

## ***Foundations for a God Honouring Covenant Family***

### **Introduction**

A noted pastor in history made the following observations about the breakdown of the family: “Nowadays no one has more to do with marriage than with all other matters. Because of them we can hardly read, preach or study.

I have observed many married couples coming together in such a great passion that they were ready to devour each other for love, but after half a year, one ran away from the other.

I have known people who have become hostile to each other after they had five or six children and were bound to each other not merely by marriage but also by the fruits of their union. Yet they left each other.”

The quoted pastor is Martin Luther, the famed German reformer of the 16th century Reformation. His comments stand as a signpost to us today in the 21st century postmodern era although it was said more than five centuries ago.

In my pastoral ministry of almost 3 decades, I have encountered struggling families languishing in familial feuds with their children and spouses. Divorces and separation of spouses are on the rise and recalcitrant children and spousal violence in broken homes too. Many families are hurting today. We need a fresh appreciation of the biblical blueprint for a well-ordered family and principles and courage to practice it today, if possible.

### **The Glory of God**

The purpose of a family is the glory of God because God had established the institution of the family for Himself. In the words of William Perkins, “Marriage was made . . . by God Himself, to be the fountain . . . of all other sorts and kinds of life in the commonwealth and in the church.” Why is it important to view the purpose of the family as the glory of God? It is because, in the long run, it determines what goes on in a family. It sets the priorities in a spiritual rather than material direction. It determines what a family does with its time and how it spends its money. The family is also the foundational unit of a society. Why? Simply because the family is the school wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned. All will be well with the country where families are properly regulated and vice versa. The very nature and moral fibre of our society today depend on what children have picked up or failed to pick up in the family. “Well-ordered families,” said Cotton Mather, “naturally produce a good order in other societies. When families are under an ill-disciplined system, all other societies [will be] ill-disciplined.”

## **The Headship of the Husband / Father**

The biblical teaching on the family is a hierarchy of God-given authority. Hierarchy in the family means, first of all, that the husband and father is the accountable head for what happens, and the one who is finally responsible for seeing that essential matters are happening in a family. Calvin had written, "Let the husband so rule as to be the head . . . of his wife and let the woman . . . yield modestly to his demands." Luther had stated that "a wife is indeed to live according to the direction of her husband; what he bids and commands is to be done." And Katherine von Bora lived up to that expectation. If we reverse the order, we court trouble in the home.

Modeled on Christ's Headship of the Church, the husband's headship is not a ticket to privilege or to tyranny but a charge to responsibility based on love for his wife and submission to God (Colossians 3:22-25). Every husband is to be responsible to guide and lead the family in the right direction. But it must be said here also that while the husband is the head of the home, the wife is the heart of the house. She is the God-ordained partnership in the management of a Christian home.

## **The Total Depravity of Man (including children)**

Reformed theology informs us that "children should not be left to themselves, to a loose end, to do as they please, because they are not fit to govern themselves yet." The cost of such discipline is the same for parents in any age; an enormous outlay of alertness, perseverance, time, and physical and emotional energy.

The theological foundation on child training should begin with the acknowledgement of original sin or innate depravity. As Calvinists, we believe that children, if left to themselves, are "inclined to follow their own evil will."

Either children are born good and can be allowed to follow their instinctive bent, or they are born sinful and in need of redirection. Our culture and human intuition generally accept the former principle but the Bible teaches us the latter. Romans 3:10 says, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one," and Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" And that includes the children. This biblical doctrine provides the practical principle of the guidance and governing of our children today (as opposed to semi-Pelagian psychology that props up the self-esteem of every child and laud them as intrinsically good).

## **An Exemplary Parentage**

The godly man Job, has an excellent family practice recorded in Job 1:5.

And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.

