



## Fatherhood revived

### ***Men do matter***

Late last August the government Minister on Youth Affairs, John Tamihere, delivered a provocative speech at St Peter's College in Epsom. Government MPs are often giving speeches. This one made the headlines because it went against the political correctness of feminism. John Tamihere urged men to be men and to be proud of their gender. His outspoken remarks arose out of his great concern for the boys and young men of New Zealand.

Boys account for 90% of behavioral problems at school. Men are responsible for 90% of convicted acts of violence and they make up 90% of the prison population. Young men are five times more likely than younger women to cause a fatal car crash. Of the top ten ranked schools in New Zealand seven are girls' schools. Out of a study of 32 countries ours has the third highest male suicide rate, ahead of Russia and Lithuania. One in three boys live apart from their natural fathers. In 1993 10% of non-Maori and 40% of Maori children under twelve months lived in sole-parent homes. More than 34,000 children in New Zealand have no father listed on their birth certificate. On current trends all these statistics are only going to get worse in the years to come.

As people reflected on these statistics, many realise that a primary cause of these problems is the breakdown of marriage and the family and the absence of good male role models for the boys and young men of our society. John Tamihere also came to that conclusion. At the end of his speech he addressed men and stated that we *"must progress to one of the greatest accomplishments we can do for our families, our community and our country – and that is to be good fathers."* (Herald, 30/7/04).

### **Nothing new**

Of course this is not a revelation for Christians. From the Scriptures we know that God has structured the family so that children will be raised by both a father and a mother. Sometimes, in His providence, the Lord does not grant a husband and wife any children. Sometimes a couple do have children but their family is disrupted by the death of one parent or by separation or divorce. Yet this does not take away from the biblical ideal of both a father and mother raising their children. At the beginning of the book of Proverbs Solomon urged his son,

*"Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching."*

Proverbs 1:8

Solomon assumed that truth is learned in the home from both a father and a mother.

We can be thankful for this renewed interest in parenting and in the role of a father in the lives of his children. Sadly there are too many sole-parent homes in New Zealand where the father is absent. But a father may be physically present in the home but still absent from the lives of his children. That could be because of job ambition: a man may be so pre-occupied with his work that he neglects his calling to be a father. Or he could be at home but remote: the "behind the newspaper" syndrome. There is a widely quoted statistic from United States research that says that fathers spend on average six minutes a day with their children. It may be a good exercise to evaluate how much time we spend as fathers in meaningful interaction, conversation and instruction with our children.

## **The man's vital involvement**

This lack of time can be part of a larger problem in families. An article in the Christchurch Press a few years ago noted that *"While a quarter (of children) are growing up in households dependent on benefits, an equal minority are growing up in double-income households awash with material goods but arguably running dangerous deficits in the time and energy parents have to give to their children."* (The Press, 21 April 2001, Weekend p.2) We have heard about the DINKS: "Double-income-no-kids" couples. We could add to them the DINTS: "Double-income-no-time" families. This secular diagnosis of a serious problem should prompt us to reflect on our situation as families in the church. Often responsibilities and tasks in the church can add time pressures to already crowded lives. In the busyness of our lives and our jobs and even our church, let's be sure that we keep our focus on our families and on instructing and leading our children.

I am not suggesting that men minimise their involvement in the church. According to the Bible leadership in the home and in the church rests with men. In many families and in many denominations men have defaulted on their responsibilities and the leadership of both home and church has fallen to wives and women. We need to be sure this does not happen in our homes and churches. A man's involvement in the church as a living member of the body of Christ is a good example to his children and shows them that the church is high in his list of priorities. Once I spoke to a father about his lack of participation in church life. He defended himself by explaining that his father had been so busy serving as an elder that he had never been at home; he declared that he was not going to repeat that same mistake. However, he fell to the opposite problem of doing nothing in the church except coming to worship. While seeking to avoid one error with his children he fell into another and failed to model the well-balanced life of the Christian man in his home, work and church.

## **The time to begin that involvement**

Training our children should begin when they are young. Again the Proverbs reflect this early start to instruction. Solomon said that he was taught *"when I was a boy in my father's house, still tender and an only child of my mother"* (Prov 4:3). These early years are formative in the life of a child. When a tree is young and slender and flexible you can train it and direct it to grow straight and tall. When it is old and inflexible and solid it is almost impossible to straighten it out. This is why the Jesuits said, *"Give me a child until he is seven."* They were aware that these are the formative years of a child's life. Someone else said, *"The best way to tackle a minor problem is before he grows up!"* And one of the Puritans wrote, *"It is common sense to put the seal to the wax while it is soft."* These early years are the time to lay a good foundation. What you sow now as a father you will reap in the future. Put in the time and effort now and by God's grace you will reap the benefit of that later on. The Proverbs say, *"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it"* (Prov 22:6).

## **The nature of that involvement**

As we train our children we must give them a clear direction. Not everyone agrees with this. Some advocate that you should give your children all the information they need and then as they get older they can make up their own minds. They suggest you give them all the options so that later on they can make an informed decision. The wise men quoted in the book of Proverbs did not advocate that approach! They knew that *"folly is bound up in the heart of a child."* Left to himself a child will choose the wrong path and get in with the wrong crowd. Christian fathers must understand the sinful nature of their children and their natural bent towards evil and actively direct them into the narrow path that leads to life. We cannot follow a "take it or leave it" attitude with our children or be casual about their direction in life. Rather we must press on our children the teaching of the Bible, show them that this is all-important and urge them to follow the Lord. Their eternal future depends on their response to the covenant promises of the Lord.

John Tamihere's remarks reflect a growing awareness in our society of the important role fathers play in the lives of their children. As Christians we can be thankful for this and pray that it may awaken more men to a greater sense of responsibility for their children. However, the tide in marriages and families will not turn until men and women realise the futility of their own ideas and schemes for solving the massive problems they face, repent of their human pride and selfishness, and turn in faith to God through Christ. May the Holy Spirit help us to model a Christian family life that gives us many opportunities to minister to the needs of others and to speak to them about our Father in heaven.

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