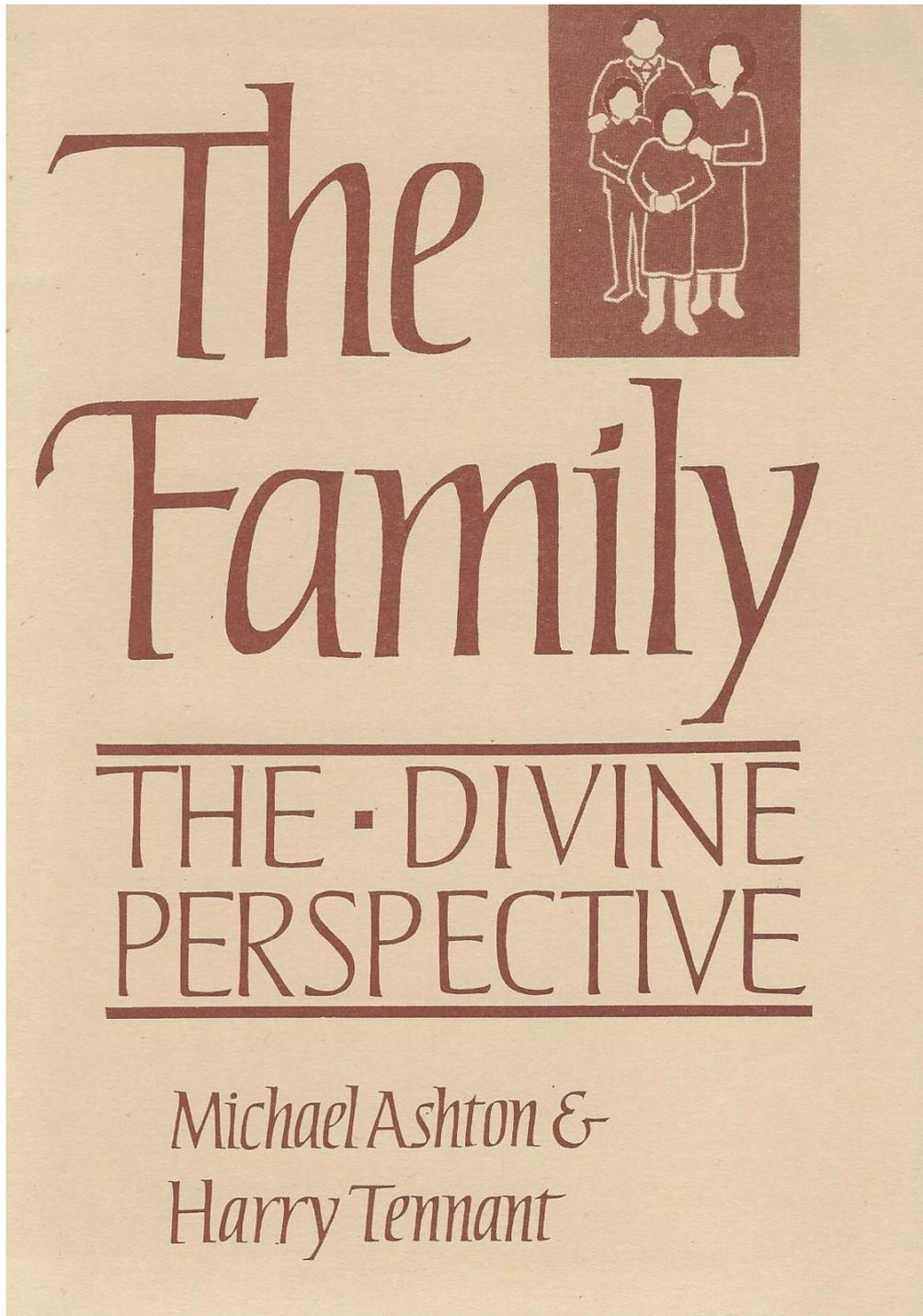


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the message for yourself



# THE FAMILY

## THE DIVINE PERSPECTIVE

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# 1

## THE FAMILY BY DIVINE APPOINTMENT

The major reason why it is necessary that we remind ourselves of the Godly appointment of families is that the whole ideal is under direct and indirect attack from the pressures of our modern world. Even our own use of words describing the family has become devalued in measure as society around us plays down its importance. The word *familiar* for example, originally meant *pertaining to the family or intimacy*. In past generations it was used to describe the family servants members of the wider household related by association and not necessarily by ties of blood. It is used in this sense in Psalm 41:9:

"Yea, mine own familiar friend in whom I trusted which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me."

Understanding as we do the fulfilment of this Messianic prophecy, we can appreciate the significance of the phrase "which did eat of my bread", for it was when the last supper was ended that Judas left the disciples to betray his Lord. The bonds created by a shared meal, and the trust this engenders are part of the meaning of the family.

Now, if we use the word familiar, we do so in a different sense. It means either to be *acquainted with*, when we could say we are familiar with a certain book or author; alternatively. It means to be *free with*. We could say someone is a bit familiar. It is necessary for us to understand that the Scriptural use is much stronger than its 20<sup>th</sup> century counterpart. In the New Testament, the original Greek word for family (*πατριᾶ*) occurs only three times, and is translated by our English word family only once. It occurs in the following passages:

"Joseph ... was of the house and *lineage* of David" (Luke 2:4);

"In thy seed shall all the *kindreds* of the earth be blessed" (Acts 3:25 quoting Genesis 22: 18);

"I bow my knees unto the Father ... of whom the whole *family* in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:15).