Do we remember to pray for and with our children every morning? Monica prayed fervently for her son and he turned out to be the great theologian, Augustine, who stood against Pelagianism in the 4th century. Susanna Wesley, another prayerful and godly lady, had two sons, Charles and John Wesley, who revived England together with George Whitefield in the 18th century. Within a family, it is important to know that a bad example can wipe out good instruction. Be sure to set a good example before your children. Other methods of instruction will not do much good if you don't teach them by a godly example. Your children will not mind the good rules you give them if you don't act contrary to those rules yourselves. If your counsels are good, and your examples are contrary, your children will be more likely to be hurt by the latter, than benefit by the former.

Someone said,

If parents would have their children blessed at church and at school, let them beware they give their children no corrupt examples at home by any carelessness, profaneness, or ungodliness. Otherwise, parents will do them more harm at home than both pastors and schoolmasters can do them good.

In practice, parents have to earn the right to inculcate values and biblical principles in their children. Remember this: "The best gift you can give another is a worthy example." You can easily nullify what you have taught by doing the exact opposite. Imagine a father says to the son, "Do not watch too much TV, it is no good for you. Now go to bed." The next thing is that the child wakes up in the middle of the night and discover that his dad is still glued to the goggle box. So much for precept when it is not matched by practice.

### **Striking a Balance in Godly Discipline**

Effective child training has two sides to it, one negative, one positive. Some need to depress impulses towards selfishness and dishonesty and unsociable manners, while at the same time build a child's confidence and faith in God, and loveable qualities. The negative task is to restrain, reprove, correct, it must be balanced by the parents' resolve to nourish in themselves a very tender love and affection to their children and manifest it. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

Excessive chastisement and severity in punishment do not always work. Remember the sun that melts the wax also hardens the clay. It must be tempered with love and gentleness; and there is a right mode of correction for every situation. Use a variety of methods and know well the temperament and disposition of your child. Some respond well to a soft approach while others to a more vigorous training.

We should steer a middle course between harshness and leniency. Children are not to be treated as brutes and neither with excessive fondness and doting as to harden their hearts towards evil and sin. Sadly we are often guilty of both and lose our effectiveness

in the proper discipline of children. Also, do not spare the rod and spoil the child. Consider these Biblical Directions for Christian Parenting:

1. Parents, are to be accountable to God and to each other in the upbringing of the children under their care.
2. Although each child is different they all need Christ as Saviour first each require different training methods. Share the gospel with them.
3. Don't let your child be totally immersed in the things of the world.
4. Discipline/Punishment of the child is necessary for their spiritual health. Tell them what God thinks about their action good or bad.
5. Reward good behaviour and penalise bad ones. Short-term rewards are more effective than long term ones.
6. A child's actions usually reflect what they have been taught or watch on TV or from their peers.
7. Parents need to be able to say; "I am sorry" "I was wrong". to them when it is so
8. When children say, "I'm sorry" or "forgive me" reply "you are forgiven" not "It's OK".
9. Be consistent with love, rules, discipline and punishment.
10. Love them enough to teach and also discipline them with care and concern.
11. Teach your children to wait and not interrupt you while you are speaking.
12. Speak the truth always. Don't make up lies to soften issues.
13. Too much TV or computer or HP games or Internet is not helpful for the child's spiritual, moral and social development.
14. Be forgiving and kind to them and learn to grow together.
15. Be gracious to spouses and children and express how that you care for them always.
16. Play with them and read the bible often for good grounding and family cohesion.
17. Hold them once a while and demonstrate the spirit of genuine care and concern.
18. Boys need their dad's time when they can share and learn from him as head of the house.
19. Don't overpressure the children for high performance; in school work and sports.
20. The first few years are critical for family bonding. Do not miss it.
21. Do not raise your voice in anger when teaching a child. Shouting is a layman's way of being emphatic.
22. Give your child quality time to learn and play and grow together with you.
23. Stop, look and listen intently to your child when they talk to you.

24. Yes is yes and no is no unless there is good reason to change (rarely).
25. Fathers, do not let your sons or daughters speak disrespectfully to their mother!
26. Your spouse comes first then the children. (Don't put them in the center of the marriage).
27. Have fun. Be creative with your kids, and enjoy precious time together.
28. Teach them Christian values and principles from time to time.
29. Forgive, love and grant mercy (without compromise) the way God does it, generously.
30. Allow your children to practice flying so that when they leave the nest they soar.
31. Children often view God the way they view their dad.
32. Children will view the church the way their mom or dad view it.
33. Show your children how God views them and hates sin, and the need to repent of it.
34. The best gift a dad can give his children is to love God and their mother.

