

Family Life: Bible Principles

Churchman 84/3 1970

Alan M. Stibbs

When God created man he created male and female, two in one; and he made them capable of giving birth to a third—the child; and, indeed, to several children—the family. Consequently it is in the context of a family that man is first born and reared, and later realises natural human completion and fulfilment in marriage and parenthood. Also, when God did this, he created man like himself, in his own image. For the concept of parenthood or fatherhood originates in God himself. It is from him as Father that every other occurrence of fatherhood and family life, takes its name or pattern. (See Gen. 1:27-28; 2:24; Eph. 3:14-15.)

A God-given Pattern

This God-given pattern is fundamental to human well-being. The very warp and woof of human society are provided by sex and marriage, by childbirth, by the family, the home, and the upbringing of children; and then the same process repeated generation after generation. So, when our Lord forbade divorce or the putting asunder of husband and wife, His concern was not only for the permanence of the marriage bond, but also for the preservation of the family, the well being of the rising generation and the future health of the human race as a whole.

Similarly, the fifth commandment of the decalogue (Ex. 20:12), reinforced by apostolic emphasis and application in the New Testament, teaches that the proper preservation of family loyalty and unity is the guarantee of racial prosperity and permanence; ‘that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth’ (see Eph. 6:1-3). This principle has been strikingly illustrated in the history of both the Jewish and the Chinese races, each of which have long held this principle in high esteem.

According to the divine pattern the foundation of each new family is to be provided by a proper and permanently maintained marriage union. From the first, as the Scripture records, and as our Lord re-emphasised, this God-given pattern was monogamy—the unique, exclusive, life-long union of one man and one woman (see Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4-6). Entering into it therefore demands total permanent mutual self-committal in trust and fidelity. Within its intimacy things should be given to one another which are given to no-one else. It is out of this union that children come, and to this union that they are entrusted. Any birth outside such a true and pure union is a tragedy for the child.

An Indispensable Provision

The union of parents in this way makes a provision for its benefit which is indispensable to the rising generation. Every child is thus given—or ought to be given—at birth his own openly confessed and publicly recognisable father and mother. He is also thereby given a distinctive name, family and home of his own—a little sheltered world or ‘nest’ for his tender years and prolonged upbringing, in and from which he can slowly be prepared to face, and to take his place in, the big world of his fellow-men. In his parents he is provided-or ought to be-with two people who are directly and daily responsible to protect him and to provide for his needs, a couple united in their common concern for his healthy development and highest wellbeing.

The family and the home thus provide the child with a place and a very necessary sense of shelter and security. It is impossible for the state or community adequately to take over these responsibilities. Still less can it supersede parental love and care by some better provision for the child's needs. The best it can do is to imitate the God-given pattern and to provide for children 'homes' with foster parents.

It is, therefore, desirable for the children's good that the harmony and stability of the family should not be disrupted or disturbed. One reason why in Old Testament times adultery was punishable with the severest penalties was surely because it meant breaking into the sanctity of a home. It is perhaps, too, equally significant in this same connection that Jesus affirmed the indissolubility of marriage not only against action by the two parties involved, but also against action and authoritative enforcement by the state. 'What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder' (Mk. 10:9).

A Sphere of God's Blessing

The family is also a primary sphere of God's activity and blessing in his gracious and providential dealings with men and women. God is pleased to visit families with his salvation. He purposes and promises to bless men and their children. In relation to this truth there is need of fresh Christian appreciation of its fundamental importance; and need of corresponding relevant practical approach in the presentation of Christian teaching.

In the early churches of New Testament times homes and families were the centres of regular Christian worship and appropriate Christian instruction. A detailed catechesis was provided for domestic use. (See Acts 5:42; 20:20; Eph. 5:21-6:9.) Home life is thus clearly meant to be taken at once into the sphere of redemption. It is the first area of human living in which the mind and spirit of Christ should be applied. It is from families in which children have been brought up 'in the discipline and instruction of the Lord' that many of God's prepared workers have entered into their God-given tasks.