An examination of Old Testament use will reveal the same pattern. There the Hebrew word is translated by *family*, *kind*, and *kindred*. In all these examples, in addition to our more normal use to describe our immediate family, there is an awareness of a relationship to a much greater and more extensive family.

### **The Nuclear Family**

This is a phrase used regularly in text books describing society and community issues. It refers invariably to the small family unit, relatively divorced from the community in which it exists. In earlier generations, in common with stronger family ties there was a mutual interdependency within communities partially created by a fellowship of common need. Today's sociologist will refer to the relative independence of the individual family as a feature of our age. If the phrase has any value for us at all, it is in reminding us that a Godly family will have a nucleus, a centre which holds the rest in being. While in a sense the father is the nucleus (and the Greek word for family is based on that for father) we should never forget that "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11:3). That is why in Ephesians the Apostle Paul speaks of "*the whole family of God*".

The unit we call a family is, or should be, but a reflection of the family of which we are privileged to form a part.

Therefore the Psalmist says: "He (God) setteth the *solitary* in families" (Psalm 68:6). The word is elsewhere translated darling, as in Psalm 22:20- "Deliver my soul from the sword; my *darling* from the power of the dog". Putting the two passages together exposes the wonderful truth that God has set or placed His darling, His solitary one, His only begotten Son, in the families which are truly part of "the whole family in heaven and earth". One of the basic messages of the Letter to Ephesus is that it is God's work to "gather together In one, all things in Christ ... in heaven and ... on earth (A.V.) ... in whom also we were made a heritage" (R.V.) (Ephesians 1: 10, 11).

The context of Psalm 68 concerns the events of the Exodus. God's people had been sundered and scattered throughout Egypt, and family ties had been disregarded by the Egyptian overseers. The congregation in the wilderness is the pattern family of God, gathered out from the world (Egypt), united by the blood of the slain lamb and freed from the shadow of death, and includes the *solitary*, the fatherless, widow and stranger. Furthermore within the rules governing the ordered life of this typical family there was special and gracious provision made for each of these classes.

But in order to fulfil God's wish for "a godly seed" (Malachi 2:15), it is not necessary for all to be natural parents. The example of Paul, who could speak of Timothy as his "own son in the faith", is the one we should follow, for it should be the prayer of all true disciples, as it was for the Apostle John: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4).

### **"Be fruitful and multiply"**

Almost uniquely within the variety of God's creation, the progeny of man is born totally dependent on its parents for the first years of its life. This teaches dependency and the need for training by example. When we consider what were the possibilities when the command was given "Be fruitful and multiply", it is necessary to bear in mind the need for care and protection during a child's formative years. Other than the family unit as we know it, the following means of providing this care were presumably possible:

1. Within a matriarchal structure: children conceived in casual relationships raised by mothers with no involvement from the father, who may not be known anyway.
2. A man could have several "wives" during his lifetime, and equally a woman could have several "husbands". The children of these various unions could be brought up by a succession of parent-couples. This is the situation created by divorce and remarriage.
3. Within a communal group: the men and the women basically living separately, but with regular, promiscuous relationships. The responsibility for the children would be the community's.

Each of these possibilities, and there are others, would have resulted in the populating of the earth. All have been tried by people of different nationalities and cultures, but not one of them follows the pattern instituted by God. The Scriptural principle applies: "That was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural" (1 Corinthians 15:46). "There is ... one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4:6). As there is one Father, who desires that we should be His children, this is the ideal which our own families should strive to reflect. Our ecclesias, the family, marriage, begetting and upbringing of children are all to teach us spiritual lessons, which in turn must be directed back into these everyday situations. It is for this reason that none of the alternative examples described above can achieve what God desires. They are all directed at earthly ambition and greed, and not to the development of characters whose desire is to "seek first the kingdom".

## **Psalms 126-128**

This group of short Psalms in the Songs of Degrees has as its main theme the family in the sight of God. Psalm 126, which is the joyful response to the end of captivity, concludes: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him" (vv, 5,6).

It is our appreciation of the spiritual lessons to be learnt from life that is important, or as the Apostle Paul said: "He that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting" (Galatians 6:8). We are reminded of God's word to the returned captives who were grieving because of the relative poverty of the rebuilt temple. It was more important that men's hearts should be right with God so that He could dwell with them, than that there should be a magnificent building harbouring false worshippers. God's purpose is sure:

"I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2:3-9).

Psalm 127 starts with the same idea: "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." In Hebrew there is an interesting family (!) of words based on the verb 'to build' (*banah*). The word for son is *ben*; for daughter, it is *bath*; and for house it is *beth*. So the house the Psalmist is talking about is the household, the family. As David said after Nathan had conveyed God's promises to him concerning his descendants: "Thou hast spoken also of thy servant's house for a great while to come." But notice in the Psalm that it is the Lord who builds, not that He has consented or authorised someone else to build for Him. There is an utter vanity in trying to build a house that is not God's. We can work all the hours God gives us to provide for our families, but if our building is not on His foundation, all we shall do is "eat the bread of sorrows". In contrast we are given the picture of the parents who have the wisdom to commit their family life to the Father, "for so he giveth his beloved sleep".

