



A challenge to our parents

The content has been on my mind for some time and was further brought to my attention when I read the following in Christopher Hill's *Society & Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*:

"Family prayers and family catechising offered an alternative to public worship, especially when the worship itself left so much to be desired as that of the Laudian Church (Archbishop Laud required Roman, very formalistic worship without preaching. JR). 'Every master of a household', the First Book of Discipline laid down, 'must be commanded either to instruct, or cause to be instructed, his children, servants and family in the principles of the Christian religion', without the knowledge of which none would be admitted to communion. Heads of households who failed to carry out this duty were to be visited with ecclesiastical and civil penalties. Catechising, Cartwright insisted, should be carried on 'both at home by the master of the house, and in the church by the minister'; and to the question 'Why at home?' he replied succinctly: 'Because houses are the nurseries of the church'. Domestic catechising by fathers and masters in their families was one of the things insisted on by the divines at the Synod of Dort. The Westminster Assembly voted in 1646 that those who neglected family prayers and family instruction were guilty of sin: the proposition that the sin was scandalous was defeated by only 3 votes...

Thomas Taylor may perhaps sum up this point: let every master of a family see to what is called, namely, to make his house a little church, to instruct every one of his family in the fear of God, to contain every one of them under holy discipline, to pray with them and for them.. The way to frame thee a good servant is, to make him God's servant... Many complain of evil times and general corruption: and many talk of want of discipline in the church, and it were to be wished, not too justly. But thou that (art) a careless master, the times are worse for thee; and all discipline in the church, or good laws in a state, will not mend things till thou mend thy family. If all families, where reformation must begin, were brought in to this discipline, our eyes should see a happy change'. Taylor's hope is that reformation will begin in the family and extend to the whole State."

And if an unbeliever like Donna Huata-Awatere can see that latter point, surely we ought to be able to. In Lord's Day 39, we confess that God's will for us in the fifth commandment is that *"I honour, love and be loyal to my father and mother (et al) ... for through them God chooses to rule us."* Make the parents the subject of the sentence, it then says God chooses to rule our children through parents **ruling** them. And that is precisely how God Himself put it in Genesis 18:19:

*"For I know (Abraham), that he will **command** his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him."*

None of us will be so foolish as to confuse rule with domination as so many in today's world persist in confusing "reasonable force" with violence. And when we look at Abraham as a father we see that this is not so. Because something is abused does not make the right use of it wrong. One of the saddest things I see sometimes is parents afraid of their teenagers. There are times when we have all had to walk a bit of a tight-rope with them – paying out just the right amount of extra leash as they grow older yet still remaining firm on what is essential and necessary, not only for them, but for the smooth running of the household and to foster obedience in younger children. For the Puritan idea of a **master** of a household is biblical. Did you ever notice that the third

commandment requires I not only rest on the Sabbath myself but see to it that the "sojourner within (my) gates" does also?

Some parents seem to have the idea that they rule their children only while very junior. After that they cut their own paths, they live as they please while the parents still feed and finance them. I am not talking about the difficult times that most of us have to go through. I know about that. So did my parents! But even through those times, the rules of the household still have to be abided by and worship attended (albeit grudgingly) for it is a covenant household, "a little church", not a boarding house.

But I would like to encourage younger parents; you must obtain the respect of your children while they are young. It is too late to do anything about it when they are in their mid-teens. Sometimes it seems it is not until then that some realise that Paul White was right: as little leopards become big leopards and big leopards kill, so little sins become big sins and big sins kill (remember his *Jungle Doctor* books?). Since they go astray from birth (Psalm 58:3), so they must have that folly driven out of them from birth (Proverbs 22:15).

Children must be trained; they must be disciplined; obedience and restraint have to be **required**. I am not speaking against play and fun and laughter with one's children. Life is to be a joy, especially the Christian life, especially the Christian family. But on the other hand, it seems to me some misplace the boundaries in this; with some it extends to laughing at their children's precociousness. One almost gets the impression that some think of children like these new Barbie dolls that pee; they are just live toys. Children of a few years old are dressed like Rachel Hunter or Michael Jackson (are we that short of heroes?). Parents praise their every little action to the skies in front of them, including joking about their naughtiness. But naughtiness is not cute; it is sin and sin is, at heart, rebellion against God, "going astray, turning everyone to his own way" from birth.

So parents, determine, from the word Go, that you will never lose a fight with your children. In fact, never fight with your children. It is nice, as your children become older, they become more friends than children. But that comes later. The parent-child relationship must be established first. Never argue with your children as equals. They are not equals. As to their being, yes; but as to their position over against you, they are not. God has made you their ruler to train them up for Him. And while they are young, we have to bear their displeasure and sulks at times. Does God not have to with us? David found this out too late when Adonijah rebelled against him. And why did he rebel? Because *"His father had never interfered with him by asking, 'Why do you behave as you do?'"* (1 Kings 1:6) He was equally foolish with Absalom. He simply could not bear to see the boy suffer and squirm a bit. There is a time for simply toughing it out with our children. Sure it hurts. Real love always does. Was God rejoicing as He hurled His holy anger upon His Son at Calvary which He did because He *"so loved the world"*?

But all this is not the first way fathers are to rule their homes. Headship is not merely laying down the law. If a father rules his children only in the way we normally think of with the phrase "laying down the law", he is not properly ruling at all. It is the easiest thing in the world to get angry and lay down the law – either to one's own children or anyone else. It is as easy as sin – which is probably what it usually is. But the first thing about headship is what Westminster and Dort called "domestic catechising" (whether with a Catechism or simply reading Scripture) and family prayers. And get the children to pray too.

Proverbs speaks of three ways in which we learn to walk in the ways of God. On the seat, on the street, and on the seat again. Firstly, by sitting on the seat and listening to the instruction of parents (e.g., 1:8); secondly by observing the consequences of not doing so in the lives of others in the streets of the city (1:20ff.); and lastly, some form of the *"rod of correction"* (including, appropriately, physical punishment; what I have termed 'on the seat' 22:15). But the first is always first and certainly the last is applied unfairly and wrongly where the first is not done.

But it is with the first that many fathers fail. Life is busy. Life has always been busy (and it is interesting to reflect on what we can find time for). Fathers, **we** must find a way to do this. We must

make a time somewhere so we can do this regularly. And fathers, we must lead in it and do it. And our wives only in our (only necessary and not too frequent) absence. I say **we, fathers** – unless you want your sons to grow up with the (still) fairly typical NZ attitude; "Religion is for women and children."

I still think I am young too, but I am old enough to have seen my generation grow up and another since and I can see the patterns. Cartwright was quite right when he said, "*Houses are the nurseries of the church.*" I have seen churches in two denominations, at close hand, go through difficult times. Children from godly homes generally survive those struggles, quite ungodly though they be at times. They seldom survive bad, including indulgent, parents.

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