Parenthood

Parenthood is obviously a divinely-intended fulfilment of marriage union. When God created man male and female, he said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen. 1:27-28). Children are the gift of God. The coming of children into their lives is without question good for the parents. It enriches, disciplines and develops their marriage union. Care of offspring provides a uniting external interest to save them from self-centred and possibly self-indulgent interest in one another. It draws out their cooperating love and sacrifice. This experience provides them with daily, endless, and sometimes very demanding opportunities to express a little of the divine likeness-to follow God's example, to copy the tender sympathy and lavish generosity, the unfailing patience and faithfulness, the appropriate instruction and discipline, of their Father in heaven.

In this connection for a married couple, otherwise childless, to adopt children by choice as an act of grace is something particularly god-like. In such cases it is the more obvious that a genuine filial relation can be established between the child and themselves only if they set themselves to win the child's love by loving him, to excite affection by showing affection. Is this not how and why we all come to love God? wholly 'because he first loved us' (1 Jn. 4:19).

Children's Prolonged Dependence

In contrast to animals the human offspring are the most helpless of all newborn things and face a very long period of dependence during which they need care and nurture, protection and provision, shelter and security. The growing child has, too, many functions and skills to acquire which can be learnt only slowly and with persistent personal supervision. It is by living in the fellowship of a family that children come to discover themselves as persons in relation to others, and begin to learn to relate themselves rightly both to God and to men. It is, too, generally supposed that it is through their experience particularly of mother-love and their response to it that children acquire a developing capacity for sensitive and discerning social interest and activity.

As children get older, and can make conscious self-chosen response, it is by right relation and reaction to parents that they learn in principle the beginnings of right attitude first to God himself, and also to those who may later be over them as authorities in daily living. So the Scriptures indicate, and indeed explicitly enjoin, that in relation to their parents children should be taught to honour and to obey, to love and to trust; to show respect and to give obedience not only as a proper duty but rather for love's sake as a positive delight—as a grateful expression of conscious debt, genuine admiration and deeply appreciative regard.

In this two-way relationship between parent and child what the child should give and may expect is significantly shown by the clauses of the Lord's prayer. Here, at the highest level in relation to God himself we are all taught the reverence and obedience that the Father expects; and we are, by implication, assured concerning the support, forbearance and protection that he is daily ready to extend to all his children (see Mt. 6:9-15). Here is a God-given pattern in the light of which parents should teach their children right response not only to themselves as parents, but most of all to our common Father in heaven. This, therefore, is how children should grow into the personal practice of religious worship and devotion—in the home. It is also the way in which they should be prepared to take their place rightly in the wider community outside the home. For it is children who thus learn due respect for parental authority in the home who become citizens with a proper regard for public authority in the city and the state.

In the home, too, it is a great disadvantage and a potential danger to be the only child. The presence of brothers and sisters is desirable, so that from close daily experience in the rough and tumble of family life, the child may learn right regard for, and express proper relation to, others who have an equal claim to a place in and a share of family life.

Such right reaction and response are most effectively and deeply acquired in the close intense fellowship of a small group living constantly together—an environment which only the family can provide. This is the more true because, to begin with, the primary loyalties of life and their spontaneous appropriate expression are 'caught' by, rather than explicitly taught to, the growing child. He enters into the recognised practice of the family to which he belongs.

Parents' Consequent Responsibilities

Parents, therefore, who are given children by God have a consequent stewardship of far-reaching importance. By the right discharge of this responsibility they can be used to mould and determine the man or woman that is to be. 'Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it' (Prov. 22:6). Children need, as the Scriptures indicate, 'training in righteousness' including necessary, detailed and practical 'teaching' 'reproof and 'correction'. It is for such training that the Scriptures are particularly 'profitable' because 'inspired by God' (see 2 Tim. 3:16).