This does not mean, as generations of parents who have attempted to put these principles into action will testify, that miraculously there are no problems or difficulties to be faced in bringing up children in God's nurture and admonition. But it does affect the attitudes we adopt in family life. The story is told of a man visiting a house where there was a large family; twelve children stood in descending order of age to welcome the visitor. "Ah!", he said to his host, "these are they who make rich men poor!" "Nay", came the reply, "rather, these are they who make poor men rich!" This is what the Psalmist meant when he said:

"As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them" (127:4,5).

### **"Children are an heritage of the lord"**

If we really believe this statement, that children and families are a deposit from God, for which, like the servants in Christ's parable who were left certain responsibilities by their absent master, we shall have to account in the great day of reckoning, it will have a number of far-reaching effects:

1. Parents will trust God for their children's provision and safety, as did Amram and Jochebed for the infant Moses, that "goodly child".
2. They will regard their children as a sacred trust, recognising they are really God's children, and will bring them up to give them to His service, as Hannah gave Samuel.
3. They will train them in the fear of God, even though they may not be their own flesh and blood, as Naomi did with Ruth.

4. They will often consult God about them, talk with Him, through prayer about hopes and concerns, as Job did for his children.

5. And they will, if called so to do, render them to God uncomplainingly, as Abraham offered Isaac;

for did not God Himself provide His son for us, that through him we might grow in grace and in the knowledge of God "till we all come . . . unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ"? (Ephesians 4: 13).

Training of children undertaken with the above constantly in mind will affect the children too. They will:

- become their parents' joy,
- be a record of their parents', and their Father's, Godly wisdom,
- be a support for their parents' old age.
- be transmitters of the truth from one generation to another.

For these reasons, the Psalmist uses the figure of arrows in a quiver. Firstly, and during the formative years, it is the quiver that provides support and protection. But the time will come when the arrows must leave the quiver, just as parents prepare their children for the day they will leave home. Then if they are directed by "*the mighty man*" they will fly straight and true towards the target of His choosing. One of the consequences of this Godly direction is the ability to speak fearlessly concerning our faith. All the great examples of Godly men and women brought before us in Scripture are remarkable also for their preaching to others. To some degree all were able to "speak with the enemy in the gate" (Psalm 127:5). In this regard they were patterned on the promised seed, who "shall possess the gate of his enemies" (Genesis 22:17). How regularly do we consider that our families, our ecclesias, and our community are representatives for God, setting forth in the midst of a wicked world the precepts by which we have learnt of His Fatherhood? We are called to attempt to live now in this dispensation according to the principles we understand will operate when all things are made new.

### **Peace upon Israel**

If we are able so to do, the promise penned by the Psalmist will, by God's grace, be fulfilled in us. It contains in its last three words a beautiful epitome of the Gospel, hinting at the coming of the Prince of Peace and Israel's king: "The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children, and peace upon Israel" (128:5,6)

## "JOINT-HEIRS OF THE GRACE OF LIFE"

The best foundation for marriage is God, the Rock of Israel. The best principles for the conduct of married life are to be found in Christ, the Chief Cornerstone. At first sight, it might seem that such thoughts are too high-flown and are far removed from day to day living in the marriage bonds. This is not so.

Take for example, if you are a husband or a husband-to-be, the simple question: do you regard yourself as the redeemer in your relationship with your partner? Sister, if you are a wife, or a wife-to-be, do you see yourself in the marriage yoke as the bride of Christ? In other words, does each see the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ as the very essence of a 'sound marriage'?

If the husband works always for his wife's eternal salvation in the everyday things of marriage, and the wife fulfils her calling as part of the bride of Christ, then, together, they will truly be "joint-heirs of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7, R.V.). Words and deeds will be governed by the sole desire to work together for eternity, and to make the home a place where saving truth is the touchstone.

In the context of Christlike life and of marriage, Paul exhorts: "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us" (Ephesians 5: 1). We begin by submitting one to another (v. 21). It is not simply that the wife submits to the husband; both submit to one another. This is the spirit of service, the very core of how Christ has redeemed us. Marriage becomes infinitely sweeter when we learn this secret.

### **Submission**

It is not only submission one to another, it is submission "in the fear of God". All submission is to God, even within the marriage ties. The husband-redeemer's love and the wife-bride's willing response are strong bands by which to hold one to another by jointly holding fast to God.

When, therefore, wives are commanded to submit to their own husbands as unto the Lord, we are being taught that faithfulness in marriage is based upon faithfulness to God. Indeed, the unity of marriage should be a reflection of the oneness of God. To be truly of one flesh, we need first to be of one mind. Our unity is assured when that mind is the mind of Christ.

Scripture teaches us that man is the head of woman (1 Corinthians 11:3). This does not mean that man has the advantage and woman the disadvantage, or that man's priority gives him preferential status thereby making woman inferior. Instead we should learn that man has a particular obligation and responsibility whereby his over-arching protection and provision establish a stability and unity by which the woman may fulfil her equally important function of building within her husband's care that which he could never accomplish of himself.

### **The Meaning of Headship**

The headship of the husband derives from the headship of Christ and is not separable from it. It is of the same kind. The headship of Christ is "to the church" (Ephesians 1:22). Christ is head for the well-being and salvation of the ecclesia which is one with him. So it is in marriage. Man is head by divine appointment for the well-being of his wife and family. It is therefore not simply a status of which to boast, but a function to be performed whereby a wife is made glad and secure, and never oppressed or down-trodden.