### **The Picture of the Family as a Church**

A good image for the family is the church. Richard Baxter wrote that "a Christian family . . . is a church . . . , a society of Christians combined for the better worshipping and serving God." William Gouge said that the family is "a little church," while William Perkins wrote, "These families wherein the service of God is performed are, as it were, little churches, yea, even a kind of Paradise upon earth."

We need to know that the church can never be a substitute for the religious life of a family. In fact, the health of the church depends on what happens in the family. Richard Greenham claimed that "if ever we would have the church of God to continue among us, we must bring it into our households, and nourish it in our families." William Cartwright insisted that catechising should be carried on "both at home by the master of the house, and in the church by the minister." To the question, "Why at home?" He replied, "Because houses are the nurseries of the church."

One day, I asked a theological student in my class, "Who is responsible for the training of the child? The family, church or state?" He said, "the church." Others have relegated it to teachers in the public schools. The model answer from the Bible is given in Deuteronomy 6:6-7,

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

The Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 1:5, “When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also”.

In 2 Timothy 3:14-15, “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”.

Both the church and the school have their complementary roles to play in the instruction of the child but this does not diminish the primary responsibility of the parents from nurturing and teaching their children.

When I was speaking at a Youth camp of a certain church, a mother came up to me and requested me to counsel her teenage son. I spent 30 minutes talking to a 16-year-old lad who is estranged from his mother. There is no replacement for an abiding and intimate relationship with our children. Some have tried the 3M’s—money, maid and machines (computers, cars, headphones, etc). But I have an announcement to make: “There is no substitute for mother” (and father).

We must not think that we have done our part to provide for their material needs without catering to their spiritual and social needs. An optimistic lifestyle does not always churn out good kids. Eli was a high priest but his sons were an abomination to God and a disgrace to him (1 Samuel 2:12-17), being involved in all kinds of immorality and sins. Eli was not absolved of his responsibility for their untoward behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

The family provides a good test case for us to apply our belief in covenant theology. The word Covenant requires an abiding relationship based on God’s laws and a set of privileges and obligations to abide by, first to God and then to other persons. The purpose of a family is to glorify God. The family is ideally a place of sanctified relationships and the worship of God and the enrichment of one another. A well-ordered family is a hierarchical one in which the husband/father is the accountable head, the wife/mother his subordinate with her own spheres of responsibility, and children subject to the discipline and nurture of both parents (Ephesians 5:24-26; Colossians 3:24).

Proper child development is not about building self-esteem as some secular psychologists would have told us to do. Like us, children are fallen creatures whose sinful bent is to be redirected toward God and moral goodness through Jesus Christ our Lord. The foundation of good childbearing is the influence of example of parents and other “significant others” as well as precepts of the Scriptures, and a balance between restraint and positive support.

Above all, the parents are to teach their children the knowledge of the Christian religion so that God willing, our children may arrive at eternal happiness through the saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A historic document concerning the family was the 1677 resolution of the members in Dorchester, Massachusetts, to undertake a reformation of their lives. Part of the covenant that they signed was the resolve:

“To reform our families, engaging themselves to a conscientious care to set up and maintain the worship of God in them and to walk in our houses with perfect hearts in a faithful discharge of all domestic duties: educating, instructing, and charging our children and our households to keep the ways of the Lord.”

We need a spiritual reformation today too. It is not a resuscitation of an ailing economy, it is a reformation of domestic life and it starts with our individual families when we humble ourselves and cry to God for repentance and divine assistance to bring up our children in the fear and admonition of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

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(NB.. For deeper studies read Richard Baxter, *The Godly Home*, 2010, and Andrew Oliver, *God's Prescription for a Healthy Marriage and Family*, 2005)

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