Children need to be taught moral discrimination so that later when they have to face life on their own they will know how 'to refuse the evil and choose the good' (see Isa. 7:16). To this end they need to become 'skilled in the word of righteousness'; and to 'have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil' (see Heb. 5: 13,14). In such training, particularly in its earlier stages, corporal punishment has its place; together with positive rewards which can be physically enjoyed. 'He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to, discipline him.' 'The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother' (Prov. 13:24; 29:15). This is so taken for granted as normal and necessary that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews can ask, 'For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?' (Heb. 12:7). Further, in all such training parents, particularly fathers, should avoid a capricious exercise of authority which only irritates and disheartens. In comment on Col. 3:21 J. B. Lightfoot wrote, 'Irritation is the first consequence of being too exacting with children, and irritation leads to moroseness'. The children then 'lose heart'; they 'go about their task in a listless, moody, sullen frame of mind'. Children should not wrongly be provoked to anger (see Eph. 6: 4); but in loving patience given under-standing sympathy and encouraging explanation.

So, in general practice in the home, here a little and there a little, as opportunity offers or occasion demands, children should be daily and diligently taught the things of God and the ways of God by the detailed use of the words of God. 'You . . . shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise' (see Dt. 6: 6,7). Such phraseology is clearly all-embracing, referring to life indoors and out of doors, and to morning and evening. Praise and prayers, thanks and trust, should too be constantly offered to God in regular, spontaneous, informal family worship.

Woman's Place

It is in the context of the family and the home that woman finds true fulfilment as a wife, mother and grandmother. The tenth commandment suggests that in every true home its most valuable possession is the lady of the house (see Exod. 20:17). 1 Timothy 5:14 enjoins that young women should as wives 'rule their households'. The home is the woman's empire. Here a woman's great and distinctive gifts find divinely intended scope and outlet. The stability of the home, its character and quality, primarily depend on her kindness, wisdom and industry. She can adorn the home with 'the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit' (1 Pet. 3:3,4). The home and the family are the primary sphere of her God-given vocation and her unfailing influence for good. 'Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her' (Prov. 31:28).

The mother, too, particularly while her children are small, has a big share to take in their instruction. The recorded 'words of Lemuel, King of Massa', are, we are told, words 'which his mother taught him' (Prov. 31:1). The son who would be wise and avoid the enticements to wrongdoing is told, 'Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not, your mother's teaching' (Prov. 1:8). From his youngest days Timothy was obviously taught from the Scriptures by his mother and his grandmother; and could in consequence be seriously challenged to 'continue in what you have learned . . . knowing from whom you have learned it' (see 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14,15).

The Head of the Family

Just as in the Trinity itself 'the head of Christ is God', so in the divinely-ordained relation between male and female 'the head of a woman is her husband' (1 Cor. 11:3). Just as the Son

of God finds his delight and his true fulfilment in becoming obedient and doing the Father's will, so the true wife should, as a wife, be submissive and obedient to her husband (see 1 Pet. 3: 5,6). In the awareness that this is the way of realised unity and proper family fulfilment she should obey—and declare her intention to obey—her husband not because she has to, but because she freely and deliberately chooses so to do.

The complementary consequence of this is that the husband and father is the proper head of the family. He should be openly responsible for major family decisions; and in these the wife should follow his lead. It does not make for true family unity and its healthy well-being, if the wife, or her mother, exercises excessive governing influence.

On the man's side the family and the home thus provide a practical test and a possible objective proof of a man's fitness for larger public responsibility. So any man who is to be appointed to exercise oversight in the church 'must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church? (1 Tim. 3:4,5). May it not equally be true that, if we are by our Christian witness to be used to win to Christ some types who seem completely outside, and out of touch with the Christian church, we must aim to win families as a whole and particularly the men who are the heads, and no longer be content with incomplete and impermanent ministries to separate groups whether of women or children?

Alan Stibbs