A thoughtless or domineering, masterful husband is as far removed from the divine pattern as would be a ruthless and unsympathetic Christ. Such is unthinkable. Tenderheartedness is the key to this kind of leadership. Moreover, such leadership always engenders the very best qualities which a godly woman can produce.

### **Speaking to the heart**

There must be true communication within marriage. Marriages are under threat when there is little or no communication. In another connection, Peter was said to have "words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved" (Acts 11:14). This is how it should be within marriage. Each partner should use that manner of considerate speech which encourages and upholds the other.

We should not sharpen the edges of our words in order to injure or threaten each other. We should not seek always to be "right" or to "win" an argument. Not even the sinless Christ was forever asserting his authority or discouraging his disciples by proving their insufficiencies or errors. Words which do not improve our marriage should not be used. A war of words or constant sniping or words shot like arrows and designed to hurt and wound debase the user, and are destructive of the very foundations on which harmony in Christ may exist and thrive.

The best source of guidance - indeed the *only* source - in the exercise of proper speech is to be found in the Bible. Marriages are immediately in jeopardy when the Word of God is not central to the home. When the Word is read every day, preferably together as a family, our hearts are open to divine influence. By this means we are taught how best to communicate with one another. Anger, wrath, bitterness, clamour, arrogance, calculated hurtfulness and countless other evils of speech are removed by divine tuition and the good examples within the pages of God's Word.

### **Giving**

We live in a world where self-centredness is highly esteemed. What is best for me is taken to be my right; and the exercise of my right is regarded as normal and sensible. Sympathy (feeling and compassion with and for others) has been replaced by empathy (the capacity to understand fully the mind and position of others largely for the benefit of one's self). To proceed on these lines in the partnership of marriage is to be on course for disaster.

Giving is the principle endorsed by the Lord Jesus who said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Supremely this was exhibited when the Lord loved the ecclesia and "gave *himself* for it". It is what we put into marriage and not what we seek to take out of it that ensures its stability. Divorce is the ultimate of "taking". 'Both partners seek to extract that which is theirs. They succeed in securing material rights but they leave the essence of marriage and the true rights of the children in ruins.

True marriage is larger than either partner or than both of them put together. It is for this reason that when each of us seeks to give, then both of us receive more than we have contributed in total. This is the wonder of divine arithmetic made possible by the blessing of the Lord himself.

Some of us may think that these ideals are right for the newly weds and for those who are young, but are beyond those of us who would like to practise them yet feel it is too late. This is altogether untrue. Improvement is always possible whatever our state. A deep desire, faith and prayer coupled with repentance and confession where necessary will work wonders. If we truly lay everything before the Lord and promise to endeavour more warmly to apply His principles in daily living, we shall receive His blessing.

No one can accomplish everything at once. Take one or two steps at a time and persist in right-doing. Try not to look for changes in one's partner without first making them in one's own way of life. We can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth us.

### **How to be a better husband**

It is given of God that husbands are to provide strength, leadership, initiative and, to the best of our ability, the wherewithal to sustain the family. We are to provide the source of authority within the home by making sure that God's law runs everywhere and that we ourselves are examples of its application in life. In these things we show forth the unity of God in a united home. And we must be consistent and reliable in ourselves.

Together with love we must demonstrate respect and loyalty towards our wives and to the family. To have respect for the person and body of one's wife is to increase her sense of security and care. To be loyal in every way - in speech, in behaviour and in thought - will ensure our own chastity and the integrity of the family as a whole.

Continual acts of tenderness keep the heart of the marriage aglow. It does not require extravagant, unreal demonstrations of feeling or lavish gifts, but rather the true and warm expressions of our hearts which evoke understanding and thankfulness.

Peter tells us by the Spirit that we are to dwell with our wives "according to knowledge" (1 Peter 3:7). This knowledge is that of divine principles and of the nature of man and of woman as revealed by the Lord. "According to knowledge" is followed by "giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel". "Honour ... unto the weaker vessel." There is a wealth of meaning here for husbands to contemplate. Every husband should honour his wife. This is the antidote to selfish indulgence whether in things intimate or in the duties within the home. The woman's weakness is not spiritual. God has created her with a particular sense of need within marriage and it is man's responsibility to meet that need in every possible way. Such is the husband's privilege.

### **How to be a better wife**

The best guidance is to be found in the good examples in the pages of Scripture - Sarah, Ruth, Abigail, and Priscilla, for example, and the many women who are included in the well-being of their children by the Old Testament expression, "and his mother's name was". The effect of womanhood on the destiny of whole families can never be over-estimated. A good wife is dedicated to providing by the God-given qualities of grace and graciousness the home in which her husband's and her children's best spiritual interests are served. As the husband is exhorted to give honour to his wife, so the wife graces her husband and the home which he has provided.

Our ability to create a home is priceless. No other person within the family has the privilege of spending so much time in building the very framework in which all other members live together. We live in an age when home-building has been replaced for many women by self-fulfilment in careers and other activities away from home. There are profound dangers here for all of the family. It may be that economic factors or illness of one's partner make this necessary. It can be that we choose this other way of life for other reasons. We read that "even Christ pleased not himself" (Romans 15:3). All of us assume responsibilities when we marry: the husband to provide and the wife to "do him good and not evil all the days of her life" and to look well "to the ways of her household" (Proverbs 31:12, 27). These are our prime activities.

