a wife.

The father provides a male model which should demonstrate the characteristics in his life that the daughter will see as desirable in a future husband and in men in general. She will also see how the mother responds to the father as a model of how she should respond to her husband in due course.

Of course, these ideals are not always manifest in marriages. However, if one partner is missing there is no possibility that the example can be seen. Indeed, the son or daughter only sees a broken pattern. Consequently the home life will not present an environment for learning by example from mum and dad.

Aberrations

Some girls and boys act in very irresponsible ways towards members of the opposite sex. The absence of the God-given pattern magnifies this problem. When either the father or mother is not present in the family these problems are more likely to be manifest because the God-given environment for growth is missing.

Examples of such aberrant behaviour could include the boy having little respect for females. He may seek for company exclusively or almost exclusively in male ‘gangs’. He may even develop a ‘family life’ in a gang.

The female may come to distrust all male figures. She may, even though she distrusts males, form relationships with men who abuse her trust in them. She may even form relationships with males significantly older than herself, seeking a ‘father figure’ in her life.

Of course, we should not assume that these problems relate only to those families where one of the parents is absent. It is certain that from time to time all our children are liable to suffer from the problems discussed when considering role models. Being aware of the possible problems in our own families should help us to see the needs of others. But, above all, we should not be judgemental in such cases. Doubtless the single parent is struggling with the problem and requires help, not criticism. The child almost certainly is completely unaware that his or her behaviour is destructive to their physical and spiritual wellbeing.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

“To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction . . .” (Jas. 1:27): “. . . the word [visit] expresses concern and readiness to help. It actually supplies the N.T. word for ‘overseer, bishop’”.

See p. 88, *7 Short Epistles*, Harry Whittaker