Wives have the threads of immortality in their hands and must seek to weave them into the minds of husband and children alike. Woman is the binder of family life. As she tends the injuries and harm

of her children, so she applies her soothing balm to the life of the whole home. It is a gift which above all others God has placed in her heart and hands.

It is good to ensure that the family has its meals together. The microwave oven and the television set can be divisive influences. A family which eats together talks together. Mealtimes are times of fellowship. Cares are shared, difficulties aired and the day's events rehearsed. Some homes have the daily readings immediately afterwards and all of the children {even the very youngest by repeating words after father or mother} are involved. We must also have our spiritual food together.

Because we are home builders we have to strike a balance between our wants for the home and our true needs. Our husband needs to be aware of what is required but not burdened by insatiable demands. In this regard it is good to teach our children the proper use of money and its subordinate place in the life of people of God.

### **Finally**

Joint-heirs have equal spiritual standing before the Lord God. Therefore, each of us has responsibility before God and our Saviour, the royal Bridegroom. If we dwell together in grace, love and trust; if we pray together to the God of heaven; then, in the age to come we will enjoy the marriage supper of the Lamb.

## 3

### THE FAMILY IN THE HOME

As we enter our homes and close the front door behind us we often act as a different person. We resent intrusions, the untimely telephone call or the unannounced visitor. In a strange way we may find it easier to live the Christlike life outside the home than in unguarded moments at our own fireside. This may be because we are made more aware by the direct opposition of ungodly men of what is required of us than we are when our defences are down. It was on this basis that Sarah was highly commended as an example to all sisters who would live Godly lives, for it was "in her heart" and when there was no-one else to hear that she referred to Abraham as her lord (1 Peter 3:5-7).

This example of consistency can condemn us all. We rationalise our irrational behaviour by describing our homes as an oasis from the world, which of course they should be. But in addition to preventing the pervasive influence of worldliness from entering our domain we should also recognise that the home and the family are the training ground for life; what we do and how we act in our homes should be no different from how we behave outside them. We shall undoubtedly make mistakes, but the secret is to learn from them in the family environment so that we can apply the results in every area of our lives. This is necessary for everyone, adults as well as children, and in our consideration of the needs of children we shall recognise our own as well.

#### Children Differ

The Lord told a very revealing parable about children, though it was primarily directed at the chief priests and elders. It was of a man with two sons, both given the same command to work in his vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32). Their response could hardly have been more different. One said immediately that he would go, but in the event did not. The other said he would not, but later he repented and went. Jesus used it first to teach of the need for obedience, a lesson we all find hard to learn, but it also describes in a quite remarkable way his insight into the true nature of man. There is no parent who has more than one child who has not learnt that children are different! and that they require different handling. This is also recognised in the proverb: "Train up a child *according* to his way (RVm) and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

This is not a verse which teaches that acceptance of the Truth by a child is the responsibility of the parents. That is contrary to the principle of individual responsibility so exhaustively laid down in Ezekiel chapter 18, and would also place election and calling in the control of parents and not with God. The parents' responsibility is to "train" the child, to teach him the precepts which, when applied as guiding principles in life, can bring the greatest joy. The lessons of life are the same for everyone, but the approach, emphasis and attitude to them will vary from child to child. When the lessons are learnt, the choice is with the individual son or daughter, whether or not to be a servant in God's household.

In his book *Principles and Proverbs*, Brother Islip Collyer recounts his observations of two families, each with a new first-born child. In one home the former order was undisturbed by the baby's arrival, while the second was affected, as though by an earthquake. Lest the parents in the first home should consider they had conquered the art of dealing with children, the arrival of their second child dispelled any unjustifiable pride they may have nurtured, their home was smitten in the same way as their friends' had been.

How difficult we find it to deal with the same matters in different ways according to the needs of the individual child. Although acknowledging that we are all individuals, with separate and distinct requirements, with different temptations and failings, we unreasonably expect our Heavenly Father to take account of our differences and make allowances for what seem to us special circumstances. Our experiences in the family environment should make us grateful that He does treat us in this way. Perhaps in return we can attempt to deal as sympathetically and compassionately with our own children. For they are God's heritage and we must bring them up in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord"

### **Deceptive Commandments**

A Police Department in the U.S.A. produced the following list of 'Ten Commandments for Parents' which by deliberately magnifying the inconsistencies in upbringing applied to some degree by all parents, shows the fallacy of sacrificing wholesome principles for the sake of an easy life. They continue the Edenic deception, elevating human desire above the love of God:

- "1. Begin at infancy to give the child everything he wants. In this way he will believe the world owes him a living.
  2. When he picks up bad language laugh at him. This will make him think he's cute.
  3. Never give him spiritual training. Wait until he's 18 and then let him decide for himself.
  4. Avoid the use of the word "wrong". It may develop a guilt complex.
  5. Pick up everything he leaves around - books, shoes, clothes. In this way he will learn to throw all responsibility on others.
  6. Let him read any printed matter he can get his hands on. Be careful that the crockery is sterilised, but let him feed his mind on garbage.
  7. Quarrel frequently in the presence of your children. In this way they will not be shocked when the home is broken up later.
  8. Give a child all the spending money he wants. Never let him earn his own. Why should he have things as tough as you had them?
  9. Satisfy his every craving for food, drink and comfort. See that every sensual desire is gratified. Denial may lead to harmful frustration.
  10. Take his part against neighbours, teachers, policemen. They are prejudiced against your child. When he gets into real trouble, apologise for yourself by saying, 'I never could do anything with him.'
- Prepare yourself for a life of grief. You will be likely to have it."

The difficulty arises because however much theoretical knowledge may be acquired before parenthood commences with the birth of a child, like learning to ride a bicycle we all have to fall off a few times before we attain any level of proficiency. Furthermore, new circumstances and altered conditions are always occurring which proceed to shift the ground on which we fondly thought we were standing firm. We have only to glance briefly at the varying (and often conflicting) advice offered by the world's counsellors to realise what a morass we would be in if there were no firm guidelines available to us. Instead, for the disciples of Christ those guidelines exist and advice abounds.

Unlike parents whose only objective is to prepare their children to cope with the pressures of our age, Godly parents attempt primarily to fit their families to live lives well-pleasing to Him. The principle is clear: "Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God and all these things (after which the Gentiles seek) shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). How difficult it is for us to try and recreate that spirit within our families, particularly when it is those human characteristics and traits we find so hard to control in our own lives that appear, sometimes in a magnified form, in our own children.

The first thing to attempt is to create an atmosphere within our homes of devotion to those things which form the major concern in our lives. We have each entered houses where it is immediately apparent that this concern is for something of man's making, harmless in itself perhaps, but not able to edify in the ways of God. The command was given through Moses to the children of Israel:

"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 ... thou shalt write them on the posts of thy house; and on thy gates" (Deuteronomy 6:6:9).

We must recognise that this command is not referring merely to reading with our families from God's Word, important though that is. If the words are to have any relevance at all, they refer to much more than that; to a way of life where the things of God are considered in all aspects as the "highest good. Of teaching children, for example, while they are playing in the garden of the God who made and sustains all life, the God of order and beauty, who is calling men and women to serve Him in the beauty of holiness in an age when the garden paradise of Eden will be restored.

### **The Role of the Mother**

It is impossible to overestimate the importance in this work of the place of the mother. While discipline and formal education form the natural role for a father; the ability to instruct through the everyday pattern of daily life is a mother's highest quality. Many are the examples through our Scripture, which can be multiplied from our own experiences, where we read "and his mother's name was ...", stressing the importance of this instruction. From the mother's example, good or evil, children learn the rudiments of life. The mother who redeems the time, sees in all parts of her activities the need to honour the name of God, has the happy disposition of one who leaves the affairs of an unknown future in the hands of her God and concentrates instead on today and how she can please Him, will communicate this devotion to her children.

The Psalmist describes a faithful wife of this kind "as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house" (128:3). We must not imagine this is a description of a climbing plant covering the outside of a house. The context is a Middle Eastern one. In the heat of those climes the family home is often a series of rooms around a central, open courtyard. For protection, the vine would grow within the courtyard. Passing from room to room, the connecting portion, holding all else together as a unit, is the shady, pleasant and secluded garden with its *fruitful* vine.

We can hardly fail to remember the teaching of the Lord that he is the true vine and his disciples the branches. What a lofty calling for any sister in Christ, to shadow the role of saviour for her family! If this great purpose is understood, the responsibilities of parenthood will assume their true, divine perspective.

### **The Father's Role**

Though we ascribe to the mother the daily attitude in the home, the father's role is no less important. If the home is to be a reflection of the ecclesia of God, and in earliest days worship was household-based, the example of all fathers is critical. Major family decisions, agreed by husband and wife, are his to make. In this way children realise that their parents are united and apply common rules. God does not whimsically change His commands for mankind; nor should we for our families. It is wise advice to examine the household rules we do make, discard the great majority which are petty and unnecessary, but determine rigidly to enforce those we consider to be important. Like their parents, children like to know what is expected of them and respond to ordered, loving and compassionate discipline.

It is the father's responsibility to lead his family to God's Word. If daily reading is an onerous chore for him, he will communicate that feeling to his children. If instead it is the act of the day which all the family eagerly anticipates, the benefits will be past counting. We should never think a child is too young to benefit. But remembering that each should be trained "according to his way", we will not burden a young child with long sessions which will become counter-productive. The objective is to instil a love for God, His will and purpose. The inspired records of men and women who sought to please Him contain all that will enthral a child's imagination. Once prompted, they will begin to enter into the lives of those whose exploits they read. Under the educative power of God's Word, their understanding will flourish.

There are homes where for various reasons the role of mother and father have to be carried out by just one parent. It would be as wrong to suggest this is an impossible situation as it would be to suggest it is ideal. Undoubtedly it is harder, though possibly not so hard as for the parent whose partner is antagonistic to the things of God and is obstructive to Scriptural instruction of the family. Those who have coped with these situations learn that they have to make a determined effort to be both mother and father so that the family education can be continued. It is in these cases that the greater family of the ecclesia can offer the greatest support, by providing a host of 'uncles' and 'aunties' interested in the children's affairs.

Finally, though by no means of last importance, there is the place of prayer. If we are attempting to bring up our children to serve God, we should talk to Him about them daily, and also lead them to Him, instructing them of the need "in everything to give thanks".

#### **Checklist for Parents**

It is possible for us to concentrate the things about which we have thought into a checklist for daily action. We should never let a day pass without:

- praying with, and for, our children;
- reading together, from the earliest age, from the Bible;
- teaching children at least one spiritual lesson arising from, or related to, their own daily experience;
- ensuring there is one quiet time when all the family is together.

## THE FAMILY IN THE ECCLESIA

How do we integrate our domestic family into the ecclesial family? There is a verse, used in another connection, which describes what we have to do: "Be ye with the king when he cometh in, and when he goeth out" (2 Chronicles 23:7). If we have Christ as the head of our home, we shall be happy to take our family to the ecclesia where both he and his Father are praised and honoured.

Home and ecclesia are not two separate places with quite distinct ways of life; they are part of the whole, our home is part of the Home. Once we discover the truth of this we more than double our happiness. The process is easier for some to accomplish than for others; nevertheless, all of us should seek this fulfilment. Some of us wish to preserve the independence of our home so that we never truly commit ourselves entirely to the ecclesia as the true family. It is as though we believe there is greater benefit in making our family at home a unit with a separate centre, our own. Tempting as this may be, it cannot be right.

### **The Example of Abraham**

There is no greater, and certainly no more lasting, happiness than to make every part of life render service to the whole. We are given clear Indication of God's purpose with Abraham, and this was more than to give him a hope for the future. Listen to God's words and let them fall quietly on the ear:

"For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgement; to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him" (Genesis 18:19, R.V.).

It is well to remember that this declaration falls squarely in the chapter in which, on the one hand, it is made known that Sarah will bear Isaac the following year and, on the other, that Sodom and Gomorrah are to be destroyed. Life is like that: we stand between the birth of the Son of God and the day of Judgement. We have the choice of being with Christ when he is king in Zion or with those who will perish in the second death. Abraham's choice is a guidepost for us.

Abraham made known to his children and the members of his household the godly principles upon which he would deal with them. As the head of the house, he declared that as God had commanded him, so he would command them for their good. That which had established a right relationship between Abraham and Sarah as man and wife would be the foundation upon which Abraham would build a relationship with his children and with his servants. There was not one law for the parents and another for the children, one law for the master and another for the servants; there was one law for all as there was one God over all. So it should be for us. The law of God ruled as much at Abraham's domestic table as at the altar where he offered sacrifice. Both parts were the table of the Lord.

### **"He will command his children . . . ."**

Abraham's law was to operate even after his death: "He will command his children and his servants after him." It was a family law, a law for the family of God. And so it should be with us. There is only one law, whether for home or for the ecclesia. This was made plain for all to see in the principles laid down for the selection of elders in apostolic times: "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 Timothy 3:4-5).

There is no greater inheritance to leave our children than that they should know how to comport themselves before God in the home and in the ecclesia. We too are heirs of Abraham and can be beneficiaries of his rule for the household and the Household.

### **Keeping the Way**

"And they shall keep the way of the lord." It was not simply a matter of being obedient to Abraham. They were to share with him the way of the lord. They were training to be fellow-pilgrims to the Kingdom of God. They shared a way of life which had promise for the life that now is and that which is to come. They learned about the "justice and judgement of God". The Judge of all the earth will do right. Abraham declared this truth at a time when he himself was learning the extent of the mercy of God in a time of severe judgement.

These were the principles by which Abraham governed his own family. This became startlingly clear at the time when Abraham was commanded to offer his cherished son, Isaac. Father and son were obedient "unto death"; for, in the lord's eyes, the offering did take place (Hebrews 11:17). The mission to Moriah would never have been completed had not both Abraham and Isaac "learned obedience" whilst living together at home. "They went both of them together", as they had always done. They sealed their wondrous bond at the altar in Moriah where Isaac, "as a sheep before her shearers is dumb", opened not his mouth; and Abraham withheld not his son, his only son. These words were as true then as when they were uttered later on: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth."

### **Learning to Worship**

When children are brought to the ecclesia they enter into an experience which is a divine method of instruction. The human family stands before God. Together they hear the Word of God read aloud, and the prayers which they experience at home now take on a larger dimension as members of the ecclesial family worship together. The children begin to understand the meaning of reverence in worship. Corporate singing inculcates one of the lessons of praise to the God of heaven.

At home the rule has been, "Honour thy father and thy mother". In the ecclesia the rule still operates but on the highest plane with God as Father. Children begin to see the consistency of things, the oneness by which life is governed. It is not that they are "miniature Christadelphians", aping the real thing. Rather are they, it is hoped, training to be children of God. As they become acquainted with the ecclesial family, with a wide range of "uncles" and "aunts", they take hold of the basic lessons of spiritual kinship and benefit at a tender age from the safety and distinctiveness of Christadelphian family life.

It does not take long for most children to develop the sense of quietness at the right times. The discipline is invaluable. But, if we do not practise discipline in our homes, we may well have difficulty when we bring our children to the meeting. Even the youngest children learn quickly.

Brother Roberts was once asked whether it was right for young children to be present at the Breaking of Bread. He replied to the effect that if children were acceptable to Christ in the precincts of the temple, they should be able to have a place in all our meetings. During the initial training periods we may well need to sit with young children at the back of the meeting room. But lessons are soon learned and families sprinkled here and there in the main body of the meeting provide a sense of comfort and unity which is most satisfying.

It is the practice in some ecclesias to place the children near to the baptismal bath when baptisms take place, in order that they may see and learn by example. Without doubt such experiences create impressions and provide ample opportunity for discussion at home.

The wisdom of Proverbs says: "In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence; and his children shall have a place of refuge" (14:26). "The Revised Version margin provides an additional slant to the verse by saying: "In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence; and the children of him that hath it shall have a place of refuge." Whichever of these translations is true the meaning of each of them holds a truth in itself. The Lord is a strong confidence and a place of refuge to those who fear Him. A parent who fears God becomes a place of refuge for his children. And by extension if we make known the fear of the Lord in our homes and by allowing our children to be taught at the ecclesia, whether by direct teaching in the Sunday School or by example in meetings of the ecclesia, they too will learn of the place of refuge and in later life seek it in faith and reverence.

Parenthood except in the sense of mere propagation of the species, is under grave threat in the world around us. When parents forsake the way of the Lord or are ignorant of it, the office of parenthood is greatly lessened. We have a priceless privilege: God has delegated part of His work to us. We can provide divine food for our children both in the home and by regularly taking them to the ecclesia. Children who become accustomed to attending the ecclesia, fraternal gatherings or Bible School create friendships in the right circle. This is one of the means whereby we can hope that our children will, in later life, choose partners in the Truth. Moreover, the network of friendships is spread wider than our own ecclesia and creates an awareness of the whole community.

### **Integrity**

"The just man walketh in his integrity" (Proverbs 20:7). The word "integrity" has the meaning of uprightness, completeness and perfection (the plural is the word *thummim*, perfections). The husband who ensures that the life of the home is to be one life, not a lot of separate and unrelated existences, will, with his wife, teach the children the secret of simplicity and single-mindedness in everything. The ecclesia will be a natural part of the same wholeness.

Children will not be surprised by imperfections in the ecclesial life. Similar imperfections are to be found at home and similar rules are at hand to remove them: the Word of God, prayer, forgiveness, sympathy. Nevertheless, our table talk at home should never be derogatory of the ecclesia. As we expect all of us to be loyal to the home, so parents should be loyal to the ecclesial family, upholding it and seeking its well-being.

Similarly, parents should dedicate themselves to the support of the ecclesia by making the maximum contribution of which they are capable. The Sunday School should have our commitment because it is the place for systematic instruction. The quality and consistency should be good. Even so, we must not expect the Sunday School to do the parents work: the two parts should work together. Parents should ensure that Sunday School homework is well done and that the lessons learned are talked about in the home. Bible games are a useful means of refreshing knowledge and making its usefulness and recall readily available.

### **A Perfect Example**

At home we get to know one another with considerable intimacy. Our foibles, weaknesses, talents, responses are known to all members of the family. In the ecclesia we learn to know God and His Son; not simply to know about them, but to know them. There are no imperfections and failings, no reservations to harbour, but simply Integrity in the highest sense of all. The love and trustworthiness of the Father and Son are shown in all their ways, and it is of these things that children become aware by the things they hear in the ecclesia. They learn almost instinctively the reality of God and

the certainty of His purpose. The ecclesia is one of the places where God is known and where Christ becomes real.

In Proverbs 31 there is a description of an industrious and cherished wife. Doubtless, there are many wives who have read the chapter and felt that the standard set there is altogether beyond them. There are many husbands though, who, unlike their wives, have felt how nearly their partner has emulated the priceless woman of Proverbs 31.

There may, however, be other ways in which to regard the model. If one substitutes wisdom for the woman, there are ways in which the chapter yields more gems for our delight. Perhaps, too, if we substitute the ecclesia for the woman we shall see some of the services which a good ecclesia renders to its individual members and to its families and, therefore, to the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the benefits seen frequently in the experiences of families is that when the time comes for serious consideration of baptism our children will seek the companionship and advice of other parents in addition to ourselves. This is as it should be. Our young folk find it easier to share confidences and emotions with other parents, not because we are inadequate but because other parents can bring a freshness to conversation and are able to treat our young people as persons in their own right. Many parents in the brotherhood have good reason to be thankful for willing and loving service rendered in this way.

#### **What will happen to the children?**

What will happen to the children when we ourselves are taken away to meet the Lord Jesus Christ? Scripture does not tell us. We are therefore to find confidence in the general principles and consistent behaviour of God in the record of Scripture. In times of judgement God has made provision in some manner for the whole family. Everyone came out of Egypt; the children, even the smallest of them, ate the passover lamb, crossed the Red Sea, benefited from the pillar of cloud and of fire, drank water provided by miracle and were sustained by the manna from heaven, and lived around the tabernacle.

If as a family we have been serving God, we can rest assured that God will make provision for our children at the time when we are unable to do it for ourselves. This present dispensation is committed to the angels. It is reasonable therefore to believe that they will have the care of our younger children as part of their special duties at the time of the Lord's return. How this will be done it is perhaps unprofitable to conjecture. We can hope and pray that those of our children who have not reached the age of crucial responsibility before God will be preserved in mortality to have the opportunity to come to a ripeness of faith and obedience in the age to come.

"What will happen to the children?" is the question we should seek to be answering now. Their destiny should be our prime concern for them. If, like the children of Israel in the plague of darkness, we have light in our dwellings by establishing the rule of Christ in our families: and if, like Israel who appeared with their children before God at the appointed times, we take our children with us to our times of worship and instruction, we can then leave all to God. He will never